



The Myth of the Moral Brain: The Limits of Moral Enhancement (Basic Bioethics)

By Harris Wiseman



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Throughout history, humanity has been seen as being in need of improvement, most pressingly in need of moral improvement. Today, in what has been called the beginnings of "the golden age of neuroscience," laboratory findings claim to offer insights into how the brain "does" morality, even suggesting that it is possible to make people more moral by manipulating their biology. Can "moral bioenhancement" -- using technological or pharmaceutical means to boost the morally desirable and remove the morally problematic -- bring about a morally improved humanity? In *The Myth of the Moral Brain*, Harris Wiseman argues that moral functioning is immeasurably complex, mediated by biology but not determined by it. Morality cannot be engineered; there is no such thing as a "moral brain." Wiseman takes a distinctively interdisciplinary approach, drawing on insights from philosophy, biology, theology, and clinical psychology. He considers philosophical rationales for moral enhancement, and the practical realities they come up against; recent empirical work, including studies of the cognitive and behavioral effects of oxytocin, serotonin, and dopamine; and traditional moral education, in particular the influence of religious thought, belief, and practice. Arguing that morality involves many interacting elements, Wiseman proposes an integrated bio-psycho-social approach to the consideration of moral enhancement. Such an approach would show that, by virtue of their sheer numbers, social and environmental factors are more important in shaping moral functioning than the neurobiological factors with which they are interwoven.

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Editorial Review

Review

In *The Myth of the Moral Brain* Harris Wiseman portrays bioethics at its best -- a careful analysis of the philosophical issues combined with a sound understanding of the relevant science and the possible clinical applications of such work, and even an irenic foray into related theological issues. This is the first book-length attempt to provide a thoughtful assessment of the ethics of moral enhancement through systematic analysis of the many conceptual issues in play with an eye toward the practical constraints of what we can actually do with biotechnology.

(William P. Kabasenche, Clinical Associate Professor of Philosophy, Washington State University)

In this well-researched and well-written book, Harris Wiseman cuts through an abundance of current misconceptions to dispel the notion that there are discrete neurochemical or neuroanatomical bases of morality that can be specifically engaged, affected, and enhanced. Instead, he notes how brain processes mediate psychological aspects of inter-individual and group interactions, and how social constructs are important to forming and guiding human behavior. In this way, *The Myth of the Moral Brain* provides an articulate, rational, naturalistic view of morality, and makes an important -- and I believe necessary -- contribution to the fields of cognitive and social neuroscience, and neuroethics.

(James Giordano, Chief, Neuroethics Studies Program, Pellegrino Center for Clinical Bioethics, Georgetown University Medical Center)

Wiseman injects a much-needed measure of scientific and political reality into one of the hottest debates in applied ethics today. The distinctions he draws in the course of his wide-ranging defense of human agency against reductionism may just succeed in rescuing the idea of moral enhancement from its staunchest advocates.

(Robert Sparrow, Professor, Philosophy Program, and Adjunct Professor, Centre for Human Bioethics, Monash University)

[Wiseman] argues compellingly against 'neuroprimacy' in ethics.... Through his thoughtful critique of neuroscientific reductionism, he provides a foundation for understanding the complexities of moral action.... *The Myth of the Moral Brain* is a cautionary tale of overconfidence in easy fixes for deep flaws.

(*New Scientist*)

The Myth of the Moral Brain...puts moral enhancement back on its feet, as it were.

(*Hastings Center Report*)

About the Author

Harris Wiseman received his PhD from the Faculty of Divinity at the University of Cambridge. He is currently a Senior Research Associate at the Institute of Education and University College London.

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