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GMO Food Labels, Our Emotions and the "Rationalist's Delusion"

"Earth & Table" Law Reporter

Politicians often referred to a 90% consumer preference for food labels signaling the existence of genetically modified ingredients—or GMOs as they are known—during this year's congressional hearings regarding the now enacted "National Bioengineered Food Disclosure Standard."



This consumer sentiment appeared irrational to some legislative representatives, believing it defied "hard science" showing that GMO foods are "safe" to eat. Others commented on how consumer reactions to GMO foods were highly-charged and fraught with "emotions."

Unfortunately, the rushed legislative GMO labeling debate only skimmed the surface of consumer psychology as it relates to an expressed desire for GMO food labeling.

Discomfort with new foodstuffs resides in our age-old "omnivore's dilemma," where what you put in your mouth and swallow can possibly

injure or leave you and your family on your death beds in Darwinian fashion. You are what you eat after all.[1]

Innate emotions—such as disgust, fear, distress, anger and rage—arise from and can be amplified by moral notions of food sanctity and its opposite, food contamination and degradation. As a classic 1970s Chiffon margarine commercial once proclaimed to crackling lightning and thunder: "It's not nice to fool Mother Nature!"

This post examines GMO food labeling from the developing perspective of "moral foundations" psychology, a topic overlooked in recent hearings. In doing so, it exposes the fallacy of the "rationalist's delusion,"—an outmoded, but convenient line of argument that denigrates innate consumer distrust of GMO foodstuffs.

The "Unemotional" Congressional GMO Hearings

Historians will marvel at the procedural machinations leading to a loophole-filled, federal GMO disclosure standard, with no committee hearings held and the amendment process short-circuited by legislative gambits. An otherwise polarized Congress rallied around the legislation's real purpose: to preempt Vermont state's GMO labeling law before it became effective later this year.

The rollicking GMO labeling debate—this is no "conversation"—evokes emotional responses, often in spades. Panel discussions of Washington state's proposed GMO labeling bill—as witnessed by this author—devolved into schoolyard shouting matches. GMO labeling advocates and opponents routinely talk over and past each other with abandon.

The federal GMO disclosure standard's co-sponsor, Senator Deborah Stabenow, alludes to the intense "emotions" generated by genetically modified foods. The lack of committee hearings, however, ensured that there would be no emotional displays during House and Senate deliberations. One would have to take her word for it that "unfortunately, we have seen a lot of emotion around this issue on both sides—a lot of emotion."[\[2\]](#)

Congressional members displayed little curiosity as to why GMO labeling issues would generate such an emotional controversy. They did not try to

reconcile why so many Americans desire GMO food labeling when "sound" scientific studies already demonstrate that "there is *no* evidence that GMOs *aren't* safe." By the conclusion of these hearings, that accurate, but double-negative statement had been transformed into a cheerleader's declaration that such "products *are completely safe*" and that "science has proven again and again that the use of agriculture biotechnology is *100-percent safe*."^[3]

Supporters of a federal GMO labeling standard appeared chagrined that "sound" science had been ignored by those demanding bold GMO labels on their food products. In their view, pure reasoning should supply the necessary corrective to allay any health or safety concerns about genetically modified foodstuffs.

Senator Heitkamp bemoaned, "I come to the floor to urge all of my colleagues to stop denying science and to start understanding that GMO ingredients are just as healthy for American consumers as any other ingredient."^[4] Implicit in the Senator Heitkamp's statement is the notion that only the "hard sciences"—chemistry or biology—have anything to say of import with respect to the GMO labeling debate.

How consumers perceive GMO foods and their associated labels—the realm of the psychology and sociology—was never evaluated with any rigor in the foreshortened congressional debate. In telling the American public in not so many words that YOU'RE STUPID and GET OVER IT, federal legislators ignored the developing field of "moral foundations" psychology. It studies how our perceptions trigger and amplify innate emotional affects. Consumer reactions to new GMO foods appear more rational and justified when analyzed from a psychological, "soft science" standpoint.

Congressional Reliance on the "Rationalist's Delusion

Philosophers from Plato to Immanuel Kant have always elevated "reasoning" as our most noble attribute. In contrast, the Scottish philosopher David Hume posited that people make moral judgments quickly and emotionally and that moral "reasoning was mostly just a post hoc search for reasons to justify the judgments that people had already made."^[5]

Hume's theory is now borne out by research findings, such as those presented in Daniel Kahneman's groundbreaking work, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2013). They demonstrate that Hume was right and Kant and his rationalist predecessors were wrong. Emotions lead reason by the nose.

A leading moral psychologist summarizes years of such moral psychology research: "each individual reasoner is really good at one thing: finding evidence to support the position he or she already holds, usually for intuitive reasons." See *J. Haidt, The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (2012).^[6]

Moral psychologists study the adaptive challenges of social life and posit "universal cognitive modules upon which cultures construct moral matrices." Five moral, adaptive challenges stand out among all cultures: (1) caring for vulnerable children; (2) forming partnerships with non-kin to reap the benefits of reciprocity; (3) forming coalitions to compete with other coalitions; (4) negotiating status hierarchies; and (5) keeping oneself and one's kin free from parasites and pathogens, which spread quickly when people live in close proximity to each other.^[7]

Each adaptive challenge, its triggers and its characteristic emotions can be classified in chart form:^[8]

	Care/ Harm	Fairness/ Cheating	Loyalty/ Betrayal	Authority/ Subversion	Sanctity/ Degradation
Adaptive Challenge	Protect and care for children	Reap benefits of two-way partnerships	Form cohesive coalitions	Forge beneficial relationships within hierarchies	Avoid contamination
Original Triggers	Suffering, distress, or neediness expressed by one's child	Cheating, non-cooperation, deception	Threat or challenge to group	Signs of domination or submission	Waste products, diseased people, taboo ideas
Typical Emotions	Compassion	Anger, gratitude, guilt	Group pride, rage at traitors	Respect, fear	Disgust

The sanctity/degradation script or module—genetically derived in our natures and molded through nurture—is the moral foundation most applicable to an analysis of GMO food labeling issues. The adaptive challenge grew out of the exploration of new foods.

The Omnivore's Dilemma and Food "Disgust"

Omnivores "must seek out and explore new potential foods while remaining wary of them until they are proven safe."^[9] "The vital importance of nutrition and the severe risks of poisoning may together account for the strong affective responses associated with eating and for the ambivalence associated with this process."^[10]

Omnivores go through life with competing challenges: *neophilia* (an attraction to new things); and *neophobia* (a fear of new things).

"The emotion of disgust evolved "to optimize responses to the omnivore's dilemma." While the original triggers included smells, sights or other sensory patterns that might predict food contamination, the current triggers of the sanctity moral foundation "are extraordinarily variable and expandable across cultures and eras."^[11]

Only one senator (Mr. Merkley) acknowledged the emotive, sanctity core of the GMO food labeling debate:

Well, we the people want simple information in the package. So if we are here to honor that principle, why is this bill that says the interest of a few titans . . . is more important than the views of 90% of Americans? And when those Americans are asked, more than 7 out of 10 say this is a very important issue to them, so this isn't one of those casual issues. Why is it so important? Because this is the food *they put in their mouths and on their table*. And even if they have no concerns about the GE product itself, they feel they have a right to know.^[12]

GMO foods push moral hot buttons because of the adage "you are what you eat." As the last checkpoint before food is ingested, the "mouth seems to function as a highly charged border between the self and nonself." Consumption of offensive objects is considered demeaning or debasing, and hence disgusting. "The focus of oral incorporation distinguishes the emotion of disgust from all other emotions"^[13]

Voluntary GMO Labeling Fills the Void

While Congress largely ignored the moral psychology of a consumer's response to GMOs, many food companies already adopt voluntary GMO-free labeling. This makes abundant marketing sense from a consumer psychology perspective. It allows them to take commercial advantage of the "sanctity" moral foundation and how moral triggers can influence one's food choices.

The color green predominates in the GMO-free labeling paradigm. It intuitively appeals to your sense of pastoral family farms and bucolic nature. Almost unconsciously in your mind's eye, you're transported back to Norman Rockwell's "Freedom From Want" Thanksgiving table. After you all hold hands and say grace, the turkey your mother toiled over in the kitchen is being carved by your father at the table.

[1] For a more detailed historical discussion of the evolution of food labels, see the author's article entitled *We Are What We Eat: The Origins and Current Legal Status of "Natural" and "Organic" Food Labels*, published in the online version of *Gastronomica*, <http://www.gastronomica.org/we-are-what-we-eat/>.

[2] Congressional Record, March 6, 2016 (Senator Stabenow).

[3] Congressional Record, July 7, 2016 (Senators Heitkamp and Roberts).

[4] Congressional Record, July 7, 2016 (Senator Heitkamp).

[5] Inspiration for this article came from Jonathan Haidt's *The Righteous Mind*. The summarizing quotation in the text is from p. 47.

[6] *Id.* at 105.

[7] *Id.* at 146. A subsidiary sixth moral foundation is posited that involves the twinned concepts of liberty versus oppression. For the purposes of this article, we will concentrate on the five major adaptive challenges of social life.

[8] This chart is adapted from a table included in *The Righteous Mind*, at 146.

[9] *Id.* at 172.

[10] *Id.* at 27.

[11] *Id.* at 172.

[12] Congressional Record, March 16, 2016 (Senator Merkley).

[13] P. Rozin and A. Fallon, "A Perspective on Disgust," 94 *Psychological Review* 1, at 25-27 (1987).