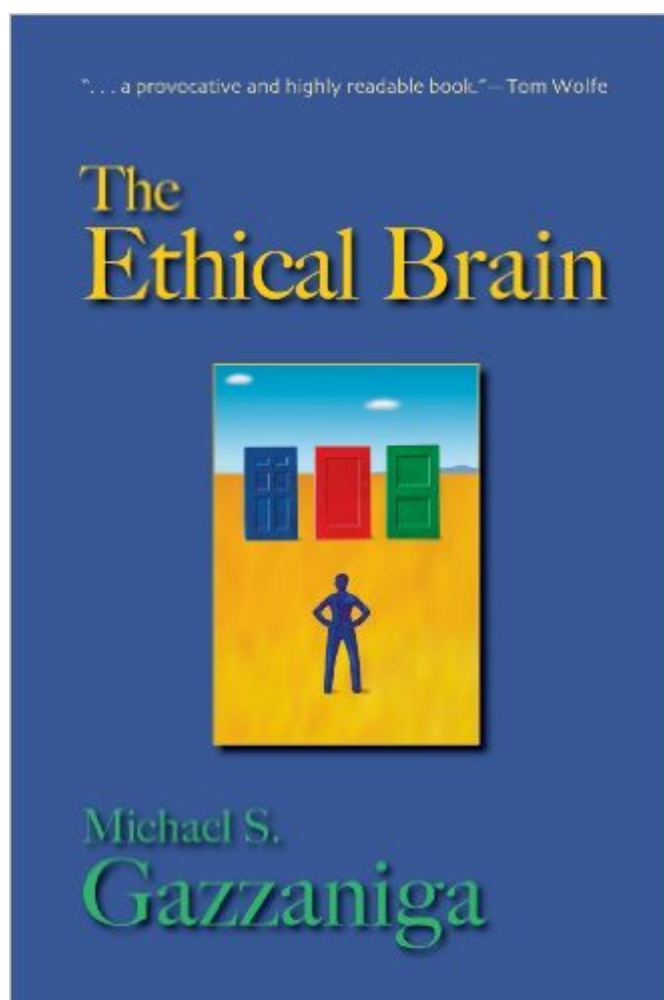


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# The Ethical Brain



## Synopsis

Will increased scientific understanding of our brains overturn our beliefs about moral and ethical behavior? How will increasingly powerful brain imaging technologies affect the ideas of privacy and of self-incrimination? Such thought-provoking questions are rapidly emerging as new discoveries in neuroscience have raised difficult legal and ethical dilemmas. Michael Gazzaniga, widely considered to be the father of cognitive neuroscience, investigates with an expert eye some of these controversial and complex issues in *The Ethical Brain*. He first examines "lifespan neuroethics" and considers how brain development defines human life, from when an embryo develops a brain and could be considered "one of us" to the issues raised as the brain ages, such as whether we should have complete freedom to extend our lives and enhance our brains through the use of genetics, pharmaceuticals, and training. Gazzaniga also considers the challenges posed to the justice system by new discoveries in neuroscience. Recent findings suggest that our brain has already made a decision before we become fully aware of doing so, raising the question of whether the concept of personal responsibility can remain a fundamental tenet of the law. Gazzaniga argues that as neuroscience learns more about the unreliability of human memory, the very foundation of trial law will be challenged. Gazzaniga then discusses a radical re-evaluation of the nature of moral belief, as he not only looks at possibly manipulating the part of the brain that creates beliefs but also explores how scientific research is building a brain-based account of moral reasoning. *The Ethical Brain* is a groundbreaking volume that presents neuroscience's loaded findings and their ethical implications in an engaging and readable manner, offering an incisive and thoughtful analysis of the medical ethics challenges confronting modern society at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Brain-Based Values  
Patricia S. Churchland  
Originally appeared in *The American Scientist*, July 2005.  
Envision this scene: Socrates sits in prison, calmly awaiting execution, passing the time in philosophical discussions with students and friends, taking the occasion to inquire into the fundamentals of ethics: Where do moral laws come from? What is the root of moral motivation? What is the relation between power and morality? What is good? What is just? Ever modest, Socrates confesses ignorance of the answers. The pattern of questioning strongly hints, however, that whatever it is that makes something good or just is rooted in the nature of humans and the society we make, not in the nature of the gods we invent. This does not make moral rules mere conventions, like using a fork or covering one's breasts. There is something about the facts concerning human needs that entails that some laws are better than others. From the time of Socrates to the present, people have sought to give a natural basis for morals—that is, to understand how a moral statement about what ought to be done can rest on hard facts, albeit facts about conditions for civility and peace in social groups. How can ethical claims be more than mere conventions? How can such claims be rooted in facts about human nature but have the logical force of a command? Developments in evolutionary biology have helped to explain the appearance of moral motivation in humans and in other eusocial animals—animals that display behavior involving cooperation, sharing, division of labor, reciprocation and deception. In these species, various forms of punishment (shunning, biting, banishing, scolding) are visited on those who threaten the social norms.

Michael Gazzaniga is one of the most renowned neuroscientists of our time, and rightfully so; his experiments regarding the role of the corpus callosum in connecting left- and right-brain functions really changed the way that we understand the brain. It should come as little surprise, then, that he

was eventually rewarded with a seat on the President's Council on Bioethics. It should also warn potential readers of the fact that a good neuroscientist does not make a very good ethicist -- or indeed, much of an ethicist at all. Each chapter of this book (except the last, about which more below) basically has the same format: there is a well-written survey of the developments in brain science that implicate a particular ethical issue, and then a couple of pages of Gazzaniga's "Perspectives." But these Perspectives shed virtually no light on any of the issues. If anything, they show how little science can tell us about them. In the essay on "My Brain Made Me Do It," Gazzaniga canvasses the literature on what we can know about mental states from the neuroscience, and then concludes that mental state or guilt for legal purposes is not a scientific question because scientists investigate brains, not minds. True enough; and something that anyone with the most cursory knowledge of the field could have told him beforehand. Often he just seems to make assumptions about things without making it clear. He favors drugs that enhance our intelligence or cognitive capabilities because you can't stop them and in any event, most people won't use them. But he is outraged at athletes using performance-altering drugs because in some sense that violates the "social contract" that we all accept.

What can the study of the brain tell us about how we should live our lives? Quite a lot, argues Michael Gazzaniga in his new book *The Ethical Brain*. Gazzaniga is a professor of cognitive neuroscience (the study of the relationship between brain and behavior) at Dartmouth College and a highly respected researcher in his field. Thus, he was an obvious choice for inclusion in the President's Council on Bioethics, on which he has served since 2001. As a member of that council, he has witnessed "how the fear of science can stifle rather than further research" (pp. xv-xvi). In response, Gazzaniga argues for neuroethics, which he defines as "the philosophy of living informed by our understanding of underlying brain mechanisms" (p. xv, italics in original). Gazzaniga's bottom line, in most cases, is that we should allow science to advance without trepidation, trusting to an innate sense of morality that will guide us sensibly through the ethical issues raised by scientific advancements. Beginning and end of life issues are at the forefront of current bioethical discussion. Defining the beginning of human life impinges on the important issues of abortion and stem-cell research. Under the traditional religious view that human life begins at conception, abortion is rightly viewed as equivalent to murder, and stem-cell research, which depends on the tissues of aborted fetuses, is morally reprehensible. Those who argue for reproductive freedom need to delay the conferral of humanity to the embryo if they want to maintain that abortion is not morally wrong, but there is no clear milestone during development where an obvious shift from non-humanity to

humanity occurs.

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