

Another Voice in Ethics

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Arguing morality is a common occurrence among many professions, from philosophers, clergy, sociologists, psychologists, and from the formally educated to those educated through experience. However, those who study the human condition from the more biological perspective of neuroethics are often left out from the discussion. In his book *The Ethical Brain*, Dr. Michael S. Gazzaniga attempts to reveal a new point of view based on current scientific knowledge surrounding ten different ethical debates that are prevalent in the world today. While Gazzaniga's opinions on topics supporting self-determination, such as abortion and pharmacological neurochemicals, seem ethically sound, the idea that neuroscience can be used to determine the relative worth of other human beings, such as editing traits after screening with PGD, is unethical. Changing the genes of the unborn so they are born more "normal" removes the beautiful diversity that strengthens our society.

Since the first laws against it were created in the United States in the 1820s and 1830s, abortion has been a hotly debated topic. The central crux to this debate is the question of when life starts, as it determines whether abortion is first-degree murder or no different from removing a tumor. Gazzaniga's use of neuroscience to answer this question is helpful in putting this emotional topic into perspective, answering the question from a minimally-biased point of view. For instance, electrical activity does not appear in the brain until week 6 and a human brain is not viable until week 23, meaning that it is impossible for the fetus to have human consciousness or humanity (Gazzaniga, 2005). This determination of when life starts is very similar to that decided in the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case *Roe v. Wade*, which decided that life begins when the fetus can survive outside the womb. Furthermore, Dr. Koch, an American neuroscientist, explains in the *Scientific American* that the thalamo-cortical complex that provides consciousness is not present until sometime between the 24th and 28th weeks of gestation (2009). Consciousness, in some form, is required to be human and not just tissue. As such, a fetus with no capability of consciousness cannot be found to be more than just a tissue. Thus, if a tissue is unwanted by the person it is attached to, he or she has no ethical responsibility to keep it.

Similar to the question of self-determination in abortion is the question of whether it is ethical to use drugs to enhance performance. While there is a general consensus that performance enhancing drugs cause an unfair advantage in the case of competitive sports, use in academic or non-competitive sporting environments is growing and the ethics of this use is being debated. Some drugs are already being widely used on a daily basis, such as caffeine to increase attentiveness and prevent fatigue. Other drugs are currently used on a prescription-only basis and show great success, such as Adderall and Ritalin, which help those with ADHD. Gazzaniga advocates for the responsible and well-regulated use of brain-boosting neurochemicals, arguing they are no more unfair than practice, socioeconomic position, parental involvement, or good nutrition. As he explains, limiting the distribution of chemicals that can boost brain function, with little to no drawbacks, is a waste. Further supporting Gazzaniga's argument, Dr. H. Greely contends that cognitive enhancement should be permitted, and even supported, in healthy patients, if and only if sufficient research is done on the short term, long term and developmental impacts of such drugs (2008). Neuroscience is helpful in this discussion as it increases the information people have about the negative and positive effects of these drugs, allowing them to determine whether such a choice will be right for them. As our society tries to improve itself, we need to put aside irrational fears and focus on more evidence-based policy and ethics. As our knowledge of the brain and ability to improve it grows, so will our need for a rational discussion on having well-regulated and safe brain-enhancing neurochemicals.

While Gazzaniga's neuroscientific views can help make breakthroughs in ethics regarding personal choices, such as abortion or what medication to take, it can be dangerous when used to make decisions for someone else. Pre-genetic diagnosis, or PGD, is a way to determine specific genes and thus, the traits of a fetus before birth. According to Gaz-

zaniga, such practices should be allowed, as ethics would be self-managed by society. I disagree fundamentally with Gazzaniga, as I fear the traits chosen would not be based on any sort of reason or objectivity but instead on societal values. For example, for centuries, being queer was thought to be a disorder; however, our society is now starting to realize the beauty in having a society with many different and unique sexualities. This would not have happened if queer individuals had been aborted or altered before birth. Sparrow expands upon this: "Regardless, investigation of the intuition that selection on the basis of the physical traits associated with race would be racist and that a selection on the basis of sexual preference would be homophobic—and that both would be *prima facie* immoral" (2013). In the past, many of these traits were thought of as undesirable and would have been eliminated, if possible. However, society now understands the great benefit this diversity provides. As Marchant and Robert describe, these ethical questions are also critically important in autism research. To describe autism as undesirable is ablesst and to decide that human beings should be born without it and other mental "disabilities" leads to a more homogenous, less accepting society. To demonstrate the relevance of this issue, a few years ago my cousin was told the child she was pregnant with had Down Syndrome. She had the choice to abort the baby, but instead she recognized that the "disorder" would not affect the worth of her child. While it has not been easy for my cousin raising a child with Down Syndrome, her daughter Anna-Lisa is an amazing little girl, despite the fact that she is not considered "normal" by society. Instead of demonizing and trying to change those who are different from us, society should focus on accepting them.

Neuroethics, the idea of using neuroscience to direct ethical discussions, is a useful tool to determine the possible answers to various ethical discussions. It can reveal to us when brain function and the ability of consciousness begins and can explain the possible side effects of performance-enhancing drugs. Neuroethics can do more harm than good, however, when it provides people with the agency to remove unwanted types of people, whether that be those with a so called mental disability or possibly, in the future, selecting certain types of physical traits thought to be more desirable. Perhaps, by combining neuroethics with the ethical approaches of other fields, a more complete picture can be created as we strive toward more concrete and logical ethical discussions.

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