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The Ethics of Protocells: Moral and Social Implications of Creating Life in the Laboratory (Basic Bioethics)

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Teams of scientists around the world are racing to create protocells--microscopic, self-organizing entities that spontaneously assemble from simple organic and inorganic materials. The creation of fully autonomous protocells--a technology that can, for all intents and purposes, be considered literally alive--is only a matter of time. This book examines the pressing social and ethical issues raised by the creation of life in the laboratory. Protocells might offer great medical and social benefits and vast new economic opportunities, but they also pose potential risks and threaten cultural and moral norms against tampering with nature and "playing God." The Ethics of Protocells offers a variety of perspectives on these concerns. After a brief survey of current protocell research (including the much-publicized "top-down" strategy of J. Craig Venter and Hamilton Smith, for which they have received multimillion dollar financing from the U.S. Department of Energy), the chapters treat risk, uncertainty, and precaution; lessons from recent history and related technologies; and ethics in a future society with protocells. The discussions range from new considerations of the precautionary principle and the role of professional ethicists to explorations of what can be learned from society's experience with other biotechnologies and the open-source software movement.

Contributors: Mark A. Bedau, Gaymon Bennett, Giovanni Boniolo, Carl Cranor, Bill Durodié, Mickey Gjerris, Brigitte Hantsche-Tangen, Christine Hauskeller, Andrew Hessel, Brian Johnson, George Khushf, Emily C. Parke, Alain Pottage, Paul Rabinow, Per Sandin, Joachim Schummer, Mark Triant, Laurie Zoloth

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