Sentientism and the Welfare Level View

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Sentientism and the Welfare Level View

Willem van der Deijl

Tilburg University, The Netherlands

Sentientism is the view that all and only sentient individuals have moral status. In this article, I challenge two versions of Sentientism: (1) the view that sentience confers moral status because phenomenal consciousness is valuable to the one who has it, and (2) the view that sentience confers moral status because sentience confers the capacity for welfare. Instead, I defend Welfare Level Sentientism, the view that sentience confers moral status because sentience confers a level of welfare.

Keywords: moral status; sentientism; sentience; consciousness; welfare; experience.

I. Introduction: Sentience and moral status

Rocks, radios, or Roombas may be damaged, and may even be destroyed. But there is a fundamental moral difference between damaging a rock, radio, or Roomba, and hurting a child or a dog. While the latter may be wronged, the former may not. Insofar as it is wrong to destroy rocks, radios, or Roombas, we would be wronging their owners, or those who have an interest in them, but we would not be wronging the rocks, radios, or Roombas themselves. This is to say that children and dogs have moral status, but rocks, radios, and Roombas do not.[1] What explains this difference? One widely cited answer is that dogs and children are sentient—they have phenomenal consciousness—while rocks, radios, and Roombas are not.[2] According to Sentientism, sentience is

Correspondence to: Willem van der Deijl, wjavanderdeijl@gmail.com

[1]To have moral status in this sense implies that 'it or its interests morally matter to some degree for the entity's own sake' (Jaworska and Tannenbaum 2018). It does not entail full moral status, or any specific rights, such as the right to life.

[2]Sometimes sentience is used more narrowly, to describe the ability to experience pleasure and pain. This is distinct from having phenomenal consciousness (DeGrazia 2021, for instance,

necessary and sufficient for moral status: without sentience, you have no moral status, and being sentient confers at least basic moral status.[3]

So far, Sentientism appears fairly straightforward and intuitively plausible. This is not to say that everyone will agree, of course, that phenomenal consciousness is essential to moral status. Sentientism rivals agent-based theories, or pluralistic theories (Kagan 2019; Mogensen 2025), which maintain that agency is the, or a, ground for moral status.[4] However, in this article, I will not focus on convincing the reader that Sentientism is the correct view of moral status (see Perry 2024 for a recent defense).[5] Rather, I will discuss what the best version of Sentientism looks like.

Recently, debates have emerged about the details of Sentientism: exactly what type of sentience is required for moral status (Kahane and Savulescu 2009)? Is any form of phenomenal consciousness sufficient (Chalmers 2022: chap. 17), or does it need to be a particular type of hedonic (Kagan 2019), motivational (Roelofs 2023), or affective variety (Smithies forthcoming)? These questions are closely tied to the justification of Sentientism. Why would sentience play such a crucial role for moral status? Here is a straightforward way to get there (cf. DeGrazia 2021; Roelofs 2023; Smithies forthcoming; who all adopt a more stringent version of iv.).

i. If an individual has moral status, this means that the individual has interests that matter morally.
ii. An individual has interests that matter morally if and only if they have welfare interests.
iii. Being sentient is required for having welfare interests.
iv. Being sentient is sufficient for having welfare interests.

This argument may be appealing but also makes clear on what grounds people may be inclined to disagree. First, premise 3 is controversial because of what has been called the Problem of Positive Goods (Bradford 2022; Shepherd 2023). Most theories of welfare suggest that some welfare goods, like achievement, knowledge, and success, are not necessarily related to phenomenal consciousness and seemingly can be possessed by those who are not sentient. After all, a computer may possess knowledge, it seems, and a robot may beat the best human Go player at Go: no small feat. Unless all welfare goods

uses the terms as such). Sentience is a thick notion, and its appropriate contents will depend on our ethical understanding of its significance (Powell and Mikhalevich 2020: sec. 1.2).

[3]We will see below, some Sentientists require a particular type of sentience, such as affective, or motivational types of sentience.

[4]Some have argued that sentience and agency are more closely connected than might at first appear (Wilcox 2020).

[5]Another challenge to Sentientism in practice is that phenomenal consciousness may be impossible to assess in individual cases (Block 2002). Nevertheless, significant inroads are being made in the assessment of sentience in other animals (see Browning and Veit 2022).

are closely tied to phenomenal consciousness, such as pleasure, loving experiences, aesthetic experience (van der Deijl 2019, 2021; Kraut 2018), and subjective desire-satisfaction (Heathwood 2006; see also Lin 2021), it is unclear why sentience is required for welfare goods.

Second, premise 4 is controversial due to what we may call the Neutral Phenomenology Problem. Phenomenal consciousness can be good or bad for the one who has it, but it can also feel utterly neutral. Chalmers imagines 'a conscious creature who experiences no happiness, suffering, pleasure, pain, or any other positive or negative affective states' (332). He calls these creatures Vulcans. Crucially for Chalmers, Vulcans can still have intellectual and moral goals. Others have discussed more extreme examples of neutral phenomenology. Kagan imagines 'a creature that could occasionally experience blue, but had no other qualitative states at all' (p.14). [though similar problems have been described by DeGrazia (2021), Lee (2019); Kriegel (forthcoming)] 'Mere sentience, on its own' Kagan writes 'may not be enough.' (15). What exactly constitutes neutral phenomenology is a substantive question, but I will use the term Neutrals to refer to individuals who have a phenomenology, but one that lacks welfare goods and bads.[6] Recently, Luke Roelofs and Declan Smithies have defended that this is indeed not enough: only *motivational* (Roelofs 2023) or *affective* consciousness (Smithies forthcoming) confer moral status.

Both these objections relate closely to the question of how exactly welfare interests and sentience are related. There are two possible candidates that appear to be assumed in many of these discussions:

(1) The Value of Consciousness View: Sentience confers moral status, because phenomenal consciousness is valuable to the one who has it.
(2) The Capacity for Welfare View: Sentience confers moral status, because sentience confers the capacity for welfare.

I argue below that both are inadequate. Instead, I argue for a third view:

(3) The Welfare Level View: Sentience confers moral status, because phenomenal consciousness confers a level of welfare.

II. The Value of Consciousness View and neutral levels of welfare

A first plausible way to explain the relationship between consciousness and moral status is to recognize that consciousness is valuable. If something is

[6]The reason I introduce the term Neutral, rather than using the term Vulcan, is that Chalmers is not quite clear on the idea whether Vulcans lack any welfare goods or not. Vulcans would definitely classify as Neutrals on hedonistic theories of wellbeing.

valuable, we have a moral reason to protect it. This is the basis of the Value of Consciousness View, which maintains that experience confers moral status just because consciousness is itself valuable to the one who is conscious. Chalmers, for instance, writes:

> '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' (2022: 331).

This, Chalmers argues, is the reason conscious beings have moral status.[7] It is safe to say that there is an obvious link between consciousness and value. The Value of Consciousness View implies that having consciousness is a welfare good, and it is plausible that having a welfare good is a sufficient condition for moral status. So, if consciousness is valuable, this way of reasoning can justify why sentience is sufficient for moral status.

What is crucial, however, is that even if consciousness itself has welfare value (see Nagel 1979: chap. 1 for a defense), this view does not imply that *all* consciousness is valuable to the one who has it. The reason is that consciousness may have bad contents (such as pain) that equal or outweigh the positive value of consciousness itself.

As a result, justifying Sentientism through the non-derivative value of phenomenal experience runs into the problem of neutral experiential welfare states. Above, we discussed Neutrals, beings that are sentient, but lack welfare goods and bads. It is not clear if Neutrals actually exist. But the problem of neutral welfare is broader than hypothetical Neutrals, who have a neutral welfare by nature. We can imagine that people contingently end up (temporarily) in experiential states whose total experiential welfare value is zero.

Consider someone who is conscious, but as a result of a health condition, becomes stuck in a state with a total level of experiential welfare of zero. The details of this condition will vary on our theory of welfare, but this person does not experience pleasure, and no other experiential welfare goods. Insofar as consciousness is intrinsically valuable, the person experiences some constant experiential bads equal to the welfare value of consciousness. The point is that the welfare value of her conscious experiences is zero for an extended period of time. We can call her Constanze. The problem, then, is that the Value of Consciousness View must exclude Constanze. After all, her consciousness is not valuable to her.

The idea that Constanze lacks moral status is something that I find difficult to accept. If anything, her condition seems to make her interests a matter of significant moral concern. If there were anything we could do to help Constanze get rid of her condition, it seems we have a *particular* reason to do so. Imagine, for instance, that there is a curative treatment available at some cost.

[7] Admittedly, Chalmers is a little ambiguous on the grounds of moral status.

This treatment would provide her with the ability to have positive experiences, like all of us. Do we have a moral reason to give it to her? If lacking welfare goods and bads means that one does not have moral status, there is no such reason. But we clearly do have such a reason. We would clearly wrong Constanze if we did not give her this treatment, while we could easily do so.

To make things worse, consider an individual who has wonderful experiences as well as horrendous experiences in such a combination that they cancel each other out. Their life is overall worse than most, but also contains many wonderful moments. The net value of their experiences comes out to zero. Let's call this individual Peaks.[8] It just so happens that Peaks' experiential states are not, on balance, valuable or disvaluable to Peaks. As a result, the total non-derivative value of the experiences for Peaks and Constanze is the same. While the case for Constanze's moral status is strong, the case for Peaks' moral status appears undeniable to me. However, the Value of Consciousness View does not seem to have the tools to ascribe moral status to either Constanze or Peaks. So, this is the fundamental challenge to the Value of Consciousness View of Sentientism:

> **Neutral welfare challenge**: some sentient entities (such as Peaks and Constanze) should clearly be classified as having moral status by Sentientism, but do not have phenomenal consciousness that is valuable to them. Their moral status therefore cannot be grounded on the value of their consciousness to them.

How could a defender of the view respond? One possible response is to say that what matters for moral status is that someone's life *has* been good or bad in some way, that an individual *has had* things in their life that were good or bad for them. Sentient beings typically have something good happen to them merely by being conscious, and this is why most sentient beings have moral status. However, in cases where this has not been true, a being does not have moral status. This reply may allow us to ascribe moral status to Peaks and Constanze.

Now imagine that Constanze's condition did not develop, but that she was born in her neutral experiential state. I do not think that this fact should make us think differently about her moral status. If there is any treatment available to Constanze, we have the same moral reasons to give it to her, for her sake, regardless of whether she has had the condition since birth or whether it developed later. This response is not promising.

What this suggests is that the significance of sentience for moral status should not be grounded in the actual value of conscious experience itself. This brings us to the Capacity for Welfare View.

[8] Kriegel (forthcoming) presents a similar case, and calls such beings Mombies.

III. The Capacity for Welfare View

A common way to link consciousness and moral status is to say that consciousness confers the capacity for welfare. For instance, in *Animal Liberation*, Singer (1977) argues:

> 'If a being is not capable of suffering, or of experiencing enjoyment or happiness, there is nothing to be taken into account. This is why the limit of sentience (using the term as a convenient, if not strictly accurate, shorthand for the capacity to suffer or experience enjoyment or happiness) is the only defensible boundary of concern for the interests of others' (154).

Smithies (forthcoming), Roelofs (2023), and Cecchinato (Manuscript) build on a similar idea. They draw on a common idea from the wellbeing literature, the resonance constraint, which maintains that something can only be non-derivatively good for us if we care about it. Consequently, without the right sort of consciousness, we lack the capacity to possess welfare goods and therefore lack moral status. It is the capacity for welfare that matters, not the value of consciousness itself. This is the Capacity for Welfare View:

(1) The Capacity for Welfare View: Sentience confers moral status, because sentience confers the capacity for welfare,

While the idea that capacities ground moral status is very common, there is surprisingly little in-depth discussion of capacities in this context. Capacities, it seems, should be understood as properties that entities possess in virtue of which certain claims about what individuals could or would do or have are correct. While I am not currently speaking English, I have the capacity to do so (DiSilvestro 2009, 2010: 1.4). But my capacity to speak another language may be much further removed. I have never learned to speak Mandarin, but I still have the capacity to speak it, though doing so would require years of study and significant effort. These capacities clearly have a hierarchy. DiSilvestro, for instance, makes a distinction between first-order and higher-order capacities. A tree has a capacity to grow leaves, but so does a sapling, and so does an acorn, but in much more limited degrees. We can say that the tree has a first order capacity, while the sapling has a higher order capacity, and the acorn an even higher order capacity.

This feature of capacities makes them ill-suited as a basis for Sentientism. Moral status is a dichotomous concept. It draws a sharp line between entities that have it and entities that don't. Capacities, however, come in degrees. To illustrate this, note that an account of moral status can either be stringent—requiring a low-order capacity—or more liberal—requiring only a higher-order capacity. But a low-order capacity requirement will be overly restrictive, while a high-order capacity requirement will be so permissive that it

contradicts the sentientist's main commitments, and any cutoff in between struggles to find a plausible rationale.

First, the Capacity for Welfare View can maintain that any individual has moral status if it possesses the first-order, or immediate, capacity for welfare. If it does so, it can explain why Peaks has moral status. Peaks, after all, clearly has the capacity to have valuable experiences. However, such a view seems unable to include someone like Constanze. Constanze lacks the immediate ability to experience welfare goods, even though it is possible that treatment could eventually get her there. And, as we have seen, it is deeply implausible that anyone who currently lacks the immediate capacity to experience goods (or bads) due to a medical condition thereby lacks moral status.

Alternatively, the Capacity for Welfare View can also be formulated more liberally, requiring only a higher-order capacity for welfare. Constanze has a higher order capacity for having welfare goods. After all, she could experience welfare goods if she would receive treatment. But, this view will be highly inclusive. And as such, it will do little to support Sentientism, which is committed to the idea that consciousness is necessary for moral status. After all, higher order capacities for welfare are not necessarily related to sentience. To see this, consider the case of non-sentient frozen human embryos that can develop into fully sentient humans. The frozen embryo has a higher-order capacity to experience welfare goods, but it is certainly not in any way conscious now. A fortiori, the same goes for artificial intelligence systems that may become conscious when technology advances. If so, this artificial intelligence system has some higher-order capacity to experience welfare goods. This liberal view would then have to ascribe moral status to such a system *today*, in virtue of this possibility, even though it is clearly not currently conscious. I find such implications implausible, but even if others do not share this judgment, they can agree that it fits poorly with the concept of sentientism, which is committed to the view that consciousness is necessary for moral status.

So, the Capacity for Welfare View should neither be formulated in terms of first-order capacities, nor in terms of having any higher order capacity for welfare. Perhaps, there is something in between. While it will be difficult to explain why it should be tied to some particular degree of capacity—say, 2nd, 3rd, or 4th-order (and to individuate such degrees clearly), there may nonetheless be more promising alternatives. One way to do so on a principled basis may be to appeal to internal and external capacities. Internal capacities are those things an individual is able to do in virtue of features of their own constitution. We may think that as long as Constanze's brain sections remain intact that play a part in producing valuable experiential states, she retains the capacity for welfare. Non-sentient robots do not have such organs, and

this explains the relevant difference between Constanze and such beings. But imagine the following scenario:[9]

> **El's operation.** El undergoes a medical operation that will involve deep surgical cuts. It is important that she stays conscious throughout the procedure. She has the option between three different types of anesthesia. The first is a local pain medication. If she receives this medication, she would not be able to feel any pain in the operated area. Because many patients experience deep bouts of anxiety and other negative emotions during the operation, there are two other options. The second targets centers in the brain that are responsible for creating any type of positive or negative valence in experiences. Taking this medication will all but ensure a person will have an entirely neutrally valenced experience during the operation. But because the second option sometimes causes lasting damage, a novel technology allows doctors to temporarily remove these centers for the duration of the operation, and to put them back in exactly the same state as they were. This has the exact same effect on experience as the second treatment. This latter operation is fail-safe.

Defining sentientism in terms of the internal capacities for welfare puts significant pressure on the distinction between external and internal capacities, and it is unclear that the distinction between internal and external capacities for welfare is all that significant. If it were, El would retain her moral status if she took the second anesthetic but lose her moral status if she took the third. After all, the third anesthetic removes her internal capacities for experiential welfare. But the two experiences would be identical. There appears to be little reason to think that the difference between the way these two experiences are generated should make such a categorical difference, if any at all.

This discussion directs us toward the conclusion that insofar as sentience matters for moral status, it is not because it provides individuals with the capacity for welfare. After all, if we understand the notion of capacities liberally, sentience is not necessary for the capacity to experience welfare goods. If we understand the notion stringently, it is unable to ascribe moral status to those who are currently unable to experience welfare goods (or bads) for contingent reasons. Nor is it clear how we might identify some alternative link between capacities and sentience that establishes a robust moral criterion.

IV. The Welfare Level View

What is the alternative? Here, I think, is a more plausible suggestion: when you become a sentient being, there is now something it is like it to be you. And consequently, it is now good, bad, or neutral to be you. In other words, a sentient being necessarily has *a level of welfare* (see also Lee 2025). This conceptual

[9]This example takes inspiration from examples from Labukt (2025), though these are formulated in a different philosophical discussion.

link makes it plausible that being conscious confers a level of welfare, even if it is a neutral level of welfare.

The idea that merely being conscious is enough for moral status has been criticized on the grounds that it will also ascribe moral status to Neutrals, despite the fact that they lack the capacity to experience welfare goods and bads. But excluding them from moral status is, I think, too harsh. It misses the significance of being conscious. However, if consciousness confers a level of welfare, this can help us see the moral difference between benefiting a conscious being that currently lacks any welfare goods and an inanimate object. To see this, imagine that you need to make the following choice:

(1) Provide a currently non-sentient robot with a complex module that will make the robot sentient, such that they get to experience a wide range of valenced experiences, on balance positive.
(2) Provide a therapy to a sentient being that currently lacks any welfare goods and bads—a Neutral—that will give them a wide range of valenced experiences, on balance positive.

These two choices are not morally equivalent. The neutral is already an experiencing subject, and passing on the opportunity to improve their life and create a new subject instead would be unfair to them. I think it is plausible to say that the moral difference between the robot and the Neutral has to do with the fact that the Neutral has a level of welfare. It just happens to be a neutral level of welfare. We can ask: how good is it to be a Neutral? And the answer would be: it is not good to be them, nor is it bad to be them, it is neutral to be them. We can ask the same about the robot, but in that case, the question asks for something that does not exist. There is nothing it is like to be the robot, and this also makes it implausible to say that there is anything to say about how good or bad it is to be that robot. The robot does not have 'a sake', and consequently does not have welfare interests. This is why sentience is so crucial for moral status. This brings us to our third view:

(1) The Welfare Level View: Sentience confers moral status, because phenomenal consciousness confers a level of welfare.

This view is not only independently plausible, it provides a rationale for why Neutrals have moral status and explains why welfare goods matter only to sentient beings. It thereby addresses the Neutral Phenomenology Problem and Problem of Positive Goods.

V. Conclusion

If the argument is correct, sentience is necessary and sufficient for moral status because sentient beings are welfare subjects, beings with a level of welfare.

Rather than the argument (i-iv) we introduced in the introduction, we should arrive at Sentientism using the following three steps:

i. If an individual has moral status, this means that the individual has interests that matter morally.
v. An individual has interests that matter morally if and only if it has a level of welfare.
vi. All and only sentient individuals have a level of welfare.

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