JEAN DECETY
The University of Chicago, United States

Prof. 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 Director of the Social Cognitive Neuroscience Laboratory (scnl.org). He 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 as well as criminal psychopaths. His research uses neuroimaging techniques (functional MRI and high-density EEG) and genetic to examine how biological and social factors interact in contributing to empathy and the motivation to care for the well-being of others.

Dr. Decety is the co-founder of the Society for Social Neuroscience. He recently edited the Oxford Handbook of Social Neuroscience (2011) Empathy from Bench to Bedside (2012), New Frontiers in Social Neuroscience (2014), and The Moral Brain – A Multidisciplinary Perspective (2015).

Decety has been on the University of Chicago faculty since 2006. Prior to that, he was a professor 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.

Selection of 5 recent publications

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.

Moral progress requires a coupling between empathy and reason - A social neuroscience perspective

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 such as justice, fairness, and rights. Drawing on empirical research and theory from evolutionary biology, psychology and social neuroscience, 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 that circle of empathy from the family and the tribe to humanity as a whole. This has been accomplished not just through technologies that extend the reach of our moral emotions, but also through reasoned debate, moral education, and the creation of domestic and international institutions tasked with making sure the expanding moral circle does not contract.