

National Core for Neuroethics

September 11, 2008

Chan Centre for the Performing Arts

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Thank you and good afternoon, everyone. It's a pleasure today to add my voice in welcome and in celebration of this inauguration.

It is always exciting to open a facility such as this. It is enormously flattering to UBC when the quality of our scholarship is recognized in this way and we are deeply grateful to the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and to other supporters, including the National Institute of Mental Health, the Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies, the Michael Smith Foundation for Health Research and our partners at Vancouver's teaching hospitals and in the Vancouver Coastal Health Research Institute.

In reflection of my role as an advocate for this great university, this has also been an opportunity for us at UBC to register our accomplishments in neuroscience to date and to demonstrate our ability to provide global leadership in neuroethics. With credit, again, to CIHR, no country in the

world has invested as much or as directly in the development of neuroethics. And this investment has given us at UBC the ability to build strength on strength. It has also allowed us to attract scholars, researchers and leaders of the quality of July Illes, a Professor of Neurology, a Canada Research Chair and the Director of this National Core. Vancouverites, British Columbians and all Canadians have reason to be proud of this institution.

But we'd be missing the point today if we chose only to celebrate UBC's accomplishment or its advancing good fortune. Today, we embrace a new challenge. We wade into the very seat of social, cultural and physical understanding – the human brain – and we contemplate the ramifications of meddling with that most precious organ.

Of course, “meddling” is a loaded word, but as the ethicists among you will attest, every word comes with its own baggage, with suppositions

and preconceptions. And I think it is important – or at least highly relevant – to acknowledge how charged the public conversation could become if we were to pursue advances in neuroscience without considering the social, cultural, personal and, indeed, the religious implications.

We have had lessons in this before. In Canada, for example, our abilities to perform what were once considered miracles in reproductive health quickly outstripped any social or national consensus about whether those new skills were positive or even acceptable. In 1989, the UBC medical geneticist Patricia Baird wound up leading a Royal Commission on New Reproductive Technologies that was charged with coming to grips with those issues.

Today, Dr. Baird makes a couple of points that should, perhaps, seem obvious. First, it is dangerous for science to get ahead of society. It is

incredibly difficult to create appropriate policies or to ensure scientific accountability if the public is not aware of the issues. People need to be engaged in a thoughtful and broadly based discussion about the advantages – and potential downsides – of scientific advances.

The process of engaging the public can be complex and painfully slow – and the complexity increases, and the pace slows further – if government is asked to take the lead. For example, it takes an average of seven years to implement the recommendations of a Royal Commission, and it's quite common for Commission reports to sit on the shelf for 15 to 20 years before government finds a way to render collected wisdom into workable policy.

In the case of the Baird Commission, it was 2004, 15 years later, before the first resulting legislation passed through Parliament, and two more

years before the government finally created the Assisted Human Reproduction Agency of Canada.

If governments feel that science *has* run ahead of society – if politicians or public groups get a sense that scientists are pursuing vested interest more enthusiastically than the public good – the result is often government intervention that is restrictive, regulatory and potentially punitive. In the United States, for example, you currently have a situation in which stem cell researchers can face fines or imprisonment in some jurisdictions.

If governments are imperfect vehicles for advancing complex social conversation – and they are – I would have to argue that universities are the best alternative. University researchers are not immune to the temptations of power, privilege or personal financial gain, but contrary to some of the alternative venues, those are not OUR main objectives.

Our institutions are open and accountable, transparent and closely monitored – from within and without. As the optimal locus for a robust dialogue, we are best positioned to bring together scientists, ethicists, representatives from government and business and, most importantly, the public at large.

In a best case – in this case – we can do that proactively. The National Core for Neuroethics is embedded – (another loaded word; perhaps I should say, fully integrated) – in the UBC Brain Research Centre. We have the ability to keep pace with the issues, to ensure the highest level of professional self-regulation. And at the same time, we offer the promise of leading a global conversation about neuroethics – one that I hope could ultimately result in a set of ethical findings that would be as broadly applicable as possible.

As a specialist in international law, I have a penchant for trying to create global norms. I think these are particularly desirable in the area of human rights: it is becoming increasingly important that states work together to establish the moral and legal foundation for a body of international law capable of protecting people against threats to their rights by corrupt, weak or indifferent regimes.

If the spirit of internationalism is to have any real meaning, countries must learn to build on shared understandings of what is right and acceptable, the value of public education, the importance of free speech in a free society, and so on.

If anything, achieving global norms in neuroethics may be more difficult yet. I have already mentioned that I believe neuroethics should be subject to cultural *and* religious considerations. I don't believe that there is a purely secular standard available to us. In fact, I think it would be

wrong to privilege a certain view – whether it is religious or specifically *non*-religious. If we hope to fairly represent the views of all constituents – of all the stakeholders locally and globally – we have to be open to approaches to ethics that are secular AND religious.

I am influenced in this by the work of the McGill University philosopher Charles Taylor, who last year won the Templeton Prize for his efforts to reconcile the spiritual and the scientific.

In the face of yet more highly loaded words, Taylor objected to what we have come to know as the “rational” movement, which began during the “Enlightenment,” in which it was argued that morality and spirituality are quaint anachronisms in the age of reason. Taylor said that this narrow, reductive approach denies the full account of how and why humans strive for meaning. And that, in turn, makes it impossible to solve the world’s most intractable problems.

At the same time, Taylor also chastised those who use moral certitude or religious beliefs in the name of battling injustice. That, he cautioned, can lead to a situation in which people say, “Our cause is good, so we can inflict righteous violence.”

Again, we cannot ignore any of our social, cultural, religious or historical contexts if we hope that our ethical investigations will be complete and our findings robust.

I have one last challenge today for those of you who will wrestle with these sometimes intractable issues: be modest. Pride is a hazard in most pursuits, and in ethics, there is a risk that the most accomplished practitioners will stop listening to the unschooled. There is a risk that we might start thinking that others don't agree with us because they have

not given serious consideration to all the issues or because they have not asked hard enough questions.

When someone disagrees with you, it pays to begin by asking yourself whether YOU have asked hard enough questions. And in a field in which cultural context is central, it would be rash to dismiss too quickly cultural representatives whose views are “typical,” even if you find them ill-informed.

I recognize that I am asking for the impossible: I am searching for global norms even as I dismiss the easy routes to certainty. I ask for leadership – which is necessarily bold and decisive – but then I insist you model humility.

Well, I won't apologize. We are in the business of breaking down intellectual barriers that once seemed insurmountable. In that pursuit, on

this occasion – in this new National Core for Neuroethics – I couldn't be more optimistic about the prospects for success.

Thank you and good luck.