

Neuroethics Challenges for the 21st Century

A book review by Perry Mill

Author: Neil Levy
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Are you worried and depressed about the potential dangers of thought-reading scanners, or mind-control robots? You may want to be as or more concerned about the effects on your mind of your weekly talk-therapy counseling sessions, because according to Neil Levy in *Neuroethics – Challenges for the 21st Century*, existing and mainstream lower-tech modalities may be as ethically dubious as their sci-fi counterparts.

In this engaging and intellectually challenging book, Levy takes the reader on a long, convoluted and complex philosophical journey, exploring topics such as the extended mind hypothesis, the ethics of authenticity and philosophy of the self, treatment versus enhancement, consciousness, and moral responsibility.

From the outset, and at its conclusion, *Neuroethics – Challenges for the 21st Century* invokes the “parity thesis” to argue that new-age mind altering technologies, such as transcranial magnetic stimulation and psychopharmacology (e.g., anti-depressant medications) are “on par” with, and should not *necessarily* be held with any greater suspicion than, more conventional approaches, such as psychotherapy and retail marketing techniques (which deplete consumers’ ego resilience, and manipulate them into spending “mindlessly”).

Along this neuroethical trek, Levy introduces us, his tourists, to a variety of exotic neurological conditions and treatments (e.g., Body Integrity Identity Disorder, Anosognosia), as well as more common phenomena (depression, post-traumatic stress disorder), both of which pose varying degrees of moral quandaries.

The most intellectually challenging part of the book for this (non-philosopher) reviewer was the section on the neuroscience of free will. So, unless you are a seasoned logician, you may not wish to slide down the vortex of the *pros* and *cons* of “free will as a consciously determined phenomenon”.

In the book’s chapter on the Neuroscience of Free Will, Levy examines the principle of using consciousness as an apparent pre-requisite for moral responsibility, such as in the prosecution of criminal acts. Citing conventional rules of legal culpability (*M’Naghten Rules*), he also puts forth an argument against blaming individuals for transgressions, about which they have no conscious or moral awareness (e.g., automatisms, such as in sleep walking, and the case of very young children): the offences by psychopaths, for example, are viewed in terms of whether or not the psychopath believed them to be moral transgressions (considered more serious) versus conventional rule-breaking (considered less serious).

Levy concludes *Neuroethics – Challenges for the 21st Century* as he started it: by questioning the adequacy of our moral theories and principles to pronounce judgment on neuroscientific interventions. Citing the work and thoughts of philosophers such as Peter Singer and neuroscientists such as Joshua Greene, Levy explores whether or not our moral judgments can be relied on if they are indeed the product of our intuitions and emotions (as opposed to, or as much as our cognitive abilities). He concludes on an optimistic note about the promise that individual and collective rational reflection holds for better moral judgment.

Neuroethics – Challenges for the 21st Century is definitely a worthwhile read, even though parts of it may temporarily tie your cortical gyri into knots (if this condition persists, you may wish to consult your neurologist...or simply put the book down for awhile). The ethical community will undoubtedly benefit from Levy's book, which this reviewer would recommend to any ethical aficionado planning to enter the nascent, but certainly controversial field of neuroethics.