Ethical implications of psychosurgery

Several important ethical issues are raised by the practice of psychosurgery; in the present chapter we shall examine these. At the outset, however, it should be appreciated that it is difficult, in the context of psychosurgery, to disengage a discussion of ethics from several recent legal and legislative deliberations. Nevertheless, separation will be attempted, since it should simplify matter of organization. Consequently, Chapter 10 will deal specifically with the legal prescriptions pertaining to psychosurgery. In the present chapter the treatment of the ethical issues will be essentially non-prescriptive. Discussion will centre around the brain’s inviolability, the irreversibility of psychosurgery, the moral implications of psychosurgery’s scientific status and the problems surrounding consent.

While psychosurgery is presently at the forefront of biomedical ethics, it is important to emphasize that many of the ethical issues stimulated by the practice could be justifiably raised in connection with many contemporary psychiatric and psychological procedures. In fact, in many ways, psychosurgery represents a curious focus for ethical debate. As Brown et al. (1975) reflected

Although psychosurgery is a powerful means of changing behavior, the ethical problems posed by the modification of behavior with drugs or psychotherapy are probably of greater import because these means of control are available to a much wider range of potential “abusers” than are the techniques of psychosurgery. (p. 232)
In a similar vein, Shuman (1977) has urged that drug therapy constitutes a far more urgent subject for ethical consideration. Comparing the scope of behaviour control by drugs and surgery, Shuman commented:

Even if we leave aside behavior modification drugs dispensed by physicians untrained in psychiatry, prescribed for young children by so-called child psychiatrists, and prescribed by pediatricians, it is clear that the number reachable by drugs is enormously greater than the number reachable by surgery. (p. 96)

Further, techniques that rely on external environmental manipulations should be included in any comprehensive moral discourse. In fact, most forms of behaviour control concentrate on manipulating the external rather than the internal environment. The therapies derived from classical and operant conditioning usually spring to mind in this context. However, such practices seem merely to represent highly streamlined versions of the processes that conventionally regulate human socialization and development, that govern behavioural control via the media and via formal education and that operate more or less casually in everyday social encounters.

This would seem to imply that it is in the phenomenon of behaviour control per se that demands careful scrutiny rather than any particular style of control. However, the very omnipresence of this phenomenon necessarily prohibits fruitful ethical debate. In essence, behaviour control is an ethically vacuous topic. Begelman (1973) pinpointed the difficulty:

Ethical issues arising over behavioral control are not – nor can they ever sensibly be said to be – issues over whether behavioral control is morally legitimate. This is because the concept of behavioral control itself is too wide or generic to permit meaningful moral questions to be raised concerning it. Such questions can only arise in connection with undertaking specific types of behavioral control in particular circumstances. (p. 413)

Begelman's argument, that for ethical questions to be meaningful they must be asked in the context of specific techniques of behaviour control, is persuasive. However, he does not tackle the issue of why moral questions are far more commonly posed in conjunction with some techniques, such as psychosurgery, than others. Why should psychosurgery constitute a primary focus for contemporary debate? Two major factors might be considered.

First of all, there is the fairly widespread opinion that the human brain is inviolable. Neville's (1975) commentary indicates the contention that the human brain demands unique respect:

Whereas his environment, perhaps even his hair and fingernails,