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*Rethinking autonomy and responsibility in bioethics*

My goal in this presentation is to develop a clearer understanding of the relations between personal autonomy, a capacity whose support by cognitive abilities will be discussed in the previous presentation by Dr. Christensen, and moral responsibility. Some implications to bioethics will be also considered at the end, because the concept of autonomy is a basic one in moral philosophy since Kant, but developments in biotechnology at the beginning of the 21st century are opening new lines of inquiry in its study and application.

Although talk of “naturalizing” ethics is quite diverse, research on emotions offers one of the most promising paths for a naturalistic approach, understood as the commitment to understanding moral judgment and moral agency in terms of natural facts about ourselves and the world. We will introduce some questions with reference to the kind of research on emotions that has been done by Damasio and others. The most important point we would like to advance at this stage is that in order to understand moral agency we should shift our attention from the individuals to the relationships they maintain amongst themselves, thus linking this presentation to the next one by Dr. De Jaegher.

Responsibility is not in the brain, but in social interaction. As Pettit argues, we are not born responsible: we are made responsible. The moral agent or self—the subject of ethics—is not the production unit of autonomous action, but rather its accountability unit in a conversational domain. Even if autonomous actions are produced by a neural complex to which the agent has limited access, it is still something over which the agent can claim responsibility in the forum of an exchange with himself or herself, and also with others. Tapping into the rich well of experimental work that deals with these issues, we will also consider Nichols & Kobe’s hypothesis about the processes that generate people’s intuitions concerning moral responsibility.

Finally, we will see how the concept of autonomy at stake in bioethics (i.e., healthcare ethics, environmental ethics, and research ethics) reflects different positions concerning the relationship between facts and values in the life sciences. Bioethics emerged at the beginning of the 1970s as a defence of the autonomy of patients and research subjects. The institutionalization of bioethics has given more importance and relevance to autonomy, but within this academic field there are great disagreements concerning its nature and implications, both in theory and in practice. Lots of work ahead!