

Against sentientism

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1. Introduction

Sentientism: sentience is both necessary and sufficient for moral status.

Consciousness is the ground of all value. Whenever anything is good or bad for someone, it's because of their consciousness. Consciousness has value, what a conscious creature values has value, and relations between conscious creatures have value. If a creature has no capacity for consciousness, nothing can be good or bad for it from its own perspective. And it's natural to conclude that if nothing can be good or bad for a creature, then the creature has no moral status. (Chalmers 2022: 341-2)

2. Sentientism and beyond

Insights of sentientism:

- moral status protects morally significant interests, which requires capacity for welfare
- welfare presupposes a subject
- only sentient beings are subjects

Bentham's question: *Can they suffer?* We tend to ignore: *Do they have agency?*

My view: all sentient beings and all agents, regardless of overlap, have welfare / moral status.

- Like sentientists, I assume that a fundamental link between welfare and moral status. But I reject sentientism about moral status by rejecting sentientism about welfare.

An informal argument:

- (i) We can conceive of beings who lack sentience but whose lives are sites of valence.
- (ii) If such beings exist, they have some moral status—there are ways it would be wrong to treat them for their own sake.
- (iii) Moral status does not fundamentally depend on sentience.

3. Sentience, welfare, and moral status

Sentience. Capacity to experience positively or negatively valenced affective states (pain, pleasure, joy, frustration, warmth, hunger, anger, sadness, boredom, anxiety, distress, etc.).

- *Broad*: capacity for subjective experience, or phenomenal consciousness.
- *Narrow*: capacity to have subjective experiences with positive or negative valence. (Browning and Birch, 2022: 1)

Welfare: how well or poorly a subject is doing, or how well or poorly their life is going for them. Welfare is prudential value and denotes the set of basic goods (and bads) that a subject can accrue and has self-interested reasons to want, desire, pursue, prefer (and avoid). Prudential value also gives moral agents reasons to care about, attend to, help, benefit, etc.

- $X = \text{welfare subject}$ iff X has the capacity for welfare (can accrue prudential value).

If X has *moral status*, moral agents morally ought to treat X in certain ways for X 's sake. That is, X 's having moral status means that X 's interests matter morally for their own sake, and X 's interests explain why one morally ought to treat them in such ways.

WELFARE: All and only welfare subjects have moral status.

- *Sentientist restriction* on welfare and moral status: (A) All and only creatures to whom things matter can have a welfare, and (B) things can matter to all and only sentient creatures.

AGENCY: Agency is a sufficient moral-status-conferring property

- *Agency* = intentional, flexible, goal-directed behavior; e.g. “minimal agency”, pro-attitudes, sensory input, and cognitive representations rationalize behavior (Dretske)

4. Agential value

AGENTIAL WELFARE: some morally significant interests are based on agency; it is basically and *pro tanto* good (bad) for an entity to have such agential interests promoted (setback).

Idea of “welfare platforms”

It is only with the emergence of the welfare platform that organisms began to experience states of affairs as good or bad, as pleasurable or painful, as things to approach or avoid. ... Moral standing arose with valuing, and valuing arose with embodied experiences of valence. (Powell et al. 2021: 235)

Conjecture. Aims came first in animal life, even if they were closely associated with the evolution of consciousness. Maybe at some point, somewhere in the phylogenetic tree, the agential basis of consciousness went on without experience. Action-perception nexus at the root of the evolution of experience around the so-called Cambrian explosion (c. 540 million years ago) (Godfrey-Smith 2020). “Roughly... the evolution of animal agency brings with it the origin of subjects” (105).

- *Pace* the standard view that it is consciousness that constitutes or allows for value (Kriegel, 2019; Powell et al., 2021; Siewert, 1998; for criticism, see Levy, 2014), and consciousness is the central question for moral status (Shepherd, 2018).

AGENTIAL WELFARE implies that *agency generates prudential value*.

AGENTIAL VALUE: some states and events are prudentially good or bad for a subject because they promote the subject's aims or because they involve the exercise of agency (e.g., planning, decision-making, exploring, playing, etc.).

PHENOMENAL VALUE (cf. Kammerer, 2019): states or events can only be prudentially good or bad for a subject because of their intrinsic qualitative character (e.g., hedonic states, emotions, feelings, and moods).

- **PHENOMENAL VALUE*:** some states and events are prudentially good or bad for a subject because of their intrinsic qualitative character.

Hedonism: (i) a *valenced* aspect of affective experience (sensations, feelings, emotions, and moods typically have a positive or negative valence) and (ii) a *qualitative* aspect of valence.

- But (i) and (ii) do not entail each other. We can imagine valence without affect even if they are two sides of the same coin for the sorts of creatures that we're familiar with. Valence need not be phenomenally conscious; valence as the nonconceptual representation of value (Carruthers 2018).

5. Experience or resonance?

Experience Requirement: something can be good for a subject only if it affects their experience in some way, and differences in the subject's level of well-being correspond to experiential, or phenomenological, differences (Griffin, 1986; Rosati 2009).

- If sentientism about welfare seems intuitive, the requirement explains it well (Deilj 2021). But alternative explanations are possible (Lin 2021). So, we should proceed assuming two views are independent. Decoupling them preserves the viability of both desire-satisfaction and objective-list theories, including for sentientists

Resonance Constraint: a thing, x, is basically good for some subject, S, only if either S has a satisfied positive attitude toward x or x itself involves S's having a satisfied positive attitude toward something. (Heathwood, 2021: 15; originally, Railton, 1986: 9)

- The constraint does not require that x affect S's experience. If non-sentient beings can have positive attitudes, a specification of AGENTIAL WELFARE can meet the constraint. If, say, success in one's rational aims (Scanlon 1998: 118-26) or goals (Keller 2009), as achieved by the agent and without phenomenality, contribute to well-being, then AGENTIAL WELFARE can meet the Resonance Constraint, making it part of an attractive theory of well-being.