

Matters of Morality

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"In an instant of time, nothing exists." This declaration by Sir Bertrand Russell was quoted in "The Ethical Brain," a novel by Michael Gazzaniga. Its meaning is simple; all things in the world are relative. There is nothing that exists without interaction and correlation with something else. This idea of relativity applies to what I believe is the key concept of the neuroethical debates described in Gazzaniga's book. While some believe that social issues of disease, mortality, and lifestyle should be governed by neuroethics alone, I choose to consider all of the factors of an issue in relation to each other. In some cases it is acceptable to use neuroethics to judge the morality of an issue, and in other cases it is best to use a different approach.

Many of the opinions that Gazzaniga presents in "The Ethical Brain" in terms of neuroethics are, in my opinion, legitimate. One of these includes his attitude regarding stem cell research and conscious life. The dilemma with stem cell research lies in whether or not it is more wrong to end a *potential* life or to end research that could potentially save lives. Gazzaniga assigns no moral status to an embryo with no neurological processes and bases his argument on one thing, which is intention. There are two types of embryos that are used in stem cell research; those left over from IVF procedures and those that are engineered specifically for research purposes. There is never an *intention* for either of these classifications of embryo to become a child, making them nothing more than what they are; a "clump of cells." Researching the embryo of a hopeful mother would be a different story, because we, as humans, expect the embryo to become something more. I agree with Gazzaniga's assertion that the moral status of an embryo is relative to what we decide its destiny to be. In this case, I find myself supporting the neurological approach to ethics.

In some cases, however, neuroethics falls short. One issue that I disagree with Gazzaniga on is the topic of brain enhancement. Gazzaniga believes that enhancing the brain with drugs is a good way to improve the general population. He states that, as the population is right now, some people have exceptional neurological traits such as great memory and fast learning. He, therefore, asks, "Why should we be upset if the same thing[s] can be achieved by a pill?" I believe that it would be wrong for us to utilize such drugs, even if they would be beneficial neurologically. I think brain enhancement drugs would cause problems, especially in situations such as standardized testing. Drugs would create "unfairness" in what we consider to be the judge of a person's intelligence. It is not logical to assume that every child or college student would be able to afford or even *want* drugs that would improve their score. Does the use of these drugs mean that a child with lower intelligence would be able to score exceptionally higher than a child with higher intelligence and no money for enhancement? We would be creating poor judgments of a person's true ability. Gazzaniga does not recognize these issues with his "why not?" attitude.

Another issue that I found with Gazzaniga's view

on brain enhancement was his contrasting opinions about steroids. He believes that steroids are wrong because they are "cheating", yet, he fully supports the enhancement of the brain. I feel like his reliance on neuroethics blinds him in this particular issue, even though it seems obvious that any type of enhancement is still an improvement.

Gazzaniga's assertion that violence is the result of a person's genetic programming is also a controversial subject. He believes that human beings do not have free will and that their actions are completely controlled by their brain and its electrical signals. He, therefore, believes that criminals charged for dangerous or violent crimes should not be held accountable for their actions because they must have had a brain malfunction. While it is true that the brain controls actions, many would disagree that, as humans, we do not possess free will. Evidence for free will is provided by the fact that every person has a different opinion in terms of what he or she wants or loves. Even if Gazzaniga's claim is true, it still remains controversial whether or not these dangerous criminals should be set free as a result of a "brain malfunction." A dangerous criminal is still dangerous, whether his brain is diseased or not. The fact that Gazzaniga suggests that we allow murderers and other offenders back into the world is foolish because nothing would stop them from committing the same crimes again. "My brain made me do it" should not be a plausible plea in the courtroom.

In "The Ethical Brain," Michael Gazzaniga makes several fair arguments regarding the use of neuroethics in judging morality in today's society. His position on the subject of stem cell research greatly displays this coherent reasoning. However, in some cases it seems as if his loyalty to neuroethics is a bit misconstrued. His beliefs about brain enhancement and dangerous criminals are immoral, and often contradictory to similar subjects, such as steroid use. While Gazzaniga may believe that an answer for everything lies in the ethics of the brain, it is more practical to judge every situation on its own. By doing this, it is easy to keep in mind that everything is relative.

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References

Gazzaniga, Michael S. (2005). *The Ethical Brain*. New York: Harper Perennial.

*This author wrote the paper for FIYS 106: Medical Mysteries taught by Dr. Shubhik DebBurman.