



Neuroethics and the History of Moral Thought

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Abstract

In this paper, the fact that there is no or little history in neuroethics is briefly considered. An open list of reasons explaining this fact is proposed as well as an open list of authors sensitive to history who adopt a critical attitude towards some bold claims expressed by a number of neuroethicists. These reflections are intended to make a humble case for more history in neuroethics.

Key words: neuroethics, neuroscience, ethics, history of ethics, history of moral thinking

1. INTRODUCTION

Neuroscience is doubtlessly a challenge for contemporary ethics. The latest discoveries in brain research gave birth to new questions and seem to undermine traditional moral theories. Doing ethics today without taking into account the accomplishments of neuroscience appears as frivolous and detached from reality. Recently, ethics has gained a new branch. Just as bioethics came into being earlier, we now have neuroethics as well. Neuroethics might be considered as a subdivision of bioethics, but some neuroethicists reveal ambitions to transform, modernize or revolutionize ethics in general, and not only bioethics.

Fernando Vidal (2015, p. 546), professor at the Autònoma University of Barcelona, briefly remarks that history is „absent from neuroethical inquiry except in the most cursory manner.” Usually, such sweeping generalizations tend to be exaggerated, but unfortunately in this

case, if it is an exaggeration, it is rather a small one. There are certainly some notable exceptions, yet generally Vidal seems to be right. Among neuroethicists, the interest in history is either invisible or it is expressed with radical modesty. For example, in over six hundred pages of *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Neuroscience* (Bickle, 2009), several authors write on neuroethics, but there are almost no historical references. Similarly, history is not an asset of the over nine hundred pages *Oxford Handbook of Neuroethics* (Illes & Sahakian, 2011). One may get the impression that people started to seriously think about moral matters quite recently, by the end of the twentieth century. History is in a slightly better situation in Springer's *Handbook of Neuroethics* (Clausen & Levy, 2015). In this publication, however, historical presentation concerns only one part of neuroethics, namely the ethics of neuroscience (that is a reflection on what is morally admissible in the practice of neuroscience or a consideration of moral dilemmas which arise in the practice of neuroscience – this history is obviously rather short), whereas the neuroscience of ethics (i.e. neuroscience's challenge to traditional ethics or meta-ethics) is completely ignored. Several historical figures also appear within the discussion of neurotheology, which means within the section that treats the relationship of religious beliefs to the new discoveries of neuroscience (the editor of this section is one of the Oxford Blackfriars, Andrew Pinsent, thus he made reference even to his medieval confrere, St. Thomas Aquinas).

Why is it so that the history of ethics is absent or it is underrepresented in neuroethics? I will propose considering several reasons that explain this state of affairs, and afterwards I will point out the usefulness and need of a more careful study of the history of moral thought.

My writing about the usefulness and need of history of moral philosophy or history of ethics in today's discussions concerning moral theories may be considered as trivial and can be compared to wagging a small bell, a baby toy, while standing below highly hung and loudly ringing bells that weigh many tons. Is it not the case that such authors as Alasdair MacIntyre, Bernard Williams, John Rawls, Alan Donagan, Charles Taylor, Terence Irwin, Jerome B. Schneewind or Julia Annas diversely and strongly exhibited this usefulness and need long ago and up to this day, the sound of their publications has spread across the whole academic world? However, the newly established neuroethics in many of its publications is notorious for ignoring this sound of great bells, as if it did not concern neuroethics, but calls over others to an unknown church for an unknown service. Therefore, is my writing on this topic based on a hope that it will cause neuroethicists to care for the history of moral thought? It is probable that the study of the history of moral thought will take its proper place in neuroethics in the age of this new discipline. Today, neuroethics is like a young man having pep, beauty, dynamism, creativity and self-confidence, but at the same time, he happens to be naïve, hot-headed and arrogant. Ringing a

small bell is of seriously doubtful efficiency, though I do not lose my hope completely: my remarks are intended to confirm that the sound of these great bells is also addressed to neuroethics.

2. WHY HISTORY IN NEUROETHICS IS SO SCARCE?

So far, I have briefly introduced the fact that there is little or no history of moral thought in neuroethics by quoting one authority and giving several representative examples. In this section, I will try to identify some probable explanations of the fact that there is little or no history of ethics in neuroethics.

a) First, I propose considering a reason within this new field. Neuroethicists face a difficulty stemming from the very interdisciplinary nature of neuroethics. Neuroethicists' position is like straddling on a wall that is separating humanities from natural sciences. On the one side of the wall, there is a discouragingly large and still swelling ocean of publications in the humanities. You simply cannot read everything. To form your own view about a specific topic is also troublesome since this problem is characteristic of many topics in the humanities, just as in the case of the waters of the ocean, they are closely connected and influence one another. Having extensively read on a topic, you think that you grasped the gist of it, but then you accidentally read something on a seemingly distant topic and suddenly you realize that this sheds some new light on what you thought you understood, so much that now you are wondering whether at that time you understood it at all. When such an experience recurs, increasing frustration poisons your mind and results in a temptation to find a convenient shortcut of key terms and slogans employed in company with an unexpressed yet effective ban on further questions, all that under the threat of failing to finish your project.

On the other side of the wall occupied by neuroethicists, there is a thick and impassable jungle of the research of natural sciences. This jungle has always grown thanks to the waters of humanities, although the jungle is usually unaware of that (say nothing of the wall itself, it is a relatively recent creation of human thinking). You cannot just walk across the jungle in order to know it. You have to first obtain some expensive instruments and often it takes a lot of time to get them. When you think you got them, there is no guarantee that you will move along nicely through the jungle as fast as you determined in your doctorate project or grant project, because you may be stuck in the mud of crucial research or you may be simply lost. Even when you cross straight through the jungle as fast as you intended, you certainly cannot say that you have become a "jungleologist," but only that you know a tiny part of this huge and pulsating life system. Does it

entitle you to clamber up on the wall and to talk about the whole jungle or the jungle in relation to the ocean?

The delimitation of the scope of the issues in the ocean of humanities only to the waves of ethics and from the jungle of natural science only to certain type of the foliage of neuroscience is consoling; but, although such a diet might be functional (you do not even need to get down from the wall to see the waves or to reach for some leaves) and methodologically justified, it may result in feeble understanding, anemic observations or ill conclusions. Yet is it feasible at all for neuroethicists to ask questions about the sources of the ocean, about the roots of the jungle or about the foundation of the clumsily straddled wall?

b) A second probable reason explaining the shortage of history in neuroethics is the current quantitative requirements and time-frame for publications. Texts are produced so quickly and in such quantity, almost all of which are immediately available, that it is difficult to expect anyone to read with understanding everything that belongs to a studied domain. Moreover, try not to be confined only to texts published in English. Even reading something that appeared over the last two decades is not a small task. In such circumstances there is no room for studying the history of specific ideas or problems, nor the possibility to read the works of the thinkers, to learn ancient languages and reach for ancient sources.

c) A shortage of history in neuroethics may be also explained by the history of neuroethics itself. If it is possible to discern the moment when neuroethics became distinct from ethics or bioethics (again, if bioethics can be distinguished from ethics), there is certainly no need to go further than two decades back. The novelty and freshness of neuroethics are therefore rightly academically celebrated and commercially emphasized. Mentioning a more distant past would have blunted the sharpness of the novelty message. Let us add that novelty and innovation are generally and diversely encouraged, stimulated, protected and remunerated.

d) The previous explanation may be propped up with a description of a larger problem of taking philosophy or ethics as maladjusted to the present and currently unable to undertake potential challenges that give new scientific discoveries. The main culprit in this perspective is history or rather those thinkers who are so focused on intricacies of the interpretations of old texts that they forget about or remain blind to the real world. In reaction to this, cases of astonishing 'presentism' in philosophy occur, especially in the analytic school, which provides arguably the majority of entrants to neuroethics. This presentism is expressed in suggestions that we should not burden students with history and thereby take away their precious time: or, more radically, that we should not contaminate their thinking, pollute their virgin perception of the

world, by framing their minds with bygone narrations and fettering them with ancient ways of thinking and formatting with old categories. The awareness of many centuries of human thinking simply intimidates: having been trained in the history of philosophy, students have no courage to think by themselves, but they want to base their reflection on some historical figures, they are afraid to see by themselves and say what there is and what there ought to be. Older considerations concerned other people, other cultures and customs, but we all have changed, the times have changed, therefore theories presented in the past are not applicable for our dilemmas.

The subject and specificity of neuroethics inscribe themselves in this presentism perfectly well. There are new instruments of measuring the activity of the brain, new techniques of research, new discoveries and new ways of applying these discoveries. Many of these discoveries actually or potentially raise moral questions. As the distinct field neuroethics takes on itself the task of analyzing challenges that individuals and societies have experienced in the face of today's neuroscience. It sounds sufficiently presentist to partly explain the shortage of history in neuroethics.

I do not intend to display an exhaustive list of reasons explaining the general lack of interest in history among neuroethicists or the lack of its reflection in the publications on neuroethics. My aim in this text is only to generally outline this phenomenon and indicate that a more serious interest in the history of ethics may be helpful. These several probable reasons are arguably sufficient to picture the phenomenon and to contextualize it slightly, so as to make clear that any suggestion about the need for the history of ethics in neuroethics might most probably meet a resistance.

3. SOME EXAMPLES OF THE USEFULNESS OF THE HISTORY OF ETHICS IN NEUROETHICS

I have listed several reasons that may partly explain the lack or shortage of the history of moral thought in neuroethics. These reasons might also partly justify the state of affairs and indicate that we accept it as it is. With no history or with modicum of it in neuroethics we could certainly save much time, energy and money. When accepting the aforementioned presentism, avoiding history may even be considered as an obligation.

Yet a problem still remains. The lack of interest in history often results in repeating old mistakes, in unjustified extrapolations, unjustified narrowing of perspective (not sufficiently informed imagination about possible cases or possible outcomes) and hasty conclusions.

One might agree that these are indeed undesirable features in neuroethical discourse, but object by saying that there is no need of history, since good logic is enough. Good logic is obviously an indispensable basis, and the more of it, the better for philosophy and for life in general. However, there are at least two reasons why logic is insufficient. First, in order to apply logic properly to any discipline a good knowledge of the discipline itself is required. Second, ethics allows inferences that are less strict than in many other disciplines, and this specific character of ethics asks for an ampler experience than a single life can contain so as to form an opinion or take a stand in the discussion.

I have already mentioned famous and respected authorities (and compared them to great bells), who explained and persuaded of the need of studying the history of moral thought in doing ethics. Apart from their arguments, obviously applicable to neuroethics, we may mention several examples of authors who, taking advantage of their historical scholarship, show the usefulness of the history of ethics in neuroethics by pointing out that certain claims put forward by neuroethicists are inadequate or simply wrong.

a) Sally Satel and Scott O. Lilienfeld in their recent richly documented book, which is significantly entitled *Brainwashed: The Seductive Appeal of Mindless Neuroscience* (2013), show that they have taken several lessons from the history of moral thinking. This academic psychiatrist-psychologist duo (Satel is a psychiatrist and Lilienfeld is a psychologist) exposes a certain boastfulness in the statements of several neuroethicists (for a nice collection of quotations see for example p. xviii–xxii) who themselves are either “overzealous” or fell prey to “neuroentrepreneurs who tout facile conclusions that reach far beyond what the current evidence warrants” (p. xiv). Satel and Lilienfeld are far from denying neuroscientific data, but rather question some interpretations and inferences. They generally revolt against theories that convince people they are basically doomed to irresponsibility. One of the chapters of this book is dedicated to the problem of addictions, an important topic in neuroethics. Satel and Lilienfeld, shaped by research in history, philosophy, neuroscience and by their personal work with addicts argue that the understanding of addictions dominant among neuroethicists as a chronic and relapsing brain disease “is fundamentally bad science” (p. 51).

b) Raymond Tallis, a physician, clinical scientist, as well as a philosopher attentive to history has already for many years fought similar battles. In 1991 he published *The Explicit Animal: A Defence of Human Consciousness* where he started his quarrel with “neuromania” by opposing exaggerated claims based on neural explanations of human consciousness and functioning. Afterwards, he published several other books exposing curiously anti-humanist trends in contemporary science and philosophy. Recently, in his much celebrated *Aping Mankind:*

Neuromania, Darvinitis and the Misrepresentation of Humanity he playfully admits his utter failure “to halt the inexorable advance of Neuromania” (p. 7). He also tries again to point out that many brain-based images of humanity or neural explanations of human agency are simply caricatures, but when they are taken seriously and presented as such by insincere people they “may have consequences that are not merely intellectually derelict but dangerous” (p. 9). Tallis gives a contemporary example from his own country of such a politically dangerous consequence and comments soberly: “Scientism and government have always made unhappy bedfellows, as the history of the twentieth century illustrated with horrible clarity. This is chilling, and yet all major political parties in the United Kingdom are fascinated by the possibility of anchoring policies in neuro-evolutionary thought” (p. 9). One of the main premises of this dangerous neuro-determinist agenda is the “you are your brain” thesis. This premise became a sort of dogma and contemporary orthodoxy. Tallis ironically notices:

it looks as if not only everyday experience and sophisticated neuroscience, but also philosophical argument, are in favour of the notion that our minds, our consciousness, our self-consciousness, our very selves, are identical with activity in the brain. Anyone who denies this must be flying in the face of fact and argument. And he or she probably has a hidden agenda. I have lost count of the number of times that I, proudly atheistic, have been accused of promoting religion by the back door (p. 42).

While outright rejecting this premise, Tallis quotes a number of neuroethicists’ bold claims and literally derides them because of their technical limitations, the crudity of the design of their experiments and most importantly, conceptual errors (for example, p. 75sq).

c) Similarly, the professor of psychology and engineering William R. Uttal in many of his publications has constantly written of the limits of the neuroscientific explanation. Serious historical research, concern for the philosophy of science as well as ethics is usually a strong asset of his publications. Thanks to this, he is able to show some similarities between today’s inadequacies that occur in neuroscience and plain errors that appeared long ago but initially had been presented as scientific discoveries. For example, in his book *The New Phrenology: The Limits of Localizing Cognitive Processes in the Brain*, he makes a comparison between some exaggerated interpretations of brain imaging with compromised 19th century phrenology. He observes that “the history of such radical mental process-brain localization theories is not encouraging to modern efforts to localize cognitive processes in particular regions of the brain” (p. 19). He contends that the “most high-level cognitive functions cannot be justifiably associated with localized brain regions” (p. 24). One of the main culprits of these errors, according to Uttal, is a lack of “an important methodological tool – critical analysis of the fundamental concepts, axioms, assumptions, and premises that underlie (...) empirical research” (p. ix). More

specifically, he critically evaluates the neuroreductionism that dominates contemporary research, because in his opinion, “although a powerful and useful means of explanation in many sciences, reductionism is ill suited for the complications one encounters when one attempts to build a bridge from the cognitive to the neural” (p. 20). As a historical example of a tragic practical consequences of insensitive scientists who succumbed to reductive explanations of human beings, Uttal gives the lobotomy craze of the thirties, forties, and fifties – “one of the most disgraceful periods in neuroscience” (p. 24).

d) In the same vein of complaining about imprecisely defined concepts, assumptions and premises inscribe themselves two other scholars, the neuroscientist Maxwell R. Bennett and the philosopher Peter M.S. Hacker. Their book *Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience* (2003) caused heated debate. In this book, the authors critically evaluate the conceptual foundations of neuroscience and show how lack of precision on this level results in erroneous conclusions. Some of these conclusions may have practical dimensions and become problematic when uncritically accepted by neuroethicists or politicians. Bennett and Hacker emphasize the need for a historical perspective both within neuroscience and philosophy as an important help of critical thinking.

e) Although more distant from neuroscience but equally relevant for the topic of this paper are the reflections of the professor of linguistics Anna Wierzbicka. In her recent book entitled *Imprisoned in English: The Hazards of English as a Default Language* (2014), she shows many problems surrounding the use of English in doing research across cultures. Wierzbicka underlies that English, like any other language, is not a totally neutral instrument of description and evaluation. It has its own culture-specific baggage that is unconsciously taken for granted by native speakers of English and tends to be underestimated in contact with other English speakers. Wierzbicka writes metaphorically that “English can at times become a conceptual prison” (p. 4). One of her examples important here is contained in chapter six of the book “Anglo Values vs. Human Values: Talking about Values in a Global World”. She quotes Marc D. Hauser’s website called “the moral sense test” (p. 62). Until recently, Hauser was a Harvard University professor of evolutionary psychology, evolutionary biology and biological anthropology and the author of the highly celebrated book *Moral Minds: How Nature Designed Our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong* (2006). According to Wierzbicka, the few words of the title of the book represent a rare example of highly concentrated dose of Anglo culture. Wierzbicka did some historical research and showed that “moral sense” underwent a significant shift of meaning during last three centuries. In her earlier cross-cultural linguistic studies she showed the peculiarity of the terms “right” and “wrong” in English. According to her, most societies do not

have these notions. Hauser's moral sense test is also devised on the assumption that everyone understands the phrases "moral sense", "right", "wrong", etc. in the same way. Using this historical and cross-cultural linguistic research, Wierzbicka gracefully suggests that it is rather disputable to assume that every English speaker was born, raised and still lives somewhere in the vicinity of Harvard, i.e. that everybody is shaped by the same culture and tradition. In her own words:

Scientists and popular science writers who today write in English about 'moral sense' generally do not seem to be aware that they are part of a particular linguistic and conceptual tradition and that by equating 'human morality' with 'moral sense' they are interpreting it through the prism of that tradition (p. 64).

I do not claim that the aforementioned examples of errors or inadequacies in neuroethics are exclusively the effects of a lack or shortage of the study of history of moral thinking. A handful of other factors might also play an essential role. However, I do believe that a careful study of the history of moral thinking is a highly useful tool that may be used in order to avoid many errors or inadequacies.

As in the case of any tool, it is possible to use or abuse it. While reading the history of ethics, it may happen that you prefer to brag about your own perfection instead of learning something, or instead of asking reverently the wise people of old, you prefer to look with disdain at any confirmation that you are wiser indeed. Studying great historical writings does not protect you from bias, malice or arrogance. You may be exceptionally well-versed in the history of moral thinking, but remain immoral and use your knowledge for immoral purposes. The study of history is of course not sufficient for your success in neuroethics since elements needed for the success in neuroethics are many. Nonetheless, I suggest that history is one of the more noble and important elements. If we treat neuroscience as indubitable challenge to today's ethics, we should certainly acknowledge as well the challenge that the history of ethics presents.

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