

Yixuan Huang

Professor Declan Smithies

Philo 5800

18 April 2023

What makes an entity have moral status

Abstract

This paper challenges Chalmers' argument for the necessary connection between consciousness and moral status. While Chalmer maintains that only conscious beings have moral status, I argue that any beings that can exhibit consciousness, regardless of how it is manifested, can have moral status. In this paper, I provide a critique of Chalmer's argument and offer evidence to support my own position. My aim is to show that consciousness is not a necessary condition for demonstrating moral status, and that we need a broader understanding of the criterion of consciousness to adequately explain what beings have moral status. Finally, I contend that my approach has important implications for ethical theory and practice and offers a more inclusive framework for considering the moral standing of non-human entities.

Introduction

The relationship between consciousness and moral status is a topic of constant discussion. In Chalmer's article, he argues that consciousness is a necessary condition for moral status, and thus only conscious entities can have moral status. In this essay, I challenge Chalmer's argument by proposing a more inclusive framework in which I argue that any beings that can exhibit consciousness, no matter how it manifests it, can have moral status.

In the first part of this essay, I criticize Chalmer's position that his treatment of the trolley problem is too narrow and fail to account for the decisive role of consciousness in it. Then, I also think that although Chalmer gives a standard definition of zombies, he does not take into consideration that there are different types of zombies, which also lead to the failure of his argument in the trolley problem.

In part two and part three, I develop my arguments for a broader understanding of consciousness and its relation to moral status. Specifically, in the second part I will focus on explaining that consciousness is not a necessary condition for moral status, while in the third part I will mainly argue my point that any beings that can exhibit consciousness can have moral status.

In the fourth part, I want to discuss a counterexample to my argument. Finally, in the conclusion, I summarize the main points of the paper and emphasize the importance of a more inclusive framework for considering the moral status of nonhuman entities.

Does The Zombie Trolley Problem Prove The Necessity Of Consciousness

In Chalmers' book, he uses a mental experiment which he calls the zombie trolley problem to prove that only consciousness beings can have moral status. He says that suppose you are at the wheel of a runaway trolley; if you do nothing, it will kill a single conscious human, who is on the tracks in front of you, and if you switch tracks, it will kill five non-conscious zombies (Chalmers 340). In this situation, what should you do? Chalmers conclusion is to kill the zombies; he thinks that the results are pretty clear that most people think you should switch tracks and kill the zombies (Chalmers 341).

However, due to limited scope and potential inaccuracies, his experiments may have significant holes. First, the number of entities on the two railways is different, which will affect our final decision. As in the following zombie trolley problem, suppose now you have the choice between killing one conscious chicken or a whole planet of humanoid philosophical zombies; at this point, intuitions are less clear: less people will choose to kill those zombies in this mental experiment (Chalmers 341). Hence, if we really want to use the zombie trolley problem to prove the necessity of consciousness, we need to make sure we have the same number of entities on both rails.

After we clarify this issue, another issue is that in this mental experiment we are not making our choices based on whether those entities are conscious or not. In fact, in all trolley problems, we compare the sum of the values of the respective entities on the two rails and choose to keep the entity(s) with the higher value. For example, in Chalmers' experiment, the reason why we choose to kill five zombies and save the single human is because in our opinion, the value of that human is higher than the sum value of five zombies. And why in the next experiment, it is harder to choose whether we should kill chicken or kill a whole planet of humanoid philosophical zombies? Because we think their values are similar. Suppose you have the choice between killing a vicious rapist or a humanoid philosophical zombie who has exactly same appearance as your parent (mother or father), I have 100% confidence that all people will kill that vicious rapist.

Another powerful counter-example is that suppose you have to choose between saving a normal human and destroying a bomb which is capable of destroying tens of thousands of people, what should you do? If we believe the zombie trolley problem proves the necessity of

consciousness in moral status, then we should undoubtedly choose to save that human, because the bomb, by Chalmers' standard of philosophical zombies, is not even a zombie. But I think most people will choose to destroy the bomb and save more people instead of only saving one person. This example is very similar to Chalmers' second example which is about one chicken and a planet of zombies, but our implementation results are very different.

After considering the various points raised in our discussions, it appears that the zombie trolley problem may not effectively demonstrate the necessity of consciousness, nor does it offer a suitable platform for discussing moral status. Therefore, it seems that it is necessary for us to further explore and check the alternative theory to clarify the complicated problem.

A Clarification Of Philosophical Zombies

Before delving into the question of consciousness and moral status, it is important to clarify the definition of philosophical zombies. The current description provided by Chalmers may contain some ambiguity, which is one reason for their failure in reasoning through the trolley problem. Therefore, in order to understand the concept of zombies more accurately and comprehensively so that there will be no ambiguity in my subsequent discussions, I want to give a clearer and more concise concept.

Chalmers describes the philosophical zombies as near-duplicates of human beings with no conscious inner life at all, which means zombies have no subjective experience (Chalmers 341). However, it is worth considering whether consciousness is exclusive to humans, leading to the possibility of envisioning other types of zombies, such as those modeled after chickens or other creatures. Moreover, it is essential to note that the degree of similarity to

consciousness may vary among different types of zombies. While some zombies may exhibit human-like behavior, others may only resemble humans in appearance, and some may both resemble humans and possess an inner life similar to that of humans. Therefore, when defining the concept of philosophical zombie, we should try to blur the human being as the only conscious creature but extend it to all the conscious creatures. In this article, I would like to define a zombie as an unconscious being who may be similar to conscious beings in other respects in order not to simply define it as an unconscious being similar to a human.

Consciousness Is Not Necessary For Having Moral Status

Now, let's move on to exploring the relationship between consciousness and moral status. Determining the moral status of an entity is a subjective judgment that varies depending on individual perspectives. Take artificial intelligence as an example. Some people believe that current AI technology, such as ChatGPT, has advanced enough to simulate human language and thinking, and therefore deserves moral consideration. However, others argue that AI is still in its early stages and does not possess true consciousness, and thus does not have moral status. Similarly, opinions on whether pets deserve moral status vary among individuals even though mine is that pets have moral status. However, despite these differing views, it is generally accepted that human beings have moral status.

Determining the moral status of an entity is a complex and subjective process that involves comparing the entity being judged to ourselves. This comparison is based on a variety of factors, such as appearance, behavior, and movement. However, it is important to note that this similarity is not solely based on physical traits, but also on assumptions and

biases that we hold. Conscious entities are often attributed with a higher moral status because humans themselves are conscious, and we tend to assume that consciousness allows the entity to behave more like a human.

Consider the hypothetical scenario of an object that has a human-like appearance, behavior, and movement, and even seems like an old friend when you talk to it. Despite its human-like qualities, we do not know whether this entity has consciousness or not. This raises the question of whether consciousness is necessary condition that determines moral status. If the entity behaves like a human and has a human-like appearance, does it deserve moral consideration even if it does not possess consciousness? Conversely, if the entity does have consciousness, does it automatically deserve a higher moral status?

In this article, I do not want to discuss too much whether consciousness makes an entity have a higher moral status. My focus is whether consciousness determines whether an entity has moral status. And from what I have argued above, I think we can conclude so far that consciousness is not a necessary condition for moral status.

I want to make the following clarification here, it seems to me that a conscious entity has moral status, but a non-conscious entity does not necessarily have no moral status. There may be varying degrees of moral standing between conscious entities, which I will not discuss in this paper, but they all have moral status.

Entities That Can Exhibit Consciousness Can Have Moral Status

A new question then arises; since consciousness is not a necessary condition for moral status, what is a necessary condition for having moral status? Based on my previous

discussion, it seems that we use a comparative approach to determine whether an entity has moral status. Specifically, we compare the behavior of the entity in question to that of other conscious entities we have previously identified. If the entity exhibits similar behaviors to conscious entities, then we consider it to have moral status. In this context, it can be argued that if an entity is capable of behaving like a conscious being, then it should be granted moral status, regardless of how it manifests itself.

An example that illustrates the importance of behavior in determining moral status is the droid R2-D2 from the Star Wars universe. R2-D2 is a mechanical entity that lacks many of the physical and cognitive features of conscious beings. However, throughout the Star Wars franchise, R2-D2 consistently exhibits behaviors that are indicative of consciousness. For instance, R2-D2 shows loyalty, bravery, and empathy towards other characters, often risking its own safety to help others. These behaviors are typically associated with conscious beings and suggest that R2-D2 should be granted moral status. This example shows that entities that behave like conscious beings, such as R2-D2, should be recognized as having moral status, regardless of whether they have consciousness or not.

Further Discussion And Responses To Possible Counter-examples

How can we determine if an entity displays behavior similar to a conscious being? For instance, in a closed environment, there may be two entities lying on separate beds that appear to be identical, without any noticeable differences. However, one entity may possess consciousness, while the other does not. In this scenario, both entities may seem to lack moral status due to their similar physical appearance. In this case, how do we determine the moral

status of unconscious entities?

My explanation is that usually, in our cognition, we find various types of conscious entities as our standard, such as humans, dogs or any other animals. This unconscious entity does not appear to bear much resemblance to the conscious entities we recognize. Therefore, I do not think there is a moral status for this unconscious entity. Some people will counter my conclusion that since this unconscious entity behaves exactly the same as the conscious entity next to it, this unconscious entity should have a moral status based on my previous argument.

My further explanation is that if we have no cognition of the outside world, but are only confined in this closed environment, then for us, the conscious entity in this environment is the only object we can refer to, so because the unconscious entity and this conscious entity have a high degree of similarity on exhibiting, we will assume that this unconscious entity also has moral status. However, in reality, we have cognition of the outside world, and then we can find more examples of conscious entities to confirm that this unconscious entity existing in a closed space does not have moral status.

More rebuttals to my argument have centered on my ambiguity about criteria: 1. How similar is similar enough. 2. Are there specific criteria that are more important than others which cause some unconscious entities to have moral status even when otherwise less similar to conscious entities. A possible example is that some people would think that dead people also have moral status.

I would like to respond to these two questions and discuss this issue in more depth. First, the issue of determining the degree of similarity between entities is a complex one that encompasses both metaphysics and phenomenology. Defining an accurate and clear standard

for this is difficult, especially given the ongoing controversy surrounding the definition of consciousness. While I can only provide a rough idea in this article, my main objective is to challenge the notion that consciousness as a necessary condition of moral status. That being said, I acknowledge that some manifestations may allow us to judge an entity's similarity to a conscious being more effectively than others. However, regardless of the manifestation, as long as it is deep enough, we will consider the entity to be similar enough to have moral status. Therefore, it is important to take a comprehensive approach when determining an entity's moral status, taking into account all relevant factors rather than relying solely on the presence or absence of consciousness.

Conclusion

In this article, I have thoroughly examined and refuted several issues with the Chalmers' viewpoint, and addressed some of the uncertainties that arose during his discussion. My inclusive stance holds that any entity that is capable of manifesting consciousness, regardless of the manner in which it does so, should be granted moral status. While I acknowledge that my perspective may have some limitations, I contend that it has significant implications for ethical theory and practice. Moreover, it presents a novel way of approaching the consideration and judgment of the moral status of nonhuman entities. This approach has the potential to enhance our ethical understanding and to promote the welfare of nonhuman entities in a more just and equitable manner.

Reference

Chalmers, David John, and Tim Peacock. *Reality : Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy*. First ed., W. W. Norton & Company, 2022.