



Cruel nature: Harmfulness as an important, overlooked dimension in judgments of moral standing

Jared Piazza*, Justin F. Landy, Geoffrey P. Goodwin

Department of Psychology, University of Pennsylvania, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 October 2013

Revised 24 December 2013

Accepted 27 December 2013

Keywords:

Moral standing

Harmfulness

Patience

Agency

Intelligence

Animals

ABSTRACT

Entities that possess moral standing can be wronged and deserve our moral consideration. Past perspectives on the folk psychology of moral standing have focused exclusively on the role of “patience” (the capacity to experience pain or pleasure) and “agency” (usually defined and operationalized in terms of intelligence or cognitive ability). We contend that *harmfulness* (i.e., having a harmful vs. benevolent disposition) is an equally if not more important determinant of moral standing. We provide support for this hypothesis across four studies using non-human animals as targets. We show that the effect of harmfulness on attributions of moral standing is independent from patience and intelligence (Studies 1–2), that this effect pertains specifically to an animal’s harmful disposition rather than its capacity to act upon this disposition (Study 3), and that it primarily reflects a parochial concern for *human* welfare in particular (Study 4). Our findings highlight an important, overlooked dimension in the psychology of moral standing that has implications for real-world decisions that affect non-human animals. Our findings also help clarify the conditions under which people perceive patience and agency as related versus truly independent dimensions.

© 2014 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

“Cruel nature absolves us of any guilt for treating its denizens cruelly.”

~Jonathan Balcombe (2010), *Second nature: The inner lives of animals*

“Even the revered medical missionary Albert Schweitzer, whose philosophy emphasized reverence for all life, kept a gun around to shoot snakes.”

~Hal Herzog (2010), *Some we love, some we hate, some we eat: Why it's so hard to think straight about animals*

1. Introduction

Which entities or organisms deserve our moral consideration? Which entities would it be morally wrong to harm or neglect without good reason? Do we have obligations only towards members of our own species, or are we obligated to respect the interests of other species as well, and if so, which ones? Questions such as these pertain to the attribution of moral standing. Entities with “moral standing” are those entities that can be morally wronged and which therefore deserve our moral consideration (Schönfeld, 1992; Singer, 1975/2009, 2011).

A longstanding debate persists in philosophy about which entities have moral standing, and which do not. Much of this debate has revolved around the question of *which characteristics* are relevant for attributing moral standing (Bentham, 1789/2011; Carruthers, 1992, 2010; Feinberg, 1971; Kant, 1981; Schönfeld, 1992; Singer, 1975/2009, 2011; Steinbock, 1978). Although there are a

* Corresponding author. Address: Department of Psychology, University of Pennsylvania, 3720 Walnut Street, Solomon Labs Bldg., Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA. Tel.: +1 (215) 898 7866; fax: +1 (215) 898 7301.

E-mail address: jpiazza@psych.upenn.edu (J. Piazza).

number of nuanced positions, philosophers debating this issue have generally discussed two distinct sources of moral standing—patience and agency.¹ On one side of the debate are those philosophers, such as Jeremy Bentham and Peter Singer, who argue that “sentience,” “experience,” or “patience”² (i.e., the capacity to suffer, or experience pain and/or pleasure) is the primary morally relevant dimension for determining whether an entity deserves our moral consideration (Bentham, 1789/2011; Korsgaard, 1996; Schönfeld, 1992; Singer, 1975/2009, 2011). On one popular account (Singer, 1975/2009, 2011), patience is defended as the basis for moral standing owing to the fact that any other attribute (e.g., gender, race, intelligence, language, self-awareness, etc.) would lead to some human beings (e.g., mentally handicapped individuals, fetuses, minorities, etc.) being disqualified from moral standing, thus, violating principles of equality (this argument is sometimes referred to as the “argument from marginal cases”). Positing patience as the basis for moral standing avoids this problem and enables the interests of all sentient beings to be given equal moral consideration.

On the other side of the debate are philosophers, such as Immanuel Kant and Peter Carruthers, who defend “agency” as the main relevant condition for moral standing (Carruthers, 1992, 2010; Kant, 1981; Steinbock, 1978). Proponents of this view often define agency in terms of “higher” intelligence, or *human rationality*, which includes “moral autonomy,” the capacity to self-govern one’s behavior in accordance with universally agreed upon rules or principles. This more anthropocentric account of moral standing often takes contractualist moral theory (e.g., Rawls, 1972) as its starting point – we only have moral obligations towards entities that can enter into contracts or agreements. Entities that cannot enter into such agreements fall outside our moral circle, though we might have other reasons to avoid harming them (e.g., because of how harming them would reflect on our character, see Carruthers, 1992, 2010; or because harming them would indirectly harm a person who is worthy of our moral consideration, see Kant, 1981).

Mirroring this two-source debate in philosophy, experimental philosophers and psychologists have recently entered the fray to investigate whether folk attributions of moral standing parallel the debate within philosophy. In one relevant study, Gray, Gray, and Wegner (2007) found that across a range of different entities (including but not limited to animals), an entity’s possessing “experience,” that is, the ability to experience hedonic states, including the ability to suffer, was a very strong predictor of whether people would be upset about harming that entity. Knobe and Prinz (2008) similarly found that, in verbal reports, people explicitly described the capacity for hedonic

experience as highly relevant for making judgments about an entity’s moral standing.

Building on these investigations, Sytsma and Machery (2012) presented a more complex theory, arguing that “experience” (or patience) but also “agency” (operationalized in terms of intelligence) represent two distinct dimensions underlying both philosophical and lay intuitions about moral standing (see also Bastian, Laham, Wilson, Haslam, & Koval, 2011). Sytsma and Machery (2012) obtained evidence consistent with their “two-source hypothesis.” Across four experiments they manipulated lay people’s perceptions of the amount of “experience” or “agency” a particular organism or species possessed. They operationalized “experience” in terms of patience (i.e., the capacity for pain and pleasure), and “agency” in terms of possessing sophisticated intellectual abilities. For example, in one innovative study (Study 2) an alien species was described as feeling “both pleasure and pain” (i.e., patience), and/or as “very intelligent, and [engaging] in highly complex social political interactions (...) [having] highly developed literary, musical, and artistic traditions, in addition to having made great advances in the sciences” (i.e., intelligence). They found that patience (but not intelligence) sometimes enhanced judgments of moral standing, as measured by the belief that it would be immoral to harm or kill the species, while at other times intelligence (but not patience) enhanced moral standing. Sytsma and Machery (2012) acknowledge that there may be other sources of moral standing beyond patience and intelligence, though they regard these two dimensions as predominant (p. 309).

In the present paper, we argue that the two factors of patience and intelligence, derived from philosophy and recent empirical work, do not exhaust the full range of factors that lay people rely on in their judgments of moral standing. Borrowing from models of social cognition, and research from moral psychology, we demonstrate that *harmfulness* (i.e., having a harmful disposition, or, conversely, a non-harmful or benevolent disposition) is an equally, if not at times more important, source of moral standing, which does not reduce to patience or intelligence, and which has hitherto been overlooked by researchers.

1.1. *Harmfulness as an important, overlooked source of moral standing*

Our use of the term “harmfulness” is meant to capture the attribution of a harmful underlying *disposition*. That is, when an entity is perceived to be “harmful,” we mean that it is perceived as having a disposition that leads to behaviors that harm others. Such a harmful disposition does not require that the agent is perceived as *malicious*, i.e., as having deliberate intentions or plans to harm others – though of course, maliciousness may sometimes amplify harmfulness; nor does it necessarily require that the agent is capable of acting upon its harmful disposition – it only requires that the agent be *disposed* to behave in harmful ways.

In social psychology, there is a rich literature on how a person or group’s having a harmful or a benevolent disposition affects global evaluations that others form of them (e.g., Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Brambilla, Sacchi, Rusconi,

¹ We leave aside the more radical ethical position that all forms of conative life deserve moral consideration and can be wronged—including all living organisms, including plants and trees, that have “interests,” in the sense of strivings or latent tendencies such as capacities for nutrition, growth, or respiration (see Atfield, 1981; Taylor, 1986).

² Sentience, experience, and patience are three ways of labeling the very same construct—namely, the capacity to suffer or experience pain and/or pleasure. Throughout this paper we adopt the label “patience” to denote this psychological dimension.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/10457574>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/10457574>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)