Brain, Body, and Mind: Neuroethics with a Human Face

Walter Glannon
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According to the World Health Organization (WHO) an estimated one-in-four people worldwide, will experience a mental health condition within their lifetime (World Health Organization, 2010). The average financing extended towards mental healthcare in most countries, however, is reported to total less than 2% of their overall health budget (World Health Organization, 2010). Research conducted by the World Health Organization projects that by 2020 neuropsychiatric disorders will account for approximately 14.7% of the global burden of disease (World Health Organization, n.d.). An on-going issue that makes these figures increasingly disturbing can be found in the results of a study conducted by the Canadian Medical Association. In this 2008 study involving one thousand Canadians, nearly half were found to perpetuate the stigma surrounding mental illness, by stating “mental illness is not always real but an excuse for bad behaviour and personal weakness” (p. 33). These troubling findings offer only a few reasons why Walter Glannon’s (2011) new book Brain, Body and Mind: Neuroethics with a Human Face is both timely and compelling.

Glannon addresses a number of neurological illnesses within his new book, taking a fascinating look at some of the most prominent and contemporary ethical issues and debates involving the use of both traditional and emerging techniques for manipulating the mind, body and brain.

Glannon is an associate professor of Philosophy at the University of Calgary, where he holds the Canadian Research Chair in Bio-medical Ethics and Ethical Theory. His latest book takes readers on a thought-provoking exploration of the medical challenges and moral dilemmas arising from the use of experimental neurological techniques and neurosurgical technology that is relevant to patients, researchers, theorist and physicians in a variety of fields.

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Following in the footsteps of Glannon’s (2007) book, *Bioethics and the Brain*..., he expands his discussion of neuroethics by highlighting contemporary literature from the fields of neuroscience, psychology, law, psychiatry and philosophy. Glannon does an admirable job breaking down several complex concepts, clearly illustrating the necessary neurological and medical techniques for his readers before probing the related ethical issues surrounding them. Some of these techniques include: cognitive enhancement, brain imaging techniques, deep-brain stimulation, and restorative neurosurgery. In each chapter, he incorporates empirical evidence from clinical and experimental neuroscience providing stimulating philosophical discussion of the potential medical, social and moral implications of innovation.

As the introduction implies, he uses a clear descriptive narrative that ensures prior knowledge of the philosophical and neurological concepts he employs are not a necessary prerequisite for readers to follow his discussion and theoretical framework. This ensures his book is both accessible and valuable to the varied readership he intended. This includes, but is certainly not limited to, students and practitioners of clinical and cognitive neuroscience, legal theory, philosophy, psychology, sociology, and anthropology (p. 4).

Glannon is strategic in his execution, capitalizing on what he feels to be a chronic failing within the current academic literature, namely the disproportionate use and ineffectual amalgamation of theory and practise. His pragmatic fusion of theory and practical evidence is a useful tactic for engaging his diverse readership.

While paying mind to detail, he is generally careful not to burden readers with unnecessary technical features of the neurosurgical, psychiatric and neurological procedures that are introduced and analysed in connection with his discussion of free will, moral and criminal responsibility, and capacity to reason. Occasionally, the presentation of excessive empirical evidence and individual case studies hinder the flow of his arguments and make for tedious reading, but overall evidence is tactfully employed and the references throughout the book create a pleasing continuity in themes.

This book is logically mapped-out establishing the most significant theoretical concept, the brain-mind relation, early in chapter one and building upon it throughout the remainder of the book. As Glannon (2007) states, “the brain remains the most complex and least understood organ in the human body” (Glannon, 2007, p. 5). However, we would be remiss to consider the mind as a concept synonymous with, and entirely reducible to, the brain. Glannon adamantly rejects brain-mind dualism, challenging the idea that our minds and mental states, thoughts, feelings and their resulting behaviours can be entirely explained simply in terms of neurological functioning. Alternatively, he suggests that our mind and mental states are shaped, sustained and altered by our brain, body and external environment (p. 12). Mental states can therefore be understood as the result of the dynamic relationship that exists between these three essential components (p. 12).

Based on this theoretical framework Glannon begins a dialogue that promotes both a healthy respect and sensible wariness of technological advancements in the field of neuroscience. He cautions against exclusive reliance on neurobiology for diagnoses and treatment, a tactic which he feels “fails to appreciate the extent to which the mind is shaped by what occurs outside the brain” (p. 39). The delivery of this warning, though not particularly novel, is compelling.

Among other things, this book highlights aspects of the ethical evolution taking place within the medical field. Glannon focuses on a few key contemporary issues within a debate that straddles numerous fields including: neuroscience, law, philosophy and psychology. He also alludes to the far-reaching implications these issues may have for the future study of neuroethics and their impact on our global medical community, policy-makers and the public domain. Indirectly, his book also suggests that as neurological techniques expand and improve our prospective health outcomes, there will be an increased importance placed...