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# Is the Creation of Artificial Life Morally Significant?

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## Abstract

In 2010, the Venter lab announced that it had created the first bacterium with an entirely synthetic genome. This was reported to be the first instance of ‘artificial life,’ and in the ethical and policy discussions that followed it was widely assumed that the creation of artificial life is in itself morally significant. We cast doubt on this assumption. First we offer an ontological account of the creation of artificial life that distinguishes this from the derivation of organisms from existing life, and we clarify what we mean in asking whether the creation of artificial life has moral significance. We then articulate and evaluate three attempts to establish that the creation of artificial life is morally significant. These appeal to (1) the claim that the creation of artificial life involves playing God, as expressed in three distinct formulations; (2) the claim that the creation of artificial life will encourage reductionist attitudes toward the living world that undermine the special moral value accorded to life; and (3) the worry that artificial organisms will have an uncertain functional status and consequently an uncertain moral status. We argue that all three attempts to ground the moral significance of the creation of artificial life fail, because none of them establishes that the creation of artificial life is morally problematic in a way that the derivation of organisms from existing life forms is not. We conclude that the decisive moral consideration is not how life is created but what non-genealogical properties it possesses.

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