

May 1983

## Playing God: Inquiry into a Slogan

Paul R. Johnson

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq>

---

### Recommended Citation

Johnson, Paul R. (1983) "Playing God: Inquiry into a Slogan," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 50 : No. 2 , Article 9.  
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol50/iss2/9>

## Playing God: Inquiry into a Slogan

Paul R. Johnson, Ph.D.

*The author, who received his doctorate from Duke University, is an associate professor and chairman of the division of humanities at D'Youville College in Buffalo, N. Y.*



The cover of *Newsweek* magazine, Aug. 31, 1981, parodies Michelangelo's painting of the Creation. God, in physician's white lab coat and stethoscope, hovers over and reaches out to the hand of Adam, who is stretching upward from a hospital bed. In block letters across the cover is the title of that issue's feature article, "When Doctors Play God: The Ethics of Life-and-Death Decisions." Advances in the biosciences over the past generation have pressed human reasoning again and again to what philosopher-theologians call boundary situations. Questions not only of *quality* of life but also of the *meaning* of life and death have been raised insistently to confront us. Decisions on questions and problems that did not even exist 20-30 years ago because technology had not yet made raising them necessary are being forced upon us. With this venture into uncharted territory, the ambiguity and responsibility which are placed on us have caused many to ask not only which way to go but whether to go at all. It is in

this context that the phrase "playing God" has come into some prominence, for it seems to be suggested that in moving too far into this boundary situation, human action is usurping the divine prerogative and is, at best, morally questionable.

It is the purpose of this paper to explore the concept of playing God — to determine, if possible, its meaning or meanings and its usefulness as an ethical concept. Though the phrase is often used in popular speech or literature as a slogan, it seems not to have been, as such, the object of much serious philosophic or theological analysis. Because of the lack of such scholarly treatment of this concept, this discussion will begin with an analysis of the theme at the level of its popular usage. In doing so, the critique presented is aimed at certain underlying assumptions in popular religious ideology. While these assumptions may have links to a variety of theological traditions, they do not seem to be direct applications of them. My goal in this essay is threefold. (1) By analyzing the popular use of the concept, I wish to clarify to the ethicist, physician and other professionals the complex of ideas with which they may be confronted. This should assist in interpreting some public reaction to developments in the biosciences and in the contribution of the professional to public debate in these areas. (2) In tracing possible questionable assumptions behind general use of the slogan, I hope that professionals in religion and medicine will clarify concepts and premises used in their more formal theorizing. Noting weaknesses in public discussion may help locate parallel or related areas of unclarity in theology or philosophy. This poses the challenge to clarify scholarly concepts as well. (3) By proposing possible lines of thought for developing more useful meanings of the "playing God" theme, I hope to encourage discussion of the concept in a way to include a balance of positive with negative connotations.

Before proposing a constructive statement of my own on possible ethical utility for the concept of playing God, I will proceed with a brief analysis of perspectives from which the general use of the phrase may be interpreted. The first approach to understanding the phrase "playing God" combines the philosophy of language analysis and the emotivist understanding of moral language. Language analysis philosophers propose that one way to understand the meaning of language is to examine its use. Emotivists describe moral language as the language of emotion, expressed feelings rather than concepts or ideas. Observing the use of the concept of playing God, particularly in popular sloganeering, it is clear that there is often more emotion than thought being expressed. Three emotions seem to me to be especially common in such use, each expressing a negative connotation, suggesting that we *cannot* or *ought not* to play God.

These emotions are the feelings of ignorance, fear and disapproval. "We can't play God" often means "we don't know how to deal with"

questions of the magnitude we are now facing. After all, how *would* one begin to assess quality of life or the possible shades of meaning of life and death from conception to expiration? What *does* "human life" *mean*? *Answers seem beyond our grasp*, and so, we assume, they must lie in God's domain of wisdom. But placing God in the gaps of our knowledge presents both a limited understanding of God and one which may, as has happened in past God-of-the-gaps theologies, see divinity decline as human knowledge increases. Secondly, "we should not play God" may simply express fear. Images of "mad scientists," of experiments gone awry, of Nazian barbarism provoke understandable feelings of fright, even terror. Shrinking from the *negative* uses of advanced biotechnologies, we shun *all* uses. Forgetting that abuse, which is possible of all technologies, need not necessarily exclude use, we categorize all biotechnologies as playing God and thus beyond our legitimate sphere of action. Finally, "you can't play God" may easily be intended as a general expression of our disapproval. Because I don't want to take a certain action, for whatever ethical, political or personal reason, I seek to inhibit your carrying it out by placing it in the negative category of "playing God." By so doing, however, I may be both prejudging the action and obscuring the meaning of the phrase by making it simply a gloss on judgments which I have made on other grounds.

### Playing God a Vehicle for Feelings

The language analysis/emotivist perspective does reveal how the concept of playing God can be, and often is, a vehicle to convey feelings. Used as such, the idea does little to aid ethical deliberation and decision-making. But we would be wrong to assume that because the phrase is used to express emotion, this is its only use. The phrase, at least in a somewhat more reflective usage, also intends to propose a cognitive element. A conceptual as well as emotional use is present. We turn, then, to two conceptual perspectives.

We examine first what I will call the "natural versus unnatural" perspective. From this viewpoint, "we should not play God" means that we should not tamper with nature. Or, since we have apparently accepted a wide range of manipulation of other parts of nature, we may mean we should not tamper with *human* nature. In either case, the premise seems to be that nature is God's domain and its laws His laws. Thus, to attempt to alter or manipulate nature is to steal the divine prerogative and claim for ourselves the power of deity. But I would suggest that this "natural versus unnatural" conceptual framework is supported by questionable assumptions which, when addressed, tend to diminish the usefulness of this perspective; or at

least suggest that those questionable assumptions be identified and replaced by correct cognitive meanings of "natural" when used in moral argument.

It is often assumed that natural means good or right. To act according to nature is to act correctly. Yet there is much in nature that we do not accept as good or right — disease, famine, "natural" disasters — things which we commend ourselves on acting to overcome. In many other ways we act to alter or manipulate nature to make it better — agricultural hybridization, energy development, artificial medications. Some would contend that it is an ideal nature, i.e., nature in the abstract, nature as "intended to be," which is good. Thus we can act on imperfect nature in its light. If we accept this modification, however, we may have lost objective nature as a guide and the contours of the ideal nature become open to analysis and debate and hence are less useful as guides for actions. It seems also assumed that nature is static. It is an unchanging standard against which actions can be assessed. But modern science, anthropology, and philosophy have called this fixedness into question. The contemporary nature-as-change model has implications for viewing human nature as well, implications which question the static understanding of man. Finally, in relation to human nature, nature is sometimes described in limited biological-scientific terms. Just where one would think theology, with its recognition of human spirituality, would do otherwise, it seems at times to restrict human nature primarily to biological considerations. But I would suggest that human nature cannot be equated with biological nature. In fact, it is central to human nature to rise above biological nature. Hence, to describe the human experience of reproduction, life enhancement and dying in primarily biological terms is to miss the point of true human nature.

The emotivist perspective tells us something about feelings but little about the content of the playing God motif. The "natural-versus-unnatural" analysis moves to the conceptual level, but, because of ambiguity in its use of the term "nature," leaves us on uncertain ethical ground. A third approach builds on the second but is more distinctly theological in its immediate expression. For reasons soon to be clear, I call this perspective "theological fatalism." Though not often articulated in such a direct fashion theologically, underlying this position is the vague assumption that all that happens is God's doing. Like the preceding perspective, this applies to human history as well as to nature. All things — the beginning of life to its end — happen at their "appointed time." To tamper with or manipulate these occurrences is to resist God's action, to usurp His position. Such a view, while psychologically comforting at times of crisis events outside our control, seldom is applied to the rest of life. Further, it contains its own theological problems. To the degree that it subsumes nature into God's action, it is open to some of the same questions just raised

about the "natural-versus-unnatural" perspective. Beyond this, it commits us to a kind of theological fatalism few would be willing to admit or defend. Life would become a charade, the playing out of a series of divinely programmed actions. The greatness and tragedy arising from human freedom would be lost. "When your time is up, it's up" may be good fatalism, even entertaining movie-making, but it is questionable theology. Further, if *all* that happens is indeed God's doing, then so would our "tampering" or "manipulation" of nature or history be his action; and thus it too would be legitimate.

Many are uncomfortable with this all-encompassing theological fatalism and would modify it to apply only, or most specifically, to beginning-of-life and end-of-life processes. Most of the current "playing God" discussion pertains to reproductive technologies and decisions to permit or enact death. It is argued that "God is the sole giver and taker of life." To manipulate *those* processes is to take God's role to ourselves. But to maintain the life and death processes as God-ordained is theologically arbitrary. Why these processes and not others? Further, such a position overlooks the interconnectedness of life and its events, so that one cannot simply isolate some events as ordained and leave others leading up to and away from them less so.

I have argued thus far that the concept of "playing God" is often used in an emotionally functional but ethically weak fashion. I have also maintained that two widely held conceptual uses of the idea are vague and that, upon closer examination, they are fraught with ambiguous or uncomfortable assumptions which make them questionable as guides to moral reflection and action. Is there then no *useful* meaning to the concept? Shall we dismiss the concept as ethically without content? There does remain, I shall argue, utility in the concept, less precise than we might like, but of some use nonetheless. To see this, we must change the connotation of the idea from pejorative to descriptive and normative. My thesis would be this: because we cannot avoid playing God, we must play God responsibly.

I begin with the assumption that playing God has something to do with determining life's beginning, quality and end. After all, God is understood in our religious tradition as Creator and Sustainer of life. To act in such a way as to affect life's beginning, quality and end is thus, in one sense, to do God-like things. Now, in a general way, decisions we make in many circumstances affect these areas of life. Decisions concerning living conditions, food additives, pollution controls, medical research, war and peace—all impinge on life's beginning, quality and end. In that sense we are always playing God. But in more specific ways we play God at life's beginning and end. Through family planning, natural or artificial, we determine the time of conception. Through choices of age to bear children and diet and activity during pregnancy, we tip the probabilities of the health or

defectiveness of fetus and infant. Through chosen lifestyles we determine probabilities of death. Through choosing medical treatments or in rejecting them, we affect the quality and duration of the dying process. Even more specifically, to have the knowledge concerning gene manipulation which may, for example, cure diabetes or increase IQ in future generations, either choice — to use that knowledge or not to — *does* affect the quality of life of the future. To have the machinery which will postpone, even briefly, an individual's approaching death makes us face a choice which *will* determine the duration of that dying, whether the choice is to use the machine or not.

Viewed descriptively, playing God is unavoidable. We cannot refrain from affecting life's beginning, quality and end. Indirectly or directly our decisions have an effect. Here, as elsewhere, the saying holds true — even not to decide is to decide. Inaction itself is a cause when action would have brought a different result. Being responsible for life-affecting and death-affecting decisions is central to the concept of what it means to play God. Such responsibility arises out of knowledge and choice. Where we have no choice or no knowledge on which to make choice, we are not playing God. But once knowledge and choice enter in, playing God is unavoidable.

### Guidelines for Decision-Making

The concept of playing God can move beyond descriptive to normative content as well. As such, it sets both a context and general guidelines for decision-making. In setting the context for decision-making, the idea of *playing* God reminds us that *we are not* God.<sup>1</sup> That is, this concept recalls the limitations of human understanding. The feeling of ignorance described earlier in this essay has its cognitive counterpart in the recognition of human finitude. This acknowledgment establishes a context in which decisions are approached with humility and a willingness not to blunder naively ahead. Some, with a "technological mentality," may feel that "can" equals "should."<sup>2</sup> The context set by the concept of playing God does not agree. But while "can" does not necessarily equal "should," it does mean that we need to inquire whether and/or how. In this sense, the idea of playing God does contain a warning — a warning about human limitedness and the possible folly of technological optimism. It is not a warning to avoid crossing a certain line, but to consider such a move responsibly and humbly.

The playing God concept also hints at certain positive guidelines for ethical decision-making. Playing God calls on us to — play God. That is, we ought to play God like God. We are to pattern our actions and decisions on the model of our understanding of God. Determination

of such guidelines is, of course, no easy matter, though it is not necessarily more difficult here than in any other area of religious ethics. Guidelines will tend to be general, thereby also making application a matter of deliberation and debate. But while determination and application of principles is problematic, such an exercise is not without benefit. Though not likely to give us precise directives, seeing the concept of "playing God" as normative will give us preferred directions to pursue.

Several principles of some relevance to bioethics can be sketched as examples of the application of the norm of playing God. (1) God is portrayed as being the God of death as well as life, hence, biological death is not the ultimate enemy to be opposed at all costs. Death can be an acceptable part of life. (2) Our tradition sees God as "no respecter of persons." Individuals are thus viewed as having value simply by being, not primarily by social rank or contribution. Because of this we will favor egalitarian decisions over those which rank people by presumed merit. (3) God is seen as protector and liberator of the weak, the needy, the oppressed. Thus we will favor protection of the defenseless and oppose use and abuse of persons, especially those who are dependent and easily manipulated. (4) Growth in human moral stature is a religious value. This can be translated to mean support for self-determination and opposition to actions which control others or limit their growth in decision-making and responsibility. (5) Technologies which show promise of providing for human fulfillment and betterment, values in our religious tradition, will be accepted. (6) Because the image of God as Judge reminds us of human "sinfulness," we will recognize the need to build in checks against individual and social selfishness and tendencies to step too quickly beyond our current limitations.

Portraying the concept of playing God as I have, points us toward uncharted territory. New technologies and new knowledge bring new responsibilities. Answers are sought where there were not even questions before. Converting the phrase "playing God" from a prohibition to an invitation calls us to risky and fearful decisions. But, as I have argued, playing God is unavoidable. The only question is whether we shall do so thoughtfully or not. Bernard Haring asks whether the human bios and psyche can legitimately be seen as coming within the realm of man's stewardship. He answers:

It is my thesis that he has to interpret his stewardship in the light of his noblest vocation. In that interpretation, he can freely interfere with and manipulate the functions of his bios and psyche insofar as this does not degrade him or diminish his own or his fellowman's dignity and freedom. Not only nature around him but his own natural being — his biological, psychological reality — call for his free stewardship, his creative cooperation with the divine artist.<sup>3</sup>

Some years ago, Leroy Augenstein wrote a book based on the assumption that the then-emerging technologies would be used; it remained only to determine how to use them responsibly.<sup>4</sup> I conclude my remarks with the challenge of the title of that book: Come, let us play God.

## REFERENCES

1. The context-setting importance of the playing God theme is stressed by Paul Ramsey, who sees it limiting human decisions by proposing that "men should not play God before they have learned to be men and . . . when they learn to be men they will not play God . . ." Paul Ramsey, *Fabricated Man: The Ethics of Genetic Control* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 143. (See pp. 138-151 for his complete discussion of this point.

2. This is the fundamental mistake of Joseph Fletcher who seems to see few potential problems in "technologizing" human reproduction. Joseph Fletcher, *The Ethics of Genetic Control: Ending Reproductive Roulette* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1974).

3. Haring, Bernard, *Ethics of Manipulation: Issues in Medicine, Behavior Control and Genetics* (New York: Seabury, 1975), p. 70.

4. Augenstein, Leroy, *Come Let Us Play God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).