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Cosmopolitan Neuroethics: What it is and why we need it

James Giordano and John Shook discuss and explain the concept of [cosmopolitan neuroethics \(https://peh-med.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1747-5341-9-1\)](https://peh-med.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1747-5341-9-1): what it is, how we can apply it, and why it's becoming increasingly important in our globalized world.

[Dr. James Giordano & Dr. John Shook \(http://blogs.biomedcentral.com/on-medicine/author/jamesgiordanojohnshook\)](http://blogs.biomedcentral.com/on-medicine/author/jamesgiordanojohnshook), 17 Jul 2018



What is a 'cosmopolitan' neuroethics?

James Giordano: By definition, a cosmopolitan ethics provides a system and approach that are universal in appreciation of the various norms and morals that constitute and contribute to international discourses and activities. In this light, a cosmopolitan neuroethics must establish and deliver a broad palette of ethical ideas, ideals and constructs so as to

appreciate and engage the cultural diversity of the contemporary global stage. But this palette should also be used to develop and utilize distinct approaches that reflect the varied hues of ethics needed to address and guide activities in and for particular local communities.

John Shook: Indeed, cosmopolitan neuroethics must comprehend what morality is for the *entire* human species, and also offer ethical advice relevant to *all* humanity while respecting cultural differences. The second task, we believe, cannot be achieved without accomplishing the first task. There is a growing realization that neuroscience and neurotechnology are increasingly international. It is now common for basic and translational research to be conducted by teams of researchers from various countries, and experimental applications quickly cross national boundaries. Neuroscience is destined to be truly global; we believe that to provide real guidance, neuroethics must also be global in its scope and conduct.

Why did you feel the need to define a different kind of neuroethics, and what limitations and challenges is this concept trying to overcome?

JS: Neuroethics has been caught in the crossfire of a long-standing philosophical debate. Opposed views on the relation between science and morality refuse to compromise. One camp expects that science's objectivity will help explain what morality actually is. The other camp rejects the idea that science could determine what is ethical. Both camps are right, but they justify their positions by distorting what the behavioral and brain sciences are able to say about morality.

Neuroethics has to seek scientific accuracy and philosophical balance. First, science does confirm how morality is thoroughly human, and not just a matter of subjective opinion or cultural convention. Normally developed and properly socialized brains have plenty of capacity and motivation to enforce moral norms, and basic processes of moral cognition work similarly across humanity. These are objective facts about human morality. Second, science also confirms how culture is supposed to shape moral norms for people pursuing well-lived lives. Variations within moral cognition permit societies to uphold differing cultural standards for adults. Cultures should display moral variation among each other, and show ethical development over time.

JG: Still, science cannot determine which culture – or system of moral codification – is most ethical. But brain science can provide increasing understanding of how humans (and perhaps other creatures) engage cognition, develop and express emotions, and execute decisions and actions in ways that are judged by their conspecifics to be moral. This can serve as an objective basis, if not grounding for ethics.

From that objective basis, neuroethics can confidently address the nature of morality and provide objective ethical advice. But, if we are to employ, rely upon and validly use neuroscientific information about moral thought and actions, then there is strong responsibility to insure that such research is conducted in ways that are apt, and sound, and that the information and capabilities rendered by such research are employed in those ways that are in keeping with ethical standards that should be applicable, at least on some level, on scales that range from the local to the global.

JS: Our belief – and hope – is that a cosmopolitan neuroethics will be well-prepared to contribute to international debates and decisions about neuroscientific advances that affect all of humanity.



Why do you think this paper has been considered so influential?

JG: Without doubt, brain science is becoming an ever more international enterprise. Ongoing international discussions center upon research tourism and what has been called "ethics dumping" – the practice of conducting research in countries (https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/science-and-technology/neurotechnology-and-society_f31e10ab-en), in which ethical standards are regarded as more lax (https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-05616-w?utm_source=briefing-dy&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=briefing&utm_content=20180703). Thus, it will be increasingly important, if not essential to develop the resources and mechanisms that enable open and sensitive discourse about the differing needs, values and norms that contribute to various cultures' philosophies and ethics. Also important is how these may be engaged when undertaking multi-national projects, or when dealing with decisions regarding the multi-national use of information, techniques and tools generated by particular countries' research programs.

Perhaps, what was influential about our work was its explicit focus upon such differences, and the need to respect and retain certain neuroethical principles, and revise and/or develop others anew in light of the expanding capabilities, and internationalization of programs and applications of brain science.

JS: Surely, if international cooperation and collaboration is the future, then parochial dictates from just one or another country could carry little weight. It was once imaginable that a single ethical and legal framework could dominate neuroscientific work around the world. Those days are gone. What will a truly international neuroethics look like?

Neuroethics was assigned a broad array of responsibilities and areas for investigation, so research methods will vary. Still, neuroethics should share a common approach for making ethical evaluations of neuroscientific advances. Familiar ethical principles from 20th century applied ethics, such as bioethics, could be applied to novel issues arising from the

brain sciences. However, those principles took shape within legal and social contexts of only some Western countries. There may be wisdom in such principles, just as there is wisdom in other cultural traditions, but they all must be adapted to 21st century contexts and capabilities that the world has never seen before.



Empowerment, non-obsolescence, self-creativity, and citizenship: why these principles?

JS: Neuroethics must fulfill a primary responsibility of any ethics: to uphold persons as centers of moral worth, and promote the flourishing of moral persons in ethical societies. By the 20th century, four principles seemed wisely paramount: While clearly Western in formulation, these principles do have non-Western counterparts, and they all presume that "the person" is a static matter. That presumption is no longer a given. There are now international, multi-cultural needs to both contemplate neuroscientific changes to conceptions of the individual "self," and to consider neurotechnological opportunities to radically augment the capabilities of persons.

We propose that each of the fundamental four principles (autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, and justice) can be augmented to adequately respond to these emerging opportunities. The ordering of these revised principles is not so important, and each one places certain limitations on others.

JG: Exactly; we believe – and advocate -that these principles should not be taken and used *prima facie*, but rather, be regarded as reciprocal and inter-dependent, as this affords these constructs scalability to enable both local value and global viability.

JS: Correct; thus, within our proposed schema, the autonomy of persons to lead their own lives now implies the creative freedom to re-shape themselves: *the principle of self-creativity*. Societies will encourage people to augment themselves for social utility, but harmful obsolescence and social disability must be prevented as well: *the principle of non-obsolescence*.

To be truly beneficial, augmentation must always be empowering for a person, allowing that person to pursue an overall enriched life: *the principle of empowerment*. As for justice, persons try to guarantee equality and justice through participation in political action, so no augmentation should obstruct that full civic engagement: *the principle of citizenship*.

Cosmopolitan neuroethics, along with a similarly upgraded bioethics, should be a steadying voice of ethical wisdom as humanity tentatively explores the possibilities for radical enhancement.

JG: And we're honored and delighted that our ideas and proposal for what such a system might entail and obtain has been considered as influential to the development and growth of neuroethics as a field and practices, and more largely to the international discourse in philosophy, ethics and the sciences.

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