

Moral Status and the Interests of Nonsentient Life

Abstract. Who or what has moral status is a fundamental problem of moral philosophy. Interestingly, although many different accounts of moral status have been proposed, most philosophers seem to agree that having interests is an integral part of (or at least a prerequisite to) having moral status. Despite this apparent unity however, there is deep disagreement about what it actually means to 'have interests' and who can hold interests. Through this paper I will argue that biological functions and the goals of non-conscious organisms should not be understood as interests in any morally relevant sense. I contend that this is the case because for something to count as an interest in a morally relevant sense its fulfilment must be beneficial to its possessor (or its lack of fulfilment detrimental to its possessor). Thus, since the interests of non-conscious organisms can most plausibly be said to aim at living or reproduction, neither of which can be said to be good for non-conscious organisms, conscious or sentient beings are the only beings which can be said to have interests and so be moral status holders.

Keywords: moral status, sentience, interests, Goodpaster, Peter Singer.

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The most prevalent account of moral status in ethics literature regarding animals is the sentience position: the claim that having sentience is a necessary and sufficient condition for having moral status. Peter Singer, the most famous proponent of this view, argues that this is the case because unless one is sentient, one cannot have interests, and having moral status requires the possession having interests. It seems to me that the claim 'only sentient beings have interests' is correct, however one cannot simply stipulate that this is the case. To do so would assume a certain understanding of interests; that interests are at least partly dependent upon having a subjective mental life (Singer, 1977, p. 27; Singer 1993, p. 57). To Singer's credit he attempts to defend his understanding of interests by claiming that if one cannot experience anything, and nothing can make a difference to one's well-being or welfare, it doesn't make a difference to such an individual how he or she is treated (Singer, 1977, p. 27). Therefore, there is nothing for us to take into consideration when we are deciding how we should treat such an individual. Other theorists suggest that non-sentient organisms do not have a well-being and as such it doesn't make sense for things to matter to them (Cochrane, 2012, p. 37). Most ethicists that argue for the moral status of animals have adopted one or both of these arguments (DeGrazia, 1996; Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2013; Feinberg, 1974; Francione, 2008; Garner, 2013).

However neither of these arguments, it seems to me, are as strong as many theorists believe. They simply assume that one must be able to experience the world in a conscious way in order for things to be good for oneself. This is certainly a questionable claim. It is plausible to understand interests to mean having a goal or a good to aim at; in fact, we often use the term in this way. Furthermore, this broader sense of 'having interests' appears to apply not only to sentient creatures, but also non-sentient organisms. Thus, if one is to argue that non-sentient organisms lack moral status, one needs to show why it is that the interests of sentient beings are morally significant and relevant to the question of moral status, whereas the interests non-sentient organisms possess, are not.

As such through this paper I will attempt to defend the central claim of the sentience position: that only the interests of sentient beings are *bone fide*, morally significant interests. In so doing I will put aside the two arguments above in an attempt to reach this conclusion through a more philosophically secure route. This, I hope, will show that only sentient beings can be said to have moral status.

I. Two Accounts of Interests

Feinberg and Kuhse both independently attempt to provide an argument in defence of the sentience position, claiming that although non-sentient organisms appear to have interests, in fact a plant's 'interest' in water is simply like an inanimate object's need: a wall's need for paint, (Feinberg, 1974, p. 7) or a car's need for oil (Kuhse, 1985, p. 147). In the same vein as many defenders of the sentience position, Feinberg claims that in order to have interests one must have 'a sake to act for' or 'a behalf to act on' which non-conscious entities lack (Feinberg, 1974, p. 5). Furthermore, interests are rooted in desires and beliefs. Therefore, since one must have consciousness in order to have beliefs and desires, plants and other non-sentient organisms, cannot be said to have interests (Feinberg, 1974, p. 6).

It is certainly true that at least some of the interests of conscious beings are formed from desires. However, it seems that we *can* plausibly act on behalf of, or for the sake of a plant by say, providing it with water, so why should we accept Feinberg's definition of an interest as a product of a desire/belief pair? Feinberg's understanding of an 'interest' seems to be unnecessarily strict and unsupported by substantial argument. As Kenneth Goodpaster notes; by accepting this analysis we 'abandon one sense in which living things [like plants] have interests' (Goodpaster, 1978, p. 319).

Goodpaster offers us a different view. While he agrees that only beings with interests can have moral status, he rejects Feinberg's claim that having interests involves having beliefs and desires and that non-sentient organisms lack a sake. Goodpaster accepts a much broader notion of interests, understanding having an interest to mean something like having a good or aim (Goodpaster, 1978, p. 320). On this account all living things have interests and therefore all living things have moral status. Unfortunately, much the same as Feinberg, Goodpaster neglects to provide an argument for why what we call the 'interests' of plants, should be relevant to the question of who has moral status. In fact Goodpaster merely suggests that we are resistant to understanding plants as having interests and moral status because western society tacitly endorses hedonism. As a result, we are likely to see pleasure as good, pain as evil and non-sentient organisms (incapable of both) as unimportant (Goodpaster, 1978, p. 310).

II. Biological Functions as Interests

We have two accounts of having interests then: the account forwarded by Singer, Feinberg and others; that interests require sentience, and the account put forward by Goodpaster; that having an interest simply means having a good or an aim. However we have no convincing argument showing either to be correct. Why then, should we

accept either view over the other? Gary Varner suggests that we should reject Feinberg's notion of having interests and adopt Goodpaster's account. In response to Feinberg, Varner argues that the functions of living organisms can be differentiated from those of non-living artefacts by the fact that they are biological and present due to natural selection. Having a biological function x , Varner claims, means: 1) function x is of an organ or subsystem s that was adaptive for one's ancestors and 2) one has function x because of the presence of subsystem s (Varner, 1990, p. 159).

Biological functions in this sense, Varner claims, must feature in the most plausible account of interests even for conscious, highly rational beings such as humans. Thus accounts such as Feinberg's and Singer's simply cannot account for the range of things we call 'interests', even in the case of humans. Our biological functions, as well as our desires, determine our interests Varner maintains (Varner, 1990, p. 163). Thus I can have an interest in water without desiring it if water will fulfil, or contribute to the advancement of one of my biological functions. Therefore having biological functions means having interests *and therefore* organisms with biological functions have moral status.

It does seem to be the case that the biological functions of humans can be considered to be interests, however there is still reason to doubt Varner's conclusion. Varner's argument rests on the claim that we should consider biological functions to be interests wherever we find them, because they are considered to be interests in the most plausible accounts of *humans'* interests. It seems to me however, that we should consider more closely the relationship between humans' interests and biological functions before we claim that biological functions *always* count as interests. Feinberg makes an important distinction that could be helpful here.

'A needs x ' can mean either *a*) x is necessary for A to function correctly or *b*) x is good for A; its lack would be detrimental to A's well-being (Feinberg, 1974, p. 7). If x is simply necessary for A to function then it need not necessarily be the case that it would be bad or wrong for the function to go unfulfilled. However, it could be wrong or bad for x to go unfulfilled if x was necessary for A to function *and* x being withheld would be detrimental to A's well-being. Thus, it must be the case that since the biological functions of humans feature in their interests, they are not just needs in sense *a*, but also in sense *b*. Furthermore, if the biological functions of non-sentient organisms like plants are to be morally significant, it must be the case that they are also needs in sense *b* and not just sense *a*.

In order to show that the biological functions of non-sentient organisms are

needs in sense *b* then, it needs to be shown that the fulfilment of these functions is good for a non-conscious organism and not simply necessary for it to function correctly. To assess whether biological functions are good for non-sentient organisms I will consider why biological functions are good for humans. Let's take the function (or more properly the group of biological functions) responsible for taking in nutrition. In plants this involves photosynthesis as well as absorbing water and nutrients from the soil around them; in humans the processes of eating and drinking. Receiving adequate nutrition does not appear to be good for humans because say, functioning correctly is good for humans. It seems much more plausible that it is good for us because receiving adequate nutrition confers *other* goods on us. By having adequate nutrition we avoid certain diseases, health problems and can live qualitatively better lives. Could receiving adequate nutrition be good for a plant for the same reasons?

This seems doubtful. While adequate nutrition may lead to a plant avoiding certain diseases, since a plant, or any other nonsentient organism for that matter, does not have the capacity for a subjective mental life, it does not make sense to talk of a plant having a qualitatively better or worse life. Furthermore, since it has no subjective viewpoint it could not matter to the plant that it is damaged through diseases or health problems. Thus, it seems that the explanation for why biological functions are considered to be interests in the case of humans, cannot justify why biological functions should be considered to be interests in the case of non-sentient organisms.

III. Producing Offspring, the Living and Flourishing

The reasons for which the fulfilment of our biological functions is good for us then, cannot be used to explain why the fulfilment of biological functions is good for plants; the goods that are conferred upon us by the fulfilment of our biological functions are simply not available to nonsentient organisms such as plants. Perhaps though, the fulfilment of the biological functions of plants, is good for plants because through fulfilling these functions a plant achieves some other good. Three effects of the fulfilment of biological functions that might plausibly be said to be good for a plant (and thus explain why its biological functions should be considered to be interests) are propagating, continuing to live and flourishing.

In order to attempt to discover why these effects may be good for plants and other nonsentient life I will first consider why they are good for humans (if they are good for humans at all). First I will consider propagating. While it is true that many humans find great joy in having children, many more have had extremely rewarding,

enjoyable and well-lived lives without ever having children (Cochrane, 2012, p74). Furthermore, for those who do gain something from having children, the benefit they receive seems to come from the relationships they develop with their children and through watching them grow and develop. Having children appears to be good in virtue of the experiences humans gain from it; experiences that are available to them because of their subjective mental life. It does not seem that humans consider having children as good for them simply because producing a child is a good thing in itself.

Since plants lack any subjective experience, they couldn't possibly benefit from producing offspring in any psychological sense like humans can. As such, producing offspring couldn't be good for them for this reason. In fact, lacking any mental life it isn't clear how propagating could be good for plants. Therefore there seems to be little reason to accept that producing offspring is good for plants and other non-sentient organisms.

Although, producing lives may not be good for a plant perhaps the continuing of its own life be good for it. This is something we consider to be good for humans and so it could also plausibly be good for plants and other non-sentient organisms. For ease of writing and understanding I will consider this question in the negative form: 'Is death bad for plants?' It may be pointed out that death could be bad because of the pain that one suffers in dying, not just the physical but the psychological. It is certainly the case that most deaths that occur are physically and psychologically painful however pain is not a necessary part of death and yet even painless death seems to be bad for humans. Thus, while painful experiences may contribute to the badness of death, there must be some other reason for which death is an evil.

A plausible explanation of why death is bad for humans is the 'Lost Opportunities Argument'. This argument's central claim is that it is wrong to kill a human (or in fact any sentience being) because he or she will be deprived of any future opportunities for goods (DeGrazia, 1996, p. 231; Singer, 1993, p. 90). For example, a person's death may deny them the opportunity to start a family, have a successful career, develop their artistic talents or even much simpler things like to grow old with their partner or to take their daily walk through the park. Thus, on this account, the taking away of opportunities for goods is what makes death bad. It is not bad in itself but bad because of what results from it; a deprivation of any future opportunities. Furthermore, the opportunities which we can be deprived of through death are mostly experiential goods; things that are good because of our experience of them and as such are dependent upon the possession of the capacity for consciousness. Therefore, if the Lost Opportunities

Argument is correct, then death is bad for humans in virtue of the fact that they have mental life and subjective experience.

Other theorists such as Oderberg have argued that human life is intrinsically valuable. Having the kind of life humans have allows us to go on and pursue goods Oderberg argues. And for this reason living should be considered a good itself. Thus, even if one is at some point deprived of all other goods in their life they still have one good to pursue: living itself (Oderberg, 2000, p. 67).

What can these two accounts tell us about the death of plants? Once again since plants lack any mental life they cannot be said to lose opportunities for goods which humans aim at as these appear to require some capacity for consciousness. Thus death cannot be said to be bad for plants because of lost opportunities. Could the lives of plants be intrinsically valuable in the way Oderberg describes however? It seems not. Since there don't appear to be any goods for plants to pursue, living can't be intrinsically valuable for them in the sense Oderberg believes human life to be. Therefore it seems likely that death cannot be bad for plants and thus living cannot be good for them. Furthermore, it appears the possession of sentience is necessary for living to be good for an individual.

One final point that could be made in support of the claim that biological functions are interests, is that the fulfilment of said functions results in flourishing which is a good, even for non-sentient organisms. This has intuitive appeal, flourishing is something that we consider to be good for humans and does not appear to require sentience; we frequently refer to plants as 'flourishing'. However it seems that flourishing may be being used equivocally (Feinberg, 1974, p. 7). When we refer to flourishing being good for humans we mean something like 'living a rewarding or worthwhile life' being good. In fact claiming one is flourishing seems to be a shorthand way of stating that one is enjoying a life filled with goods or perhaps advancing one's interests. This being the case it simply can't be true that the fulfilment of its biological functions is good for a plant because it allows it to flourish. This claim simply amounts to a plant's fulfilment of its biological functions being good for it because it allows the plant to live a life filled with good or advance its interests. However, since it has been shown that there are no goods for a plant to pursue, and no interests for them to advance, this justification is explanatorily empty. There would need to be at least one other good for a plant to pursue in order for flourishing to be good for a plant.¹

It seems therefore that neither living, propagating nor flourishing can be said to be good for nonsentient organisms and thus we do not have reason to believe that the fulfilment of biological functions is good for nonsentient organisms as it is for sentient

beings. As such, Varner's claim that biological functions are interests (whomever they belong to) is false. The biological functions of non-sentient entities could only be interests if the fulfilment of these functions would be good for them or the lack of fulfilment of the functions would be detrimental to them. It seems the sentience position is correct then; one can only have interests and so moral status if one has sentience. Without sentience it seems there are no goods which one can pursue and as a result nothing can be good or bad for non-sentient organisms.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Varner's claim that biological functions always count as interests has been shown to be unsupported. Biological functions can only be considered interests if their fulfilment would be good for the individual or their lack of fulfilment would be detrimental to the individual's well-being. In non-sentient organisms continuing to live and reproducing appear to be the aims of biological functions thus, in order to show that the fulfilment of the biological functions in non-sentient organisms is good for them one must show that continuing to live and/or reproducing are good for them. After consideration of several plausible reasons for why these aims might be good for a plant it appears that neither continuing to live nor reproducing can be said to be good for a plant. While Varner is right that biological functions feature in the interests of humans this is because of the experiential goods that accompany the fulfilment of such functions in conscious beings. Therefore it seems that Singer is right: an interest is something only sentient beings can possess and thus only sentient beings can be moral status holders.

NOTES

¹ This doesn't mean, of course, that we need to stop referring to plants as 'flourishing' or 'having interests' but simply that these terms, when used to describe non-sentient organisms, lack any moral significance.

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