

Ethical Blurs of *The Ethical Brain*

Saajidha Rizvydeen*

Department of Biology
Lake Forest College
Lake Forest, Illinois 60045

There is a line at which scientific decisions come to an end and morality and ethics are brought in to solve some of humanity's most complex medical questions. Though this line exists, it is often extremely blurred by an individual's desires or religious beliefs. Michael Gazzaniga, author of *The Ethical Brain*, educates the readers about some of the most recent controversial topics that are present in the realm of neuroethics. Neuroethics is an area of study that monitors ethical issues in respect to medical advances connected to the central nervous system (P. 15- preface).¹ I partially agree with Gazzaniga's beliefs. While Gazzaniga's argument of whether and when a fetus should be granted moral rights seems plausible, his logic for allowing the use of Pre-Genetic Diagnosis to determine sex is idealistic, and his belief that the use of memory enhancers would be self-regulated by society is irrational.

For the first ethical dilemma, Gazzaniga questions whether and when a fetus should be granted moral and legal rights of a human being. By questioning this, he attempts to elucidate the period at which it is ethical to use human tissue for embryonic stem cell research. Gazzaniga relates his beliefs to the readers by explaining the science behind them and relating the emotional aspects that merge when making such a decision. For his argument of whether a fetus should be given moral rights, Gazzaniga deems that it depends on the intent that the embryo was primarily created with. Gazzaniga explains that there are "two types of embryos used in human biomedical research: spare embryos from IVF procedures and ones created by cloned embryos intentionally generated for research" (p. 13).¹ Seeing as how these embryos were not intended to become human beings, they are not supposed to be granted the rights that an embryo that is intended to develop to a human would be given. As to when the embryo should be granted moral rights, Gazzaniga believes the fourteen day cut-off period currently used by scientists is appropriate (p. 7).¹ He further believes that the moral right should be granted to a fetus at Carnegie Stage 23 (8 weeks). He bases the fact that though the fetus would still not be able to sustain human life by itself; it has gained the form of a human being. After considering emotional factors that might well up in parents, he decides that after this point the fetus should gain some rights (p. 7-8).¹ I support all of these beliefs of Gazzaniga. I believe that Gazzaniga takes into perspective both the emotional and the scientific aspects of embryonic stem cell research thus taking into account the major ethical issues that brew up under this argument.

One of the ethical standpoints of Gazzaniga that I disagree with is his belief that "it is unlikely that many people will seek memory enhancing drugs that slow normal memory loss." (p.78)¹. Gazzaniga makes a good point that overtime many drugs have developed and though regulations have been made, society self-regulates which ones would be abused and which ones would not. He gives us a great example that ironically seems to disprove his claim. His example is that coffee (a mild form of the drug caffeine) is widely used and abused in society, usually to benefit an

individual's attention, whereas alcohol consumption, for example, is greatly moderated by society because it has few benefits to humans. Therefore, Gazzaniga's belief that memory enhancers will not be abused in society is falsifiable. Though memory enhancers may conjure memories that most people in society might not want to remember, I believe the thirst for climbing up the social ladder will outweigh the fear of bad memories. Society will look at memory enhancers as its new "coffee," a way in which people are able to improve their understanding and knowledge. For those who do not use memory enhancers, they would be forced to do so just to keep up with the ones who do. Therefore, I do not agree with Gazzaniga's belief that they will not be abused. I believe that if memory enhancers were to be sold, then they should be done so with regulations that limit society's use of it allowing, for example, only those in need such as Alzheimer's patients to use it.

Another ethical perspective of Gazzaniga that I disagree with is his belief that sex selection using Pre-Genetic Diagnosis technology (PGD) should not be regulated. "In PGD, testers remove a single cell from the fertilized embryos in a petri dish to scan for abnormalities. The test allows couples to choose to implant healthier embryos that don't have abnormalities. More controversially, it also lets them choose male or female embryos."² Gazzaniga believes "PGD will not be abused to any significant degree... [because] any abuse will be outweighed by the gains in eliminating disease."¹ (p. 54). He goes on to explain that man has always understood what is eventually good for him, and an "innate morals-ethics system would stop us from going too far."¹ (p. 54). I completely disagree with Gazzaniga's belief on this issue. The use of PGD to identify lethal genes is acceptable when there is danger towards the health and wellbeing of the child. However, using PGD for other purposes such as sex selection will conjure issues in society such as sexism. In countries that have already allowed for sex selection, statistics show that there is a rise in the number of males to females (p. 49-50). This is one indication that society is not functioning as Gazzaniga hoped it would, and the only way to halt the imbalance is to regulate what PGD could be used for.

The use of neuroethics to ethically justify issues concerning the health and lifestyle of humans is dense with oppositions. In *The Ethical Brain*, Gazzaniga does make many other valuable points concerning neuroethics, yet overall I only partially support them. I feel that there is a key component that Gazzaniga missed. Gazzaniga was so focused on observing the patterns that history has made in society with other ethical issues, that he failed to consider the dangers of what would happen when these patterns change. The possibility that memory enhancers will be abused by citizens to provide an academic advantage over others and the chances that the sex ratio of the world would be skewed beyond repair are few of the points that Gazzaniga did not consider. Neuroethics is, and will continue to be, a debated subject. Thus, as society ages, so will its perspective on certain issues, bringing about dilemmas that are as disputable as these previous ones have been.

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

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