Response by
Erik Parens &
Josephine Johnston

In our article, we wrote that speaking of neuroethics—or nanoethics or genethics—is not unreasonable. We also said that, if one does speak in such terms, one

should be aware of three potential problems: of reinventing the bioethical wheel; of exaggerating what the science can teach us about who we are; and of exaggerating or mistaking what bioethics research can deliver. In his comment, Eric Racine does not address the grounds we offered to support our identification of these three potential problems, but instead responds to what he calls two “implicit assumptions”.

He writes that “the authors opt for the perspective that neuroethics can contribute to ‘carving up bioethics into ever more specialized subfields’ and to ‘squandering scarce resources’” (Parens & Johnston, 2007; Racine, 2008). Yet, Racine’s letter does not allay that worry. He says, for example, that “neuroethics is bringing new ethical perspectives and contexts to consider in their own right with the help of new colleagues and students” (Racine, 2008)—in part because bioethics has failed to do so. Without a doubt, neuroethics has attracted the attention of many smart, creative and

productive people who call attention to ethical issues in new technological and scientific contexts. However, we question whether these people contribute new ethical perspectives or whether these new contexts raise new ethical questions. What these people are doing in these new contexts can be very important, but we worry that we will waste time and resources if we fail to notice the familiarity of the ethical problems and the finite number of possible ethical responses.

Our other assumption, according to Racine, is “that neuroethics is somehow addressing only ethical issues associated with technological developments” (Parens & Johnston, 2007; Racine, 2008). We do not assume this; the problems we raised are not limited to new technologies. The first problem described in the previous paragraph has to do with hyperbole about the novelty of the ethical issues arising in the context of technological—and scientific—developments. The second problem we explored in

our article was to do with hyperbole about how much neuroscience can tell us about who we are. The third problem has to do with hyperbole about how much ethicists can tell policy-makers, clinicians, members of the public or anyone else about what they should do, think or believe.

Finally, we would emphasize that the three problems we worry about are not in any way potential problems only for neuroethics; those problems might arise in any area of ethical inquiry that deals with new science and technology.

REFERENCES

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 Racine E (2008) Comment on “Does it make sense to speak of neuroethics?” *EMBO Rep* 9: 2–3

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