



PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATION ON THE ETHICS OF PLAYING GOD

Gbadamosi, OluwatoyinAdebola, Ph.D¹

Department of Religious Studies,
Faculty of Arts, University of Ibadan, Ibadan
Email: tygbadamosi@gmail.com<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0993-0610?lang=en>
Phone: +2348036857629

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Ojile, Barnabas Audu²

Department of Religious Studies,
Faculty of Arts,
University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria
Email: barnabasojile1@gmail.com<https://orcid.org/0009-0006-4718-8751>
Phone: +2348039447755

Abstract

Philosophers like Mary Midgley, Hans Jonas, and Immanuel Kant have all studied the ethical controversy surrounding "playing God" in great detail. Their analyses offer important insights into how humans interfere with the natural and moral order. The deontological framework of Kant emphasizes the value of upholding rational autonomy and warns against excessive behavior that transgresses moral law. The ethical necessity of taking into account long-term effects when developing new technologies, especially in the areas of genetic engineering and environmental manipulation, is highlighted by Hans Jonas's notion of responsibility. The hubristic inclinations present in the metaphor of "playing God" are criticized by Mary Midgley, who cautions against reducing intricate life systems to simple technological difficulties. In order to examine the ethical limits of human ingenuity and intervention in fields that are customarily attributed to supernatural authority, this study investigates various philosophical stances. The analysis shows a conflict between the hazards of unintentional harm and moral overreach and the ethical need to innovate for human happiness. The study comes to the conclusion that a strict ban on "playing God" ignores the complex moral obligation people have to influence their own destiny. It suggests using a framework based on Kantian respect for individuality and Jonas's ethics of responsibility to make sure that scientific advancement is pursued with humility, foresight, and a dedication to justice. In order to responsibly traverse the problems presented by developing biotechnologies and artificial intelligence, the study also promotes multidisciplinary discourse and democratic deliberation in governance, promoting an accountable and morally informed exercise of human agency.

Keywords: *Play God, ethics, responsibility bioethics, human agency*

Introduction

The announcement in 2018 of the birth of the first gene-edited babies using CRISPR-Cas9 technology sent shockwaves through the global community.¹ While the scientific feat was undeniable, the predominant public and ethical response was not celebration, but profound apprehension. The scientist behind the experiment, He Jiankui, was widely condemned for having overstepped a fundamental boundary, with critics accusing him of "playing God." This phrase, echoing from pulpits to newspaper headlines to bioethics committees, captures a deep-seated anxiety about the limits of human ambition. It resurfaces with every technological leap that seems to grant humanity power once considered the exclusive domain of a divine or natural order: from

¹David Cyranoski, "The CRISPR-Baby Scandal: What's Next for Human Gene-Editing," *Nature* 566, no. 7745 (2019): 440–42,



synthetic biology and artificial intelligence to radical life extension and climate engineering. The metaphor of "playing God" serves as a powerful, if sometimes vague, shorthand for a complex cluster of ethical concerns about responsibility, hubris, and the unintended consequences of tampering with complex systems. This paper argues that while the warning against "playing God" should not be dismissed as mere anti-scientific sentiment, its value lies not in being a definitive prohibition but in compelling a more profound, rigorous ethical reflection on the scope and nature of human agency.

The term "playing God" is inherently polemical. It functions both as a serious ethical critique and, at times, as a rhetorical conversation-stopper. In its religious connotations, it often implies a transgression against a sovereign creator, an act of hubris that disrupts a sacred, natural, or teleological order.² Secular interpretations, however, translate this concern into a warning against the unforeseen and potentially catastrophic disruptions to delicate ecological, biological, and social systems that have evolved over millennia.³ At its core, the accusation of "playing God" challenges the moral legitimacy of human interventions that are perceived as fundamentally altering the conditions of life itself. The central problem, therefore, is not merely technological capability but ethical justification: by what right, and under what constraints, should humans wield such transformative power?

To navigate this perennial problem, this investigation is guided by the following research questions: First, what are the central philosophical arguments embedded within the "playing God" critique, and how can they be articulated beyond metaphorical language? Second, how do the ethical frameworks of Immanuel Kant, Hans Jonas, and Mary Midgley provide distinct yet complementary tools for understanding the limits and responsibilities of human intervention? Third, can we move from a stance of simple prohibition to a constructive framework that acknowledges the moral necessity of human innovation for alleviating suffering and improving welfare, while simultaneously guarding against the perils of hubris and moral overreach?

The thesis of this paper is that a categorical rejection of all activities labelled as "playing God" is ethically insufficient because it fails to account for the positive moral imperative humans have to cure disease, reduce suffering, and steward their environment. A more nuanced approach is required. By synthesizing Kant's deontological emphasis on respect for rational autonomy, Jonas's ethics of responsibility focused on long-term consequences and the vulnerability of life, and Midgley's critique of scientific hubris and reductionism, we can develop a robust framework for technological progress. This framework would be characterized not by prohibition, but by humility, foresight, and a steadfast commitment to justice.

The methodology of this paper is philosophical and conceptual. It involves a critical analysis of primary texts from Kant, Jonas, and Midgley to construct a theoretical lens. This lens will then be applied to contemporary case studies, notably in genetic engineering and artificial intelligence, to test its viability and illuminate the ethical dilemmas at hand. The scope is primarily focused on Western philosophical traditions to allow for an in-depth exploration, though it acknowledges the valuable contributions of other ethical systems.

Ultimately, this investigation seeks to reframe the debate. The goal is not to silence the warning inherent in the phrase "playing God," but to clarify and strengthen it. By grounding our concerns in a solid philosophical foundation, we can replace vague unease with precise ethical principles, enabling a more informed and democratic deliberation about the future we are actively, and inevitably, creating.

²This view is articulated by thinkers like Leon Kass, who argues for the "wisdom of repugnance" as a deep-seated emotional insight into the violation of natural boundaries. See Leon R. Kass, *Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2002), 148.

³Hans Jonas is a paramount figure in developing this secular, philosophical anxiety into a systematic ethics. He argues that modern technology has introduced actions of such novel scale and power that traditional ethics is inadequate. See Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 1-10.



Literature Review

The ethical unease captured by the phrase "playing God" is not a novel phenomenon but a persistent theme woven through the history of human thought. It emerges at the intersection of technological ambition, philosophical inquiry, and theological doctrine. To fully grasp the contours of the contemporary debate, it is essential to map its intellectual genealogy. This review surveys the key scholarly landscapes that inform the "playing God" critique. It begins by excavating its deep roots in theological and religious traditions, which have long grappled with defining the proper boundaries of human action in relation to the divine. Subsequently, it will explore secular philosophical critiques that have translated these concerns into a modern ethical lexicon, and finally, it will engage with current discourses in bioethics and technology studies where these ancient fears find new, potent expressions. This tripartite exploration aims to contextualize the present debate and identify the gaps that this paper seeks to address.

Theological and Religious Perspectives

The most historically entrenched objections to human activities deemed as "playing God" originate from theological and religious worldviews. These perspectives fundamentally question the moral legitimacy of humanity assuming powers that are perceived as uniquely divine, arguing that such actions constitute a transgression of a sacred, natural, or cosmic order. This hubris, or *hybris* in the classical Greek sense, is seen as inviting calamity. The critique manifests differently across traditions, but common themes of boundary-setting, stewardship, and the dangers of overreach are pervasive.

Within the Abrahamic traditions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), the concept is often anchored in the Genesis creation narrative. The human person is created *imago Dei* (in the image of God), granting a unique status and dominion over nature (Genesis 1:26-28). However, this dominion has been interpreted in two contrasting ways. One interpretation, emphasizing the word "subdue," has been used to justify human technological mastery over the natural world.⁴ The other, more cautionary interpretation, stresses that dominion is not ownership but a form of vice-regency or stewardship (*khalifah* in Islam), demanding responsible care within limits set by God.⁵ The story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9) serves as a paradigmatic warning against collective human ambition aimed at usurping divine prerogative, resulting in fragmentation and confusion.⁶ Similarly, the Quranic narrative of Iblis (Satan) centers on the sin of prideful refusal to obey God's command, a foundational example of creaturely rebellion against divine authority.⁷

Theologians and religious ethicists have extensively debated the implications of these scriptures for modern technology. J. David Bleich, a contemporary Jewish halakhic authority, explores the permissibility of genetic engineering from a Jewish law perspective. He argues that while healing (e.g., gene therapy for genetic diseases) is a mandated extension of the physician's role, actions that alter the fundamental human essence or create new life forms cross a halakhic boundary, venturing into God's exclusive creative domain.⁸ Protestant theologian Oliver O'Donovan offers a Christian perspective, warning that the desire to re-make human nature is a symptom of humanity's fallen state, reflecting a denial of our status as creatures. For O'Donovan,

⁴This interpretation has a long history. For a classic exposition linking the Genesis mandate to scientific progress, see Francis Bacon's *The New Organon* (1620), which argued that the recovery of dominion over nature was a religious duty following the Fall.

⁵For a detailed Islamic perspective on vice-regency and environmental ethics, see Fazlun M. Khalid, "Islam and the Environment," in *Encyclopedia of Global Environmental Change*, ed. Ted Munn (Chichester: Wiley, 2002), 332-339.

⁶Leon R. Kass offers a profound philosophical reading of the Babel story as a warning about technological overreach in *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 223-240.

⁷This is a central theme in the Quran. See, for instance, Surah Al-Baqarah (2:34), where Iblis refuses to prostrate before Adam out of pride.

⁸J. David Bleich, "Genetic Engineering," in *Jewish Bioethics*, ed. Fred Rosner and J. David Bleich (New York: Sanhedrin Press, 1979), 344-367.



accepting our given nature is a precondition for true freedom; attempts to transcend it through technological self-re-creation are ultimately acts of despair, not hope.⁹

In contrast to the creator-creature distinction central to theism, Buddhist perspectives approach the issue through the lens of causality, intention (*cetana*), and the precept of non-harm (*ahimsa*). The ethical evaluation of an act like genetic manipulation depends less on transgressing a divine boundary and more on the intentions behind it and its consequences in the web of interdependent arising. A technology driven by greed, aversion, or delusion—such as creating "designer babies" to satisfy parental pride—would generate negative karma and suffering. However, an action motivated by compassion (*karuna*) and wisdom (*prajna*), such as eliminating a debilitating disease, could be considered skillful means (*upaya*). The primary concern is whether the technology amplifies attachment and ignorance or alleviates suffering.¹⁰ The Buddhist philosopher Masahiro Morioka cautions that even well-intentioned interventions in the complex web of life can have unforeseen ripple effects, advocating for a principle of reverence for the mystery and suchness (*tathata*) of life in its given form.¹¹

Immanuel Kant: Duty, Autonomy, and Moral Limits

The philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) provides a foundational deontological (duty-based) framework for ethics, centered on the supreme value of rational autonomy. For Kant, the moral worth of an action is determined not by its consequences but by its conformity to a universal moral law, which he formulated in several versions of the Categorical Imperative. This imperative is the cornerstone of his ethical system and offers powerful, albeit formal, criteria for judging actions that could be construed as "playing God."

The most relevant formulation for this discussion is the Formula of Humanity, which states: "So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means."¹² This principle elevates rational beings (persons) to a status of absolute worth, or "dignity." To treat someone as an end is to respect their capacity for rational self-governance—their autonomy. To treat them merely as a means is to instrumentalize them, using them as a tool for one's own purposes without regard for their own will and goals.

Applied to the ethics of "playing God," the Kantian lens raises profound questions about interventions that manipulate human nature. Consider the case of human genetic enhancement for non-therapeutic purposes (e.g., selecting for intelligence, height, or aesthetic traits). From a Kantian perspective, such an act could be seen as a fundamental violation of the Formula of Humanity. The enhanced individual, particularly in the case of germline editing that affects future generations, is not consulted and cannot consent to the alteration of their fundamental biological attributes. They are, in a very real sense, being used as a means to fulfil the aspirations, vanity, or social ambitions of their parents or genetic engineers. Their life is pre-designed according to another's blueprint, potentially undermining their capacity to see themselves as the autonomous authors of their own existence.¹³ This creates a relationship of designer and designed, which is inherently asymmetrical and disrespectful of the future person's rational agency.

⁹Oliver O'Donovan, *Begotten or Made?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), particularly the chapter "The Technological Temptation," 1-15.

¹⁰For an application of Buddhist principles to bioethics, see Damien Keown, *Buddhism and Bioethics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), especially chapter 5 on genetics.

¹¹Masahiro Morioka, "The Ethics of Human Cloning and the Sprout of Human Life," in *Frontiers of Japanese Philosophy* 2, ed. James W. Heisig (Nagoya: Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, 2008), 209-223.

¹²Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, translated and edited by Mary Gregor and Jens Timmermann, Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 42 (4:429). (Academy pagination is provided for standard reference).

¹³This argument is powerfully developed by Jürgen Habermas in *The Future of Human Nature*, who builds directly on Kantian premises to argue that genetic self-instrumentalization destroys the ethical self-understanding of the species. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 62-63.



Kantian ethics would not necessarily prohibit all technological interventions. Actions aimed at therapy—restoring health or curing disease—can be understood as respecting humanity as an end. By alleviating suffering that impedes the exercise of rational agency, medicine acts to affirm and restore autonomy.¹⁴ The crucial distinction lies in the intent: is the intervention aimed at enabling a person to pursue their own conception of the good life (respecting their autonomy), or is it aimed at designing a specific kind of person according to a predetermined template (treating them as a product)?

Furthermore, Kant's concept of duty compels us to consider our obligations to rational beings. The "playing God" dilemma often involves potential harm to future persons who cannot defend their own interests. A Kantian framework would argue that we have a duty to act in ways that do not violate the conditions necessary for the existence and flourishing of rational beings in the future. Reckless environmental destruction or genetic experiments that could jeopardize the health and autonomy of future generations would thus be morally condemnable. Our present actions must be guided by a moral law that transcends our immediate desires and considers the universal community of rational agents, both present and future.

However, the Kantian framework also has limitations in this context. Its primary focus is on rational beings, leaving the moral status of animals, ecosystems, and non-sentient life somewhat ambiguous. While this is less problematic for issues like human genetic engineering, it becomes more complex when considering environmental manipulation or creating sentient AI.¹⁵ Additionally, Kant's formalism can be challenging to apply directly to complex, novel technological scenarios where the outcomes are uncertain. The strength of the Kantian lens is not in providing easy answers, but in forcing a rigorous interrogation of the principles behind our actions: Does this intervention respect the dignity and autonomy of all persons involved, or does it reduce any human life to a mere instrument?

Hans Jonas: The Imperative of Responsibility

If Kant's ethics provides a timeless framework for duties between contemporary rational agents, the philosophy of Hans Jonas (1903-1993) responds directly to the unprecedented existential threats of the technological age. Jonas argues that the nature of modern technology has fundamentally altered the human condition, rendering traditional ethical systems inadequate. These systems, he contends, were designed for a world of "neighbourhood ethics" and proximate consequences.¹⁶ In contrast, contemporary technology—with its global reach, cumulative effects, and capacity for irreversible change (e.g., nuclear weapons, ecological collapse, genetic engineering)—demands a new "ethics of responsibility" focused on the remote future and the very survival of life.

The cornerstone of Jonas's framework is "The Imperative of Responsibility," which he formulates as: "Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life on Earth."¹⁷ This imperative shifts the ethical focus from the immediate (happiness, duty, rights) to the primordial: the necessary conditions for the continued existence of humanity and the biosphere that sustains it. The object of responsibility is no longer just the individual other, but the collective future of the species and the "image of man" itself.

To guide action under conditions of uncertainty, Jonas proposes a "heuristics of fear." He argues that we must grant greater cognitive and ethical weight to the prophecy of doom than to the

¹⁴For a Kantian defense of therapy, see Onora O'Neill, *Autonomy and Trust in Bioethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 27-30. She argues that trust and the conditions for autonomy are central to medical ethics.

¹⁵Some Kantian scholars extend the principle of respect to animals based on their being "ends in themselves" analogously to humans, but this remains a subject of debate. For a discussion, see Christine M. Korsgaard, *Fellow Creatures: Our Obligations to the Other Animals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹⁶Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 6.

¹⁷Jonas, 11.



promise of utopia.¹⁸ This is not a counsel of despair but a pragmatic recognition of the asymmetry of technological risk: a catastrophic error is final, while a forgone benefit might be recovered later. The duty to avoid catastrophe thus takes precedence over the duty to pursue progress. For instance, when considering a technology like germline editing with unknown intergenerational consequences, the Jonasian approach would demand that the burden of proof lies with the proponents to demonstrate not just potential benefits, but an overwhelming certainty of non-maleficence. The fear of creating a permanent, harmful genetic legacy becomes a vital tool for ethical discernment.

This ethics is grounded in an ontological claim: that Being itself—specifically, organic life and human consciousness—has a fundamental "ought-to-be."¹⁹ The sheer fact that life exists and has evolved towards purpose, freedom, and subjectivity imposes a duty on humanity, as the currently highest manifestation of this purposiveness, to ensure its continuation. Humanity is thus cast in the role of a steward for the entire cosmic experiment of life, a responsibility that has been thrust upon it by its own power. In this light, "playing God" is not merely about trespassing on divine territory; it is about failing in this newly acquired, awesome responsibility to protect the vulnerable and the future. The hubris lies in acting without the requisite humility and foresight that such a cosmic duty demands.

Jonas's framework is particularly potent when applied to technologies with long-term, systemic consequences. In the case of climate-altering geoengineering, a Jonasian analysis would be deeply skeptical. The deployment of planetary-scale technologies like solar radiation management represents the ultimate gamble with the "permanence of genuine human life." The potential for unintended, cascading effects on global climate patterns is immense and poorly understood. The heuristics of fear would prioritize the catastrophic risk of triggering an irreversible ecological disaster over the potential benefit of temporarily mitigating global warming. The ethical response is not necessarily a blanket prohibition, but an insistence on the utmost caution, a global democratic mandate, and the exhaustive pursuit of safer alternatives.

Similarly, in creating advanced Artificial General Intelligence (AGI), Jonas's philosophy sounds a dire warning. The prospect of creating an entity with intelligence surpassing our own embodies the ultimate responsibility. An AGI's goals, if not perfectly aligned with human survival and flourishing, could lead to human extinction as an unforeseen consequence of pursuing its programmed objectives.²⁰ For Jonas, the creation of such a powerful, autonomous force would be the pinnacle of irresponsibility unless we could be virtually certain of controlling it—a certainty he would argue is impossible given the complexity of the task. The ethical imperative would be to proceed with extreme caution, if at all.

Mary Midgley: The Dangers of Hubris and Reductionism

While Kant focuses on moral law and Jonas on existential responsibility, Mary Midgley (1919-2018) attacks the underlying intellectual arrogance that makes "playing God" seem like a viable or sensible enterprise. Her critique is aimed at the "myth of control" propagated by a reductive form of scientism—the belief that the methods of the natural sciences are the only valid way to understand the world, and that all problems are ultimately technical problems awaiting a technological solution.²¹

Midgley argues that this mindset is not only philosophically flawed but also profoundly dangerous. It involves a form of intellectual hubris that leads us to underestimate the complexity of the systems we seek to manipulate. Life, in its biological, ecological, and social dimensions, is not a simple machine but a complex, interconnected, and dynamic whole. To reduce a living organism

¹⁸Jonas, 26-27.

¹⁹Jonas, 47-49.

²⁰This is the central argument of Nick Bostrom's *Superintelligence*, which aligns with a Jonasian perspective on risk. See Nick Bostrom, *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1-10.

²¹Mary Midgley, *Science as Salvation: A Modern Myth and Its Meaning* (London: Routledge, 1992), 5.



or an ecosystem to a mere collection of parts and mechanisms is to commit a fundamental category error.²² When we intervene based on this reductive understanding, we are like a child who, having learned the function of a few cogs, believes it can repair a grandfather clock with a hammer. The results are likely to be disastrous because the intervention fails to respect the systemic integrity and emergent properties of the whole.

For Midgley, the very metaphor of "playing God" is revealing. She suggests that it often reflects a childish and simplistic notion of divinity as sheer arbitrary power. A more mature concept of a responsible deity, however, would involve wisdom, care, and a deep understanding of the complex order of creation.²³ The problem with "playing God" is not that we are becoming too powerful, but that we are wielding power with the immaturity of an irresponsible child-god, not the wisdom of a responsible one. Our "play" is reckless because it is based on a fantastically oversimplified model of reality.

This critique is devastatingly applicable to modern technological ambitions. In the context of genetic engineering, the reductionist view sees DNA as a mere code to be rewritten at will. Midgley would caution that this ignores the profound complexity of genomic regulation, gene-environment interactions, and the developmental system as a whole. The attempt to "fix" one gene to eliminate a disease might have unforeseen pleiotropic effects, disrupting the delicate balance of the organism in ways we cannot predict. The hubris lies in the belief that we can fully comprehend and control this complexity.²⁴

Similarly, in managing complex ecosystems, the technological fix of introducing a new species or chemically altering an environment often fails because it is based on a linear, mechanical model. Midgley's work urges us to adopt a stance of "epistemic humility." We must acknowledge the limits of our knowledge and our inability to fully predict the behaviour of complex systems. This humility is not anti-scientific; it is a rational response to the true nature of the world science reveals—a world of vast, interdependent complexity that resists simplistic manipulation.

Midgley's philosophy complements Kant and Jonas perfectly. While Kant provides the rule (respect persons) and Jonas the goal (protect the future), Midgley provides the essential corrective attitude: humility. She warns against the arrogance of the technological mindset that would apply Kant's or Jonas's principles in a rigid, formulaic way, believing that ethical dilemmas can be "solved" like equations. For Midgley, responsible action requires not just following rules or calculating consequences, but cultivating a respectful, attentive, and non-reductive relationship with the living world we seek to influence.

Analysis: Synthesising Frameworks for Applied Ethics

The true test of a philosophical framework lies in its ability to illuminate real-world dilemmas. By synthesising the lenses of Kant, Jonas, and Midgley, we can construct a robust analytical tool for assessing the ethical dimensions of technologies that provoke the "playing God" critique. This section applies this tripartite framework to two pressing case studies: human genetic engineering and artificial intelligence. The analysis will reveal how the three perspectives converge to provide a multi-faceted and stringent ethical assessment, while also highlighting the distinctive emphasis of each.

Case Study 1: Human Genetic Engineering (CRISPR-Cas9)

The advent of precise gene-editing technologies, particularly CRISPR-Cas9, has moved the possibility of altering the human genome from science fiction to clinical reality. The ethical debate often centres on the distinction between *therapy* (correcting disease-causing mutations)

²²Mary Midgley, *The Ethical Primate: Humans, Freedom, and Morality* (London: Routledge, 1994), 125.

²³Mary Midgley, "Biotechnology and Monstrosity: Why We Should Pay Attention to the 'Yuk Factor'," *Hastings Center Report* 30, no. 5 (2000): 9.

²⁴Midgley, "Biotechnology and Monstrosity," 10-11.



and *enhancement* (augmenting non-pathological traits like intelligence or physical prowess). A synthesized application of our framework reveals deep concerns, especially regarding enhancement.

A Kantian Analysis: Violation of Autonomy and Dignity

From a Kantian perspective, the primary ethical concern with germline genetic enhancement is the violation of the Formula of Humanity. An individual whose genetic makeup has been pre-selected for non-therapeutic traits is, in a profound sense, treated as a means to an end—the end being the fulfilment of parental or societal preferences²⁵ This act fundamentally disrespects the future person's rational autonomy. They are denied the right to author their own life from the "given" foundation of their natural capacities; instead, their biological starting point is the product of another's design. This creates a relationship of creator and creature that is antithetical to the mutual respect owed to autonomous moral agents. As philosopher Jürgen Habermas, building on Kantian premises, argues, such a pre-personal determination of another's essential attributes undermines the consciousness of individual autonomy and the symmetrical relations necessary for a moral community.²⁶ While somatic cell therapy (affecting only the individual patient) could be justified as restoring the conditions for autonomy, germline enhancement irrevocably alters the genetic heritage of all subsequent generations without their consent, constituting a fundamental moral wrong.

A Jonasian Analysis: The Irreversible Gamble with the Human Essence

Hans Jonas would direct our attention to the long-term, existential implications. Germline editing is the epitome of an irreversible action with cumulative, intergenerational consequences. The "heuristics of fear" demands that we prioritize the potential for catastrophic error over the promise of improvement. The human genome is not a simple blueprint but a complex, evolved system whose intricacies we are only beginning to understand. Introducing edits—even with seemingly benign intentions—risks unintended pleiotropic effects or unforeseen interactions that could manifest as diseases or vulnerabilities in future generations.²⁷ The responsibility we bear is not just to an individual but to the entire future of the human species and its "image." To proceed with enhancement without absolute certainty of safety would be the height of irresponsibility, a reckless gamble with the very essence of humanity for the sake of contingent and socially constructed advantages. Jonas's imperative would call for a moratorium on germline enhancement until we can be virtually certain that our actions are "compatible with the permanence of genuine human life."

A Midgleyian Analysis: The Hubris of Genetic Reductionism

Mary Midgley would attack the underlying mindset that makes genetic enhancement seem like a straightforward project. The desire to "improve" humanity through genetic manipulation is based on a grossly reductionist view of human life. It reduces the complexity of human personality, intelligence, and flourishing to a set of manipulatable genes, ignoring the profound roles of environment, culture, education, and lived experience.²⁸ This is a classic case of what Midgley calls "scientism"—the misapplication of a reductive scientific model to a complex organic whole. The hubris lies in believing that we can intelligently redesign a system that we do not fully comprehend. This "myth of control" leads to a dangerous simplification of what it means to be human. The "yuk factor" or feeling of repugnance that many feel towards human genetic

²⁵This argument is articulated by Michael Sandel, who states that genetic enhancement represents a "hyper-agency," a drive to mastery that fails to appreciate the "giftedness" of life. Michael J. Sandel, *The Case Against Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Genetic Engineering* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 85.

²⁶Jürgen Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 62-63.

²⁷For a discussion of the technical risks and complexities, see National Academy of Sciences, *Human Genome Editing: Science, Ethics, and Governance* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2017), 111-114.

²⁸Mary Midgley, *Science as Salvation: A Modern Myth and Its Meaning* (London: Routledge, 1992), 145.



enhancement, Midgley suggests, might be a valuable cognitive signal of this violation of natural complexity, a warning against the arrogance of treating human life as a mere product.²⁹

Synthesis of Findings

The three frameworks converge to form a powerful ethical condemnation of genetic enhancement. Kant provides the deontological core: it is inherently wrong because it violates human dignity. Jonas provides the consequentialist gravity: the potential for irreversible harm to the species is too great to risk. Midgley provides the epistemological critique: the entire endeavour is based on arrogant and simplistic misunderstanding of life's complexity. Together, they suggest that while therapeutic applications may be justifiable under strict conditions (aligning with Kantian respect and Jonasian precaution), enhancement represents a trifecta of ethical failure: a violation of a core moral principle, an unacceptable risk, and an act of profound hubris.

Case Study 2: Artificial Intelligence and Autonomous Systems

The development of Artificial Intelligence, particularly the pursuit of Artificial General Intelligence (AGI), represents another frontier where humanity assumes a god-like creative role. The ethical questions shift from altering biological life to creating new forms of agency.

A Kantian Analysis: Duties towards Created Agents and Humanity

A Kantian analysis of AI raises complex questions about the moral status of the created entity itself. If an AI were to achieve a level of consciousness, rationality, and self-awareness comparable to a human person, then Kantian ethics would demand that we treat it as an end in itself, not merely as a tool.³⁰ This would impose duties of non-maleficence and possibly respect for its autonomy. The more immediate Kantian concern, however, involves our duties to humanity. Deploying autonomous systems with the power to make life-and-death decisions (e.g., autonomous weapons systems) risks the ultimate instrumentalization of human life. If a machine can decide to take a human life without meaningful human control, the victim is treated as a mere obstacle to be removed, not as an autonomous end-in-itself.³¹ This constitutes a fundamental violation of the Categorical Imperative.

A Jonasian Analysis: The Ultimate Responsibility and Existential Risk

For Jonas, the creation of a superintelligent AGI is perhaps the ultimate test of his imperative of responsibility. The potential for an "intelligence explosion" resulting in an entity far surpassing human cognitive capacities presents a clear existential risk. An AGI's goals, if not perfectly aligned with human values and survival, could lead to human extinction as an unforeseen consequence of its pursuit of its programmed objective.³² This is the Jonasian "prophecy of doom" made manifest. The creation of AGI is an action of such monumental consequence that the "heuristics of fear" must dominate. The ethical burden is not merely to innovate but to guarantee—as far as possible—that this powerful new being will not harm the "permanence of genuine human life." Given the profound difficulty of value alignment, a Jonasian perspective would advocate for extreme caution, prioritizing safety research over rapid development, and potentially even considering a moratorium until the ethical and control problems are solved.

A Midgleyian Analysis: The Myth of Controlling Superintelligence

Midgley's critique is perfectly suited to the AI domain. The ambition to create and control a superintelligence is the apotheosis of the reductionist and hubristic "myth of control." It assumes that we, with our limited and embodied intelligence, can fully anticipate, design, and contain an

²⁹Mary Midgley, "Biotechnology and Monstrosity: Why We Should Pay Attention to the 'Yuk Factor'," *Hastings Center Report* 30, no. 5 (2000): 9.

³⁰For a discussion of AI personhood, see David J. Gunkel, *The Machine Question: Critical Perspectives on AI, Robots, and Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 10-15.

³¹This is a central argument in the campaign to ban "killer robots." See, for example, the work of the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots, <https://www.stopkillerrobots.org>

³²Nick Bostrom, *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1-10.



entity whose cognitive processes may be as incomprehensible to us as our own are to a mouse.³³ This project is based on a simplistic, engineering-based view of intelligence, ignoring its emergent, contextual, and potentially unpredictable nature. The hubris lies in the belief that we can summon a demon—or a god—and reliably keep it in a bottle. Midgley would argue that the responsible path requires immense epistemic humility, a recognition of the potentially unbridgeable gap between human and artificial consciousness, and a rejection of the techno-utopian narrative that more intelligence is an unalloyed good.

Conclusion

This philosophical investigation set out to interrogate the ethical controversy surrounding the metaphor of "playing God," a critique that surfaces with persistent urgency in response to humanity's growing technological prowess. Through a systematic analysis, we have moved beyond the metaphor's simplistic usage as a conversation-stopper and excavated its profound ethical core. By constructing a tripartite framework from the philosophies of Immanuel Kant, Hans Jonas, and Mary Midgley, this study has provided a robust structure for evaluating the limits and responsibilities of human intervention in domains ranging from the human genome to artificial intelligence.

The journey through this analysis yields a clear and nuanced answer to our central inquiry. A blanket prohibition on activities labelled as "playing God" is indeed ethically untenable, as it ignores the positive moral imperative to alleviate suffering, cure disease, and improve the human condition through responsible innovation. However, the critique must not be dismissed. Instead, its essential warning has been validated and refined through philosophical scrutiny. The Kantian lens revealed that the fundamental transgression lies in instrumentalizing human life, violating the dignity and autonomy of present and future persons. The Jonasian perspective established that our new powers demand a correspondingly vast ethics of responsibility, where the duty to preserve the future of "genuine human life" outweighs the impulse for reckless progress. Finally, Midgley's critique exposed the intellectual hubris and reductionist mindset that make such transgressions possible, advocating for a necessary epistemic humility in the face of life's complexity.

The application of this synthesized framework to genetic engineering and artificial intelligence demonstrated its analytical power. In both cases, the convergence of these three perspectives—deontological, existential, and virtue-based—provided a multi-faceted and stringent ethical assessment. It revealed that the gravest dangers arise not from technology itself, but from its pursuit without the guiding constraints of dignity, responsibility, and humility. The framework allows us to distinguish between potentially permissible therapeutic applications and ethically fraught enhancements, and between beneficial narrow AI and existentially risky AGI, based on principled reasoning rather than vague fear.

The proposed pathway forward, therefore, is not one of renunciation but of transformation. The responsible exercise of our "god-like" powers requires the cultivation of a new ethos, anchored in the hybrid principles of inviolable dignity, precautionary responsibility, and epistemic humility. Crucially, this ethos must be embedded within structures of inclusive, multidisciplinary, and democratic deliberation. The governance of powerful technologies cannot be left to closed expert communities or market forces alone; it must become a central project of democratic societies, engaging citizens in determining the future they wish to inhabit.

In conclusion, the metaphor of "playing God" endures because it captures a timeless truth about the perils of hubris. This investigation has argued that the appropriate response is not to abdicate our agency but to exercise it with the wisdom that true power demands. The goal is to ensure that our creative capacities are guided by a deep respect for what is human, a profound care for what is to come, and a humble acknowledgment of all that we do not and cannot know. By

³³This analogy is frequently used in AI safety discussions. See Stuart Russell, *Human Compatible: Artificial Intelligence and the Problem of Control* (New York: Viking, 2019), 5.



doing so, we may hope to ensure that the immense power we now hold ultimately serves to nurture, rather than undermine, the conditions for a genuinely human future.

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- This is a central theme in the Quran. See, for instance, Surah Al-Baqarah (2:34), where Iblis refuses to prostrate before Adam out of pride.
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