



Bioethics and the Brain

Walter Glannon

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Our ability to map and intervene in the structure of the human brain is proceeding at a very quick rate. Advances in psychiatry, neurology, and neurosurgery have given us fresh insights into the neurobiological basis of human thought and behavior. Technologies like MRI and PET scans can detect early signs of psychiatric disorders before they manifest symptoms. Electrical and magnetic stimulation of the brain can non-invasively relieve symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder, depression and other conditions resistant to treatment, while implanting neuro-electrodes can help patients with Parkinsons and other motor control-related diseases. New drugs can help regenerate neuronal connections otherwise disrupted by schizophrenia and similar diseases.

All these procedures and drugs alter the neural correlates of our mind and raise fascinating and important ethical questions about their benefits and harms. They are, in a sense, among the most profound bioethical questions we face, since these techniques can touch on the deepest aspects of the human mind: free will; personal identity; the self; and the soul. This is the first single-author book on what has come to be known as neuroethics. Walter Glannon uses a philosophical framework that is fully informed by cutting edge neuroscience as well as contemporary legal cases such as Terri Schiavo, to offer readers an introduction to this fascinating topic. He starts by describing the state of the art in neuroscientific research and treatment, and gives the reader an up-to-date picture of the brain. Glannon then looks at the ethical implications of various kinds of treatments, such as: whether or not brain imaging will end up changing our views on free will and moral responsibility; whether patients should always be told that they are at future risk for neurological diseases; if erasing unconscious emotional memories implicated in depression can go too far; if forcing behavior-modifying drugs or surgery on violent offenders can ever be justified; the implications of drugs that enhance cognitive abilities; and how to define brain death and the criteria for the withdrawal of life-support. While not exhaustive, Glannons work addresses a wide range of fascinating issues and his pathbreaking work should appeal to philosophers, psychiatrists, neurologists, neurosurgeons, radiologists, psychologists, and bioethicists.

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