

# Conference

## “Moral Decision Making, Neuroimaging, Neurophilosophy and Law”

Co-sponsored with the Berlin NeuroImaging Center  
Berlin, Germany.  
June 11, 2004

### **Moral Decision Making, Neuroimaging, Neurophilosophy and Law** *Report by Oliver Goodenough*

On June 11, 2004 the Gruter Institute and the Berlin NeuroImaging Center co-sponsored a symposium on Moral Decision Making, Neuroimaging, Neurophilosophy and Law. The program was organized as part of the ongoing collaboration between the Institute and the NeuroImaging Center, which has also included a research program on moral judgment in the brain.

The official program was preceded by an opportunity for coffee and informal conversation in the Bonhoeffer-Raum. The symposium proper convened in the lecture hall of the old Nervenlinik, starting with opening remarks by Prof. Dr. Arno Villringer, (Director, Berlin NeuroImaging Center) and by Prof. Oliver Goodenough (Vermont Law School and Gruter Institute Fellow). These remarks focused on the challenges and opportunities of an interdisciplinary approach to questions like moral decision making. Although we are as yet in the early days of a necessarily lengthy undertaking, that should not deter us from the path, or from sharing the insights available at this point in the process.

The first formal presentation was by Prof. Villringer, who examined “From Gall to Cajal \* What fMRI tells us about the organization of the human brain. Prof. Villringer reviewed the methodological promise and limitations of fMRI imaging, particularly when applied to complex cognition such as moral decision making. Dr. Isabell Wartenburger of the NeuroImaging Center introduced the talk.

The second presentation was given by PD Dr. Henrik Walter of the Department of Psychiatry at Ulm University. Dr. Walter gave a masterful review of “Social Cognitive Neuroscience and Moral Emotions,” laying out in detail the experimental work to date, pointing out the merits and flaws in the experimental and analytic designs, and drawing conclusions about the emerging picture of the systems in the brain which are likely to be involved in moral cognition. Dr. Hauke Heekeren, also of the Center, introduced Dr. Walter.

Prof. Goodenough provided the third presentation, “Contrasting Cortical Function in Law and Justice.” He described some of the historical and jurisprudential distinctions between rule-based and intuitive moral judgments, and suggested links between these distinctions and neurological functions in the cortex. While the processes involved in moral judgment are beginning to be

understood, we are still in the very early stages of investigating legal rule application. Still, it is possible to suggest a model for the law of more wide-ranging recruitment of brain structures and strategies. Kristin Prehn, a student at the NeuroImaging Center and a collaborator with Prof. Goodenough, introduced this talk.

The symposium closed with a period of comment, question, and discussion, in which the prior speakers were joined by Prof. Elke van der Meer (Psychology, Humboldt) as part of the panel.