

Foreword

*The moral virtues of humans are practised
almost exclusively in relation to the men
of the same tribe, and their opposites
are not regarded as crimes in
relation to the men of other tribes.*

CHARLES DARWIN, 1882

This *Annals* volume collects most of the papers presented and discussed at the first Barcelona Social Brain Conference, entitled Values and Empathy across Social Barriers: A Neurocognitive Approach to Fairness, which took place on November 21–22, 2008. The conference was organized under the auspices of the New York Academy of Sciences (NYAS), the European Science Foundation, and the Catalan Research Foundation, as well as the Social Brain Chair (Autonomous University of Barcelona). The idea for the conference originally came about four years earlier, at the closing of an extremely large-scale set of multidisciplinary cultural debates, fostered by Dr. Joan Clos, who was then the mayor of Barcelona (and who is currently serving the Spanish ambassador in Turkey). It was Dr. Clos who suggested and lobbied for the creation of the Social Brain Chair, an institution devoted to disseminating current advances in the social neurosciences through education and research connected to “ruling human communities according to high standards in values and morality.” In June 2006, the City of Barcelona and Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB) convened to create the Chair, which was adscribed to UAB’s Department of Psychiatry.

It has been gratifying to see the impressive media impact that the Social Brain Chair has had in promoting education on social-neuroscience issues in the metropolitan area of Barcelona, as well as the whole of Spain (see www.elcervellsocial.net). The Chair’s initiatives include high-school contests concerning primatology, the production of a video documentary (*Bajo la Piel del Conflicto*, 2004), and academic publications such as *Social Brain Matters: Stances on the Neurobiology of Social Cognition* (O. Vilarroya and F. Forn-Argimón (Eds), Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007).

Around this time, the Chair also contacted NYAS President Ellis Rubinstein, with a proposal to hold a series of conferences on social-brain issues, either in Barcelona or in New York City. The New York Academy of Sciences welcomed the initiative with enthusiasm. The present volume is a testament to two windy and hectic days in November 2008, on one of the steep slopes of Tibidabo mountain, where the Barcelona Museum of Science-“Cosmocaixa” is located. The conference venue came alive with a truly multi-disciplinary atmosphere, where neuroscientists, economists, geneticists, anthropologists, and political scientists from around the world engaged in a highly productive encounter concerning the social neurobiology of fairness.

The main topics of the conference (values, fairness, and empathy across social frontiers) were first outlined during a pleasant outdoor lunch at Scott Atran's summer cottage on the French Mediterranean coast, where Adolf Tobeña and Oscar Vilarroya had traveled in August 2007 to offer Atran the opportunity to lead the first Barcelona Social Brain Conference. While discussing findings from Atran and his collaborators on sacred values and their role in the Palestinian–Israeli conflict or the so-called, by then, “Global War on Terror” against Al-Qaida and similar organizations, it became clear that the notion of “social barrier” would be a good attractor for work coming from anthropological field research, neuroeconomics, and neurogenetic studies, as well as imaging experiments in social and affective neuroscience labs. With these ideas in mind, we contacted Kevin Ochsner in New York City, and he eagerly received the suggestion to lead one of the modules of the conference devoted to studies on empathy, with an emphasis on social distances, prejudices, and stereotypes. In Barcelona, Arcadi Navarro quickly committed to extend one of the workshops he regularly organizes in order to head the “neuroeconomics” branch of the conference with a selection of game-theorists, geneticists, and evolutionary biologists. Furthermore, Scott Atran agreed to lead the section devoted to anthropological and political psychology studies. The final outline of the conference, including topics, speakers, schedules, and other details were decided at NYAS headquarters, during January 2008.

These distinctive branches, or modules, form a triad of pillars in a volume that we hope reads as engagingly as the talks presented at the conference on which each contribution is based. The introductory paper, by Adolf Tobeña, reproduces his keynote lecture that interconnects the conference topics and serves as a prelude to the present tome. Part I (empathy studies) was coordinated by Kevin Ochsner. It contains papers describing topics ranging from neural networks associated with mentalizing to characterizing brain regions mediating modalities of stereotyping. Part II (fairness studies) was coordinated by Arcadi Navarro. The papers in this section discuss genetic markers for fair/unfair proclivities in economic games, as well as the role of specific neuromodulators on social affects. Part III (sacred values studies) was coordinated by Scott Atran and contains papers devoted to the study of the role of sacred values in relation to maximal sacrifices during communal conflicts and the evolutionary roots of tribal instincts. The papers delivered by the different panels are complemented with a fine selection stemming from the posters presented at the conference.

The volume shows that the conjunction of rather disparate research fields is not only possible, but necessary for fine-grained neurocognitive depictions of the complex abilities sustaining the emergence and maintenance of human virtues (and sins). Merging data and models might improve the still developing power of multidisciplinary approaches to very nuanced phenomena. Whether this knowledge will serve one day to fulfill the aspirations of Dr. Joan Clos to foster “ruling human communities according to high standards of values and morality” remains to be seen. Nevertheless, we are confident that the impact of these seminal explorations along the frontiers covered by the book will be long lasting. In the final discussion that closed the conference, there were several participants who congratulated the sponsoring institutions for permitting such a varied and rich perspective, asking for a regular continuation of the initiative.

It must be said that the conference was also an opportunity for social gatherings. There were lively discussions after most presentations, and the attendants seemed to enjoy the socializing. The discussions continued and expanded while attendees enjoyed

the splendid and imaginative tapas food and drinks that galvanized participants (some 280 researchers from 24 countries!) during two stimulating and enriching days.

All this was the result of hard work and enthusiasm of many people who deserve praise. To be fair, we should acknowledge here all the people who have contributed in some way or other to make the Social Brain conference possible. However, this would take more space than the volume itself, so we will just mention those who have been directly concerned with the organization of the event. First and foremost, we would like to acknowledge the substantial institutional and personal support we received from the City of Barcelona, and especially from former Mayor Joan Clos, without whom neither the Social Brain Chair nor the conference would have come into being; the City Counselor, Montserrat Ballarín, for her unconditional backing of the Chair over the past two years; and former City Counselor Ramon Nicolau.

Second, we would like to recognize the support of the various institutions involved in the conference, especially the New York Academy of Sciences, the Fundació Catalana per a la Recerca i la Innovació (FCRi), the European Science Foundation, the Cosmocaixa and the “Obra Social” Fundació la Caixa, as well as the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB).

Third, we would like to thank the staff of the New York Academy of Sciences, who were committed to the organization of the conference, especially Kathy Granger, for her efficiency in the coordination of the activities at the NYAS site; Stacie Bloom, for her ideas and support through the entire process; and, of course, Ellis Rubinstein, for backing our project from the very first day we approached him.

Fourth, we want to thank the people at the FCRi, above all Jordi Mas, its executive director. He was committed to the conference from the very beginning; he was pivotal in finding the necessary institutional support for our endeavour, reaching out to scientists, politicians, and business people alike, and making the overseas visitors feel at home. We also must acknowledge FCRi director, Joan Comella, who agreed to support the conference from the very first contact we had with him.

Fifth, we would like to recognize the collaboration of the Fundació “La Caixa” and Cosmocaixa personnel in the preparation and implementation of the conference, especially Beatrice Sala, Guillermo Santamaría, Anna Guil, and Jorge Wagensberg.

Last but not least, we would like to thank the Social Brain Chair team at UAB for making the conference possible. Josep Maria “Pepus” Rabanal conducted all the local and travel arrangements, and took charge of the onsite conference with efficiency, style, and without ever losing his smile. Ana Moreno coordinated all the conference programs and co-managed all the activities during the conference, doing it with ability and enthusiasm. Joseph Hilferty was unselfishly and totally committed in the preparation and implementation of the conference. We also thank Teresa Garzón, for preparation of the conference, and all the neuroimaging research group for helping in the registration processes, including Susanna Carmona, Erika Proal, Erika Barba, Elseline Hoekzema, and Olivia Merns.

Reference

1. Darwin, Charles. 1882. *The Descent of Men and Selection in Relation to Sex*, 2nd Edition. John Murray. London.

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