

Editorial Essay: Mapping the Ethical in Neuroscientific Research

Gazi Islam¹

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*“What’s the good of Mercator’s North Poles and Equators,
Tropics, Zones, and Meridian Lines?”
So the Bellman would cry: and the crew would reply,
“They are merely conventional signs!”*
Lewis Carroll, *The Hunting of the Snark*

In this issue of the Journal of Business Ethics, a diverse group of scholars explore the prospect that understanding neuropsychological processes will lead to philosophical and practical understandings of ethics. Like Lewis Carroll’s “Snark” quoted above, turning our analytical gaze into the folds and connections of the brain mobilizes technologies that produce ever more elaborate maps of the neural terrain, pressing toward an ethical horizon that seems to recede beyond the limits of current knowledge. Although the map is not the territory, mapping the mind inscribes its mark on its object, and neuroscientific research can have important impacts on how we understand our own humanity (Lindebaum et al. 2017). The special issue contained in the current volume summarizes the state of the art in this quest (Robertson et al. 2017), surveying important neuroscientific lines around decision making and cognitive processes, gender, and consumer behavior perspectives in their relation to the ethical, mapping an increasingly complex territory to ease navigation by business ethics scholars.

In addition to the articles gathered for the special topic forum, the issue contains an additional contribution by Lindebaum and Raftopoulou, who provide a philosophical appraisal of neuroscientific perspectives from the

perspective of Mill’s utilitarianism. While not originally part of the special issue, the article has been included because of its complementarity to and dialogue with the special issue. Indeed, together they open a field of debate to enrich discussion of the biological bases of business ethics, evaluating the prospects of neuroscience as a project for understanding business ethics.

Drawing on Mill, Lindebaum and Raftopoulou’s contribution confronts neuroscientific claims on their own philosophical grounds. Specifically, such claims often involve the benefits that individuals, organizations, or society at large may derive from a better understanding of the neuroscience of ethics (Cropanzano and Becker 2013). In short, neuroscience’s benefits are often argued from utilitarian grounds, based on an assessment of potential benefits. As Lindebaum and Raftopoulou argue, however, the conceptual roots of utilitarian criteria often go unexamined in this process. Lindebaum and Raftopoulou’s article fills this gap by providing a nuanced view of utilitarian criteria for evaluating such claims.

To do so, they begin by acknowledging points in Mill that they claim to be important but underappreciated—first, that both pleasure and pain are central to a utilitarian calculus (and thus pain and harm must be taken into account), and second, that individual and collective harmonization is itself a utilitarian goal. They go on to add that “higher” pleasures such as dignity are privileged in the utilitarian calculus, contrary to vulgar understandings of utilitarianism.

Each of these starting points grounds an aspect of their critique. The first, that pain must be taken into account, grounds the claim that the disadvantages of neuroscientific screening must be considered along with the benefits. The second point, about individual-collective harmonization, notes that screening requires broad social

✉ Gazi Islam
gazi.islam@grenoble-em.com

¹ Grenoble Ecole de Management, Univ. Savoie Mont Blanc-IREGE, Grenoble 38000, France

surveillance and control technologies that produce collective harms as they are used to scan the brains of the population for, among other things, “violent sexual fantasies” (Cropanzano and Becker 2013), a dystopian proposition for sure. Finally, by recuperating the notion of “dignity” in Mill as a higher pleasure, they argue that the individuals who enjoy their own dignity might resist treating their brains as instruments for performance enhancement. The subsequent pain of being so treated would certainly have to be taken into the utilitarian calculus along with the pleasures of augmented individual and organizational performance.

In pointing out the utilitarian stakes of phenomena such as mass bodily surveillance and, on the other hand, the hedonic utility of values such as dignity, Lindebaum and Raftopoulou importantly reinforce a two-sided connection important to linking neuroscience and ethics. The first is that deep social values like human dignity or justice are not only abstract principles but are felt in the body as affect, pain and pleasure, that the social and philosophical are embodied and felt in the senses. The second is, conversely, that knowledge of and control over bodies is instrumental to ordering the social, through selecting and enhancing bodily features, associating bodily tendencies with social categories such as those of sex and age, and linking socially desirable practices to physical pleasure through reward activation (Robertson et al. 2017). These connections between the body and the ethical reinforce the importance of theorizing the two together.

In adopting a utilitarian perspective, Lindebaum and Raftopoulou (2017) focus on the potential negative effects on the bodies of individuals as they undergo invasive techniques, the diminution of their pleasure as they lose the ability to enjoy their own human maturation process, and the harms on society as it is cleaved along lines of cognitive capabilities and tendencies. The special issue articles, at the same time, present interesting possibilities for social benefits derived from neuroscience, for business ethics education and for moving beyond monetary rewards (Robertson et al. 2017). These contributions are sensitive to the ethical concerns and dangers involved in neuroscience techniques, and promote neuroscience conducted under conditions of rigorous ethical safeguards.

While it is not the place of an editorial essay to add to the myriad possibilities and challenges presented by these contributions, I will take the opportunity to briefly reflect on what is at stake in building neuroscientific perspectives into the architecture of the business ethics literature. Scientific understandings of the human, in an important sense, feedback into their audiences’ understandings of themselves. One could say that they are, in this sense,

“performative,” a notion that in another register might resonate as “neural plasticity” (cf. Malabou 2008). Because at least in part, we become what we think we are; new paradigms do not only predict, but also construct, the human. While we ask ourselves, with Lindebaum and Raftopoulou, what are the pleasures and pains of recognizing neuroscience as a social science and integrating it as a social technology, we might also ask how such a technology would invite us to reimagine ourselves and to remake ourselves in such images.

As a closing remark before making way for the discussion to unfold, one might remember the words of Lewis Carroll, as the expedition to hunt the Snark pursued its object (cf. Ford et al. 2016). As the explorers push ever onward for the elusive Snark, they must beware the Boojum, whose mere presence will make one disappear into thin air. The promises of self-discovery through neuroscience may also hide a promise of self-transformation when we are defined through our neural activity. What the human will be in such a scenario is far from certain and thus has deep ramifications for conceptions of the ethical as such. Thus, our readers are advised to proceed with caution into the crags and folds of the brain as they search for the sources of ethics:

In the midst of the word he was trying to say,
In the midst of his laughter and glee,
He had softly and suddenly vanished away—
For the Snark was a Boojum, you see.¹

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