

Place: University of Basel, Kollegienhaus, Aula (t.b.c.)
Time: Thursday, 22 June, 9:00-10:30

Keynote Lecture by Jean Decety

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The complex relation between empathy and morality: A lesson from evolutionary biology, social neuroscience and psychopathy

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Empathy, the ability to perceive and be sensitive to the emotional states of others, plays a fundamental role in interpersonal interactions. It motivates prosocial and caregiving behaviors, plays a role in inhibiting aggression, and facilitates cooperation between members of a similar social group. This is probably why empathy is often and wrongly confused with morality, which refers to prescriptive norms regarding how people should treat one another, including concepts of justice, fairness, and rights. Drawing on empirical research and theory from evolutionary biology, social neuroscience and behavioral economics, I will argue that our sensitivity to others' needs has been selected in the context of parental care and group living. One corollary of this evolutionary model is that empathy produces social preferences that can conflict with morality. This claim is supported by a wealth of empirical findings in neuroscience and behavioral economics documenting a complex and equivocal relation between empathy, morality and justice. Empathy alone is powerless in the face of rationalization and denial. It is reason that provides the push to widen the circle of empathy from the family and the tribe to humanity as a whole. But, pure reason does not guarantee respect and dignity for all.

Bionote

Jean Decety is Irving B. Harris Distinguished Service Professor of Psychology and Psychiatry at the University of Chicago and its College. He is the director of the Child Neurosuite (childneurosuite.org) and the Social Cognitive Neuroscience Laboratory (scnl.org). Decety is a leading scholar on the social neuroscience of empathy, morality and prosocial behavior, as well as other topics related to the neurobiology of social cognition. His work has led to new understandings of socio-affective processes and moral decision-making in typically developing children and adults as well as criminal psychopaths. His research uses neuroimaging techniques (functional MRI and high-density EEG) and behavioral economics to examine how biological and social factors interact in contributing to the motivation to care for the well-being of others and social decision-making.

Dr. Decety is the co-founder (with John Cacioppo) of the *Society for Social Neuroscience*. He recently edited the *Oxford Handbook of Social Neuroscience* (2011) at Oxford University Press, *Empathy from Bench to Bedside* (2012) at MIT Press, *New Frontiers in Social Neuroscience* (2014) at Springer, *The Moral Brain – A Multidisciplinary Perspective* (2015) at MIT Press and *Social Cognition – Development Across the Life-span* (Routledge, 2017).

Decety has been on the University of Chicago faculty since 2006. Prior to that, he was at the University of Washington, Seattle, and Director of Research at the National Medical Research Institute in Lyon, France. He received his PhD in Neurobiology from the Université Claude Bernard in Lyon, France in 1989, followed by a post-doc at the Karolinska Hospital in Stockholm (Department of Neurophysiology and Neuroradiology), Sweden.

Selection of 7 recent publications

Decety, J. & Yoder, K. J. (2017). The emerging social neuroscience of justice motivation. ***Trends in Cognitive Sciences***, 21(1), 6-14.

Decety, J., Ben-Ami Bartal, I., Uzefovsky, F., & Knafo-Noam, A. (2016). Empathy as a driver of prosocial behavior: Highly conserved neurobehavioral mechanisms across species. ***Proceedings of the Royal Society London - Biology***, 371, 20150077.

Cowell, J., & Decety, J. (2015). Precursors to morality in development as a complex interplay between neural, socio-environmental, and behavioral facets. ***Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences USA***, 112 (41), 12657-12662.

Yoder, K. J., Harenski, C., Kiehl, K. A., & Decety, J. (2015). Neural networks underlying implicit and explicit moral evaluations in psychopathy. ***Translational Psychiatry***, 5, e625.

Decety, J., & Cowell, J. M. (2015). Empathy, justice and moral behavior. ***American Journal of Bioethics – Neuroscience***, 6(3), 3-14.

Decety, J., & Fotopoulou, A. (2015). Why empathy has a beneficial impact on others in medicine – Unifying theories. ***Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience***, 8: 457.

Decety, J., & Cowell, J. M. (2014). The complex relation between morality and empathy. ***Trends in Cognitive Sciences***, 18(7), 337-339.