

Building Better Brains: The Ethical Challenge of Neuroenhancement

Paul Root Wolpe, PhD

September 14, 2005

4:00 pm - 5:30 pm

Alumni Auditorium

Columbia University Medical Center

650 West 168th Street

New York, NY 10032

Dr. Paul Root Wolpe was the inaugural speaker for the Center for Bioethics Neuroethics Program. He is a Professor in the Departments of Psychiatry, Medical Ethics, and Sociology, and a Senior Fellow at the Center for Bioethics at the University of Pennsylvania. He is also the first Chief of Bioethics at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA).

Dr. Wolpe's stimulating presentation focused on the ethical challenges posed by neuroenhancement. The audience included a diverse mix of more than ninety researchers, students, faculty, and staff. The seminar addressed ways in which new, varied, and profound neuroethical dilemmas generated by emerging brain technologies have not been considered. This is a time when most of us are worried about losing our minds, and some of these technologies are increasingly effective therapeutic devices. Dr. Wolpe explained how complex it can be to make reasoned decisions about issues such as privacy, implications of micro-manipulating brain chemistry, and how to balance ethics and social good with business and progress. Dr. Wolpe's presentation brought to life a vital concern that we are in great danger of changing our humanity. Deep brain stimulation, for example, may enhance humankind, but one must look at the cost of these operations and wonder how society will be affected if we take full advantage of them.