As a diverse group of colleagues met to discuss the possibility of forming a Neuroethics Society, one of the foremost questions was whether it was truly useful to distinguish neuroethics from the well-established field of bioethics. After all, the world has no shortage of subfields, societies, or journals, and many of the issues that might come under the rubric of neuroethics are already well handled by bioethics and other existing fields. Brain-related issues already well discussed by bioethicists include constraints on informed consent and decision-making by people with mental illness or cognitive disability, or circumstances under which it is acceptable to end life support in an unconscious person who has not provided advance directives. The decision to form a Neuroethics Society was based on our view that, beyond such traditional bioethical issues, the brain has a special status with respect to ethics and public policy. The goal of forming such a society was not to further fragment the world of scholarship but to remain strongly connected to bioethics, philosophy, neuroscience, and the gamut of social sciences.

Because the brain is the substrate of all thought, emotion, and behavioral control and thus underlies what is most central to our humanity, we believe that understandings of the brain and interventions that affect its function raise unique questions for society. Examples of emerging technologies worth special consideration from the point of view of ethics and policy include: Noninvasive imaging technologies that permit us to peer into the working brain and even to glimpse markers of cognitive or emotional processing (including forms of bias) of which the brain’s possessor is not conscious; chronically implantable stimulating electrodes that can produce long-term changes in human mood; drugs that can selectively dampen memories encoded under the influence of strong emotion; peptide hormones that can be administered via nasal spray that increase a person’s trust. Such examples bring home the point that technologies used to observe or influence brain function deserve thoughtful attention beyond that provided by scientists.

While ethics should accompany the study of the brain, the study of the brain can also be brought to bear on our understanding of ethical principles themselves. Indeed, whether one believes that ethical principles are transcendent or are contingent on human brains and human history, all understandings, ethical or otherwise, are shaped and constrained by our cognitive and emotional capacities. Thus the field of neuroethics can provide an important point of interaction between scientists studying the nature and neural basis of what has come to be called “moral cognition” and those interested in systems of ethics and their application in the world. In sum, it is our hope that the Neuroethics Society, and neuroethics as a field, can provide an exciting intellectual crossroads that will advance ethical reflection on the study of the brain and, at the same time, enrich the study of ethical principles themselves.

Here is the first issue of the Neuroethics Society Newsletter, which we plan to publish four times a year. Together with our website and occasional emails, it will keep you informed of Society activities and the world of neuroethics more generally.

Certain features will appear in the Newsletter on a regular basis. A “Letter from the President,” will head up each issue. Each issue will also include an “Update” from one of the Executive Committee members on some aspect of Society operations. In this issue the update concerns Society events and meeting plans. Future updates will cover membership, finances, and international initiatives. A calendar of neuroethics events will appear on the back page of every issue, and we encourage you to notify us of any upcoming events with a neuroethics focus that are intended for audiences or participants outside a single institution.

Finally, each issue will feature an interview with a Neuroethics Society member. Our goal is to showcase the diversity of research programs and philosophical approaches that have found an intellectual home in neuroethics and the Neuroethics Society. Ilina Singh of the London School of Economics graciously agreed to be the first member interviewed.

The content of the NS Newsletter will undoubtedly evolve over the coming months and years. We hope you will let us know which features are most valuable to you and also send us your suggestions for new features. The newsletter is being edited by Martha Farah, with assistance from Andrew Rosenthal, and for this issue, Melissa Hozik. Andrew’s work on this and other aspects of the Neuroethics Society is supported by a generous grant from the Dana Foundation.
Update on Neuroethics Society Meetings
Turhan Canli, NS Events Chair

2006 was an extraordinarily busy events-year for neuroethics. In September, I organized a one-day workshop on “Neuroethics and Homeland Security” at Tufts, in cooperation with the Neuroethics Society.

In October, we hosted our first official Society social event at the Society for Neuroscience (SfN) meeting. Approximately 50 neuroscientists, including Neuroethics Society members and prospective members, gathered at one of the conference hotels in Atlanta for cocktails and hors d’oeuvres. Also in October, NS members and interested colleagues got together for dinner at the American Society for Bioethics and Humanities (ASBH) meeting in Denver. Attendance exceeded RSVPs by quite a bit, so we overflowed to additional tables at the very accommodating Avenue Grill restaurant.

In November, we hosted our first international social in Heidelberg, Germany, at the suggestion of NS student member Adrian Carter. The venue was Brauhaus Vetter in the old town center, whose sausages and beer helped fuel an excellent late-night neuroethics discussion. This social was held in conjunction with the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL) annual 2-day conference on Science and Society, which included a number of NS members this year as the meeting theme was “Genes, Brain/Mind, and Behaviour.” Discussions at the NS get-together and at the meeting itself (which included approximately four-hundred attendees) included probing discussions of neuroethics as a new field and in relation to existing disciplines and programs. We were grateful for the opportunity to have these exchanges and feel that this was a very auspicious start for the Neuroethics Society in Europe.

We are now in the process of organizing neuroethics meetings for 2007 and beyond. Under discussion now are a possible social event at the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) meeting in San Francisco this February, and a possible satellite meeting for the Cognitive Neuroscience Society (CNS) in May. Stay tuned for more information on these.

The first annual meeting of the Neuroethics Society will take place in April or May of 2008 in San Francisco. By scheduling the first meeting well in advance, we have more time to plan and to build our membership base to make it a well-attended and successful meeting. The program is expected to fill two days with didactic workshops, symposia, panel discussions, poster sessions, and a business meeting. In the meantime, we will continue to hold get-togethers for members and prospective members at next fall’s SfN, ASBH and other relevant meetings. Let me know if you would like to organize one of these at a meeting you plan to attend.
NS: What is your current research about?

Dr. Singh: I have been funded by the Wellcome Trust to investigate the impact of stimulant drug treatment on children’s moral self understandings (including conceptions of personal authenticity, personal responsibility, and autonomy). This project will involve interviews with up to 100 children across three groups: children taking stimulant drug medication for ADHD, children “at risk” for ADHD, and children not currently under psychiatric care. I’m interested in picking up on the dynamics of culture and gender, and so we’ll be interviewing boys and girls in the US and the UK.

NS: Fascinating! The concept of authenticity has played such a central role in discussions of psychopharmacology, but it’s usually invoked in a very abstract way. How are you -- approaching this empirically? What sorts of questions do you ask to probe a child’s sense of authenticity, and what sorts of answers are you getting?

Dr. Singh: Interviewing anyone -- let alone children -- about “authenticity” is complicated. In the pilot work I have done so far, I was really trying to figure out how children think about this issue, how they would talk about it, and how relevant it is for them in terms of their experiences with medication. I have experimented with open-ended and standardized interviewing techniques. Children readily engage in thinking about how medication alters the brain; what relationship the brain has to the person; whether medication fundamentally alters the person (or only acts on behaviors); whether the person on medication is more or less “real” than the person off medication – or whether this is a ridiculous distinction to make. People underestimate children’s capacities to talk on this level, and they underestimate the consistency of their responses. I have a set of about 8 questions in front of me when I go to interview children. I try to ask each question in at least 4 different ways throughout the interview -- and children’s responses are mostly the same, no matter how I’m asking the question.

The most surprising, and disturbing, finding amongst UK children taking stimulant medication for a diagnosis of ADHD, is that their understanding of their “authentic” selves appears to be characterized by an immutable sense of inner “badness.” They believe that medication fundamentally alters the person (or only acts on behaviors); whether the person on medication is more or less “real” than the person off medication – or whether this is a ridiculous distinction to make. People underestimate children’s capacities to talk on this level, and they underestimate the consistency of their responses. I have a set of about 8 questions in front of me when I go to interview children. I try to ask each question in at least 4 different ways throughout the interview -- and children’s responses are mostly the same, no matter how I’m asking the question.

This finding needs to be interpreted very cautiously, for all sorts of reasons which I enumerate in an article that will be published in Child Psychology and Psychiatry, entitled “Clinical Implications of Ethical Concepts: Moral self-understandings in children taking methylphenidate for ADHD.” But if the finding holds up in the larger study, it will turn our fears about the impact of stimulant medication on authenticity upside down. These children are saying that in fact, stimulant medication doesn’t undermine their personal authenticity. But how do we, as parents, teachers, clinicians, value the authentic self that these children are expressing? Is this a personal authenticity that we want to protect? Should we be viewing stimulant drug medication not as a threat to personal authenticity, but as a means of positive intervention into an entrenched negative self-concept?

NS: This raises so many interesting questions, theoretical and clinical. That’s one of the wonderful things about working in neuroethics now: All these fascinating issues concerning minds, brains and society have become more than just fun to think about intellectually, they have acquired real-world relevance, even urgency. Did you get into your current research from a more theoretical entry point or a more clinical one?

Dr. Singh: One of the challenges I have set myself is to try to continually work both ends, as it were, the theoretical and the clinical. I was trained as a social scientist, so my head is full of a classic critique of psychiatry and medicalization – Szasz, Foucault, Conrad, etc. While I still think this critique is important, I quickly found it lacking in real-world applicability once I entered the clinic. I have a similar sort of respectful impatience with the traditional approach taken by ethicists – which is to formulate answers to problems by working with made-up cases. One of my goals in the current research project is to build an evidence base for claims and concerns voiced by the public and by ethicists about the implications of stimulant drug treatment for children. I think this is a useful model for trying to assess the potential ethical, social and psychological implications of other neuro-technologies as well. Without this evidence we remain at the mercy of media and politics-driven hype and paranoia about these new technologies, and we won’t know how to productively translate these concerns into sound policy or good clinical practice.

NS: In your experience, what kinds of institutional factors have encouraged or blocked the synthesis you’ve been forging between the theoretical and clinical approaches?

Dr. Singh: There is a growing number of us who are interested in doing what is sometimes called “empirical ethics” around issues in neuroscience. In the UK, this effort is being supported institutionally by funders such as the Wellcome Trust Biomedical Ethics Program, and through the creation of research centres such as BIOS at the LSE, where the vision really is to forge interactions and intersections between social science and clinical/laboratory research. In addition, there is now a global collective called the Neuroscience and Society Network, which has been created largely through the efforts of several of our BIOS PhD students (for more information contact Linsey McGoey at lj.mcgoey@lse.ac.uk). We have also created a new journal whose specific aim is to facilitate dialogue between social scientists and life scientists around the social, ethical, and policy implications of current and new developments in the life sciences. The journal is called BioSocieties: An interdisciplinary journal of social studies of life sciences, and I’m pleased to say that we’ve just reached the end of our first year of publication, with excellent results!

NS: Indeed! I’ve enjoyed many of the articles in BioSocieties. In closing, let me ask you for any general observations you might have on the emerging field of neuroethics.

Dr. Singh: I suppose one question I have about neuroethics is... what is it? For me, this definitional question is grounded primarily in methodological concerns: What constitutes data in the field of neuroethics? What are our objects of study? Which methodological approaches are best suited to research in neuroethics? What modes of analysis can or ought to be used? How do we (or should we?) validate research findings? I’d like to see us take on these sorts of questions more formally, perhaps in workshops or seminars. I worry that without rigorous discussion on this rather mundane level, we risk encouraging the notion of neuroethics as afad, rather than as an...
Neuroethics Events Calendar

February 2, 2007  “Is there Science Underlying Truth Detection?,” a symposium organized by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the McGovern Institute for Brain Research at MIT, and Harvard University. The event will be held on February 2, 2007, from 2-5 PM at the American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 200 Beacon Street, Somerville MA 02143. For more information, see http://www.amacad.org/event.aspx

February 16, 2007  “The Spotless Mind? Policy, Ethics & the Future of Human Intelligence”  National Press Club, 529 14th Street N.W., Washington, D.C.  Hosted by the Institute on Biotechnology and the Human Future (IBHF) at Chicago-Kent College of Law/illinois Institute of Technology 8:30 AM - 5:00 PM  Emerging technologies in the areas of neuro-enhancement and artificial intelligence promise to drastically alter: our ability to augment human intellectual and sensory capacity; the role of machines; and how we connect, communicate, and share information. But, will such changes bring about the panacea promised by their proponents, or will they be akin to opening Pandora’s Box? Even before such interventions become possible, their exploration should not be left to the realm of science fiction writers and pop-culture movie moguls. Rather, society, as a whole, must engage both science fact and science fiction in confronting the issues presented by these technologies - from who gets them to how they should be used.  For more information, see http://www.thehumanfuture.org/events/

February 15-19, 2007  Annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, in San Francisco, CA.  As usual, the program includes a number of talks and symposia relevant to neuroethics, including: “Smart Prosthetics” (Feb 16, 8:30 AM)  and “Does Neuroscience Challenge Moral and Legal Notions of Responsibility?” (Feb 18, 8:30 AM).  For more information, please visit http://www.aaas.org/meetings/Annual_Meeting/


April 20-21, 2007  From the Brain to Human Culture: Intersections between the Humanities and Neuroscience. An interdisciplinary conference sponsored by the Comparative Humanities Programs at Bucknell University. Bucknell University. Lewisburg, PA, USA. Conference calls for papers. For more information, please contact Prof. John Hunter at jchunter@bucknell.edu

June 1, 2007  Neuroethics breakfast meeting, hosted by Eric Racine at the Canadian Bioethics Society Annual Meeting, 7:45-8:45 AM, at the Toronto Marriott Downtown Eaton Center.

September 26-27, 2007  “International symposium on the vegetative and minimally conscious state.”  Impaired Conscious Research Group: Robinson College, Cambridge, United Kingdom.  “An exciting program has been prepared which will include lectures by leading scientists, clinicians and allied health professionals.  The program will not only focus upon the latest findings and application to clinical practice, but will give everybody the opportunity to discuss emerging questions and issues as we continue to learn more about these devastating conditions.”  For more information: http://www.wbic.cam.ac.uk/~mrc30/conference_home.html