Neuroethics: An objective look at our moral understanding

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History is punctuated by defined events. Numbers, dates, places, and personalities are etched into textbooks and, thereby, cemented in our history. This cannot be said of ethics and morals. Granted these social constructs change through time but are not as concrete as the Battle of Hastings in 1066 C.E. Ethics and morals are an ever-changing heterogeneous constant in our society; for every premise, there is always a qualification or negation argument. Yet, through this nature of debate and contrast, individual ideas are clarified to the point of universal acceptance; a universal ethic. Until now, the primary method of ethical and moral progress in society has been through rhetoric and popular sovereignty. Currently, as science continues its charge of progress, more facets of humanity and personal experience are being illuminated. Can scientific findings expound and, possibly, define ethical and moral dilemmas? This is the purpose of Michael Gazzaniga's book The Ethical Brain. Gazzaniga proposes neuroethics, defined by William Safire as "the field of philosophy that discusses the rights and wrongs of the treatment of, or enhancement of, the human brain" (Gazzaniga, XIV), as a form of discourse for our social and ethical issues. This line of discussion gives greater merit and clarification to our moral understanding as scientific findings depend on evidence, not a subjective opinion.

Abortion is a divisive subject. It has separated our society into pro-lifers and pro-choicers. Abortion's corrosive nature is to be expected given its involvement in killing potential human beings. Two arguments that argue against abortion are the continuity and potentiality arguments. The continuity argument states that, "a fertilized egg will go on to become a person and therefore deserves the rights of an individual, because it is unquestionably where a particular individual's life begins" (Gazzaniga, 9). The potentiality argument states that, "since an embryo or fetus could become an adult, it must always be granted equivalent moral status to a postnatal human being" (Gazzaniga, 11). The potentiality argument is essentially a qualification of the continuity argument yet holds the same conclusion. Gazzaniga gives credit to these only in that they strike a chord with the sympathies of the population. Instead, his scientific opinion lies in the inability to attribute human status to a 13-week-old fetus as it is "a writhing reflex-bound hunk of sensory-motor processes that does not respond to anything in a directed, purposeful way" (Gazzaniga, 6). Since neural complexity and function is necessary in all humans, this status cannot be ascribed to a non-function nervous system. In turn, he argues abortion is ethical prior to the twenty third week of development when such characteristics are present (Gazzaniga, 7). Another argument for abortion is the societal necessity in empowering women. This is well mapped out in the second chapter, "Abortion Ethics: Rights and Responsibilities," of the book Hypatia by Elisabeth Porter. When concluding her argument for abortion, she writes, "The basis of its social claims lies in the integration of a particular rights claim as a woman, and a general human rights claim for autonomous bodily self-determination" (Porter, 85). With abortion, you are giving women the chance to have more control over their destinies. None of this indicates a should do it argument but rather that the option always be there.

Continuing with the pro-life pro-choice divide, euthanasia is another debate that parts society. Gazzaniga's opinion is that living wills regarding euthanasia should be honored. He cites the American philosopher Ronald Dworkin as his views also stem from valuing "autonomy, beneficence, and sanctity of life" (Gazzaniga, 29). While this gives sound reasoning for the implementation of euthanasia and the sanctity of its choice, the popular opinion muddies this clarity. The paper "Euthanasia and physician assisted suicide" outlines a study on euthanasia and why it is so controversial. In the findings, the authors mention, "About two thirds of oncology patients and the public found euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide acceptable for patients with unremitting pain" (Emanuel et al., 1996). Unfortunately, for those with lower degrees of pain, euthanasia was not deemed acceptable by the public. If euthanasia is going to become a right, the populace cannot impinge the individual's decision. What is the point of having a right if it can be vetoed at another's whim? To allay some of the controversy, in chapter 23 "The Morality of Killing" in Bioethics: An Anthology, the author, James Rachels, states that euthanasia, though it should be a right, it should only be given sparingly (Rachels, 2006, 247). The criteria for administration is a separate and more complex issue, but the acknowledgement of needed scarcity is important. Though we can value the beneficence and autonomy of one's choice, as a society we value life and its protection.

A final point of discussion is the attainability of a universal ethic. Certain points are obvious, the outlawing of murder and theft for example, but what about a universal code that defines the answer to all ethical dilemmas. This seems slightly absurd and extreme but there is a biological argument to be made. Gazzaniga explains that, "From an evolutionary perspective the theory is that the neural structures that tie altruistic instincts to emotion may have been selected for over time because helping people immediately is beneficial" (Gazzaniga, 171). This may seem like a cynical materialistic view of such an important piece of our society but it explains both the longevity of morals and their universality through tenants such as altruism. In addition, Gazzaniga briefly touches on some evidence that, "The new brain imaging results are highly suggestive that our brains are responding to the great underlying moral dilemmas" (Gazzaniga, 171). If this is the case, morals may be a factor that has shaped our genes and neural physiology. Another facet to this argument is that of necessity; a universal ethic is needed for our growing cosmopolitan society. In Karl-Otto Apel's essay, "Globalization and the Need for Universal Ethics," he mentions that, as we expand our horizons further and further, we need our morals to be homogenous. In situations where this cannot be resolved, an impasse must be placed so both sides can live in harmony and not discord. As our societies and cultures expand, a universal ethic is inevitable as it is both demanded by need and facilitated by our neurophysiology.

In conclusion, neuroethics, in tandem with other fields of study, is a very beneficial agent in ethical and moral dilemmas. Neuroethics is effective at defining objective reality but does not account for subjective experience. Gazzaniga acknowledges this when he says he would have a visceral reaction to an image of his child at Carnegie stage 23 though he is aware of its non-human status (Gazzaniga, 7). There will always be a place for rhetoric and poplar sovereignty. Neuroethics is simply another tool which we can use to live more moral and ethical lives.

References

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