

Moral Status:
Who Deserves Moral Consideration?

Syllabus for Tave Fellowship

Nethanel Lipshitz

(TERM / YEAR)
(TIME / ROOM)

Instructor: Nethanel Lipshitz
Email: nethanel@uchicago.edu
Office Hours: Time / Place

Course Description:

Do the interests of nonhuman animals matter as much as the interests of human beings? Do robots that exhibit behavioral similarities to human beings have rights? Should cognitively disabled persons be allowed to vote? Is there anything wrong with abortion? All these questions have something in common: to answer them fully, we need to say something about the *moral status* of the beings in question.

If a being has moral status, then its interests matter when we are trying to decide what we ought to do. For this reason, the concept of moral status plays an important role in many contemporary philosophical discussions in ethics. In this course, we will explore the concept of moral status and the grounds for ascribing a certain moral status to a being. We will discuss how different theories of moral status inform a number of central ethical questions that our society is confronted with, including the question of vegetarianism, the abortion debate and the social integration of cognitively disabled persons.

In the first part of the course, we will consider two broad approaches to moral status. The first approach, *moral individualism*, identifies attributes that establish the moral status of an individual regardless of the individual's species membership (for instance, an individual's level of rationality, autonomy or sensibility to pain). The second approach, the *species-norms view*, takes the membership in a species to be of irreducible importance for assigning moral status to an individual. A central version of this view takes especially the membership in the species "homo-sapiens" to be of irreducible importance in assigning moral status.

With these theoretical models in mind, we will consider five cases in which interesting questions about moral status arise: three concrete cases—nonhuman animals, cognitively disabled human beings, and fetuses—and two cases that are seemingly fantastic but may be realizable in the not too distant future—sophisticated robots and enhanced human beings ("super-persons"). All these cases figure in contemporary debates about moral status and present theoretical and practical challenges to received accounts of moral status. We will discuss the unique features of each of these cases and the ways in which they illuminate each other.

Course Aims:

The questions that we will ask in this course are among the most important ethical questions that confront our society. The course will help students enter this social conversation by introducing them to central philosophical views regarding moral status. The course provides an opportunity to think more slowly and more deeply about issues relating to moral status, an opportunity that the heated debates in the media and the public sphere often do not offer.

The syllabus is designed to give voice to a variety of opinions. My hope in so doing is to create a safe and welcoming environment for different opinions on the issues raised in class. I also hope the readings will surprise the students and open their eyes to possibilities they did not think about before. The course will give students tools to develop more nuanced and thought-through views about moral status than the ones they entered the class with.

All the readings should be accessible to students without prior experience with philosophy.

Readings:

All readings will be made available on the website.

Grading:	Paper One (3,000 words):	30%
	Paper Two (5,000 words):	50%
	Participation:	20%

Two papers will be assigned during this course. The papers will ask you to either critically evaluate a view or an argument that has been presented in the readings, or to analyze a work of art (movie, play, novel, poem, etc.) using concepts and tools from our discussions and readings. At least one of the two papers has to be of the first type. More detailed instructions will be given in the first week of class.

For due dates for papers, consult the syllabus below. Late papers will be accepted with a penalty (a third of a letter-grade for every late day).

Participation credit accrues to those who regularly and actively participate in class. I expect you to come to class after you have read and thought about the material, and to contribute your share to a stimulating and thoughtful discussion. In addition, each meeting two students will be asked to prepare a question for the group on the material. These questions will count toward your participation credit.

Course Reading Plan

PART 1: THEORETICAL MODELS

Introduction:

1	<p>Introduction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• No readings assigned.	<p>Introducing the concept of moral status.</p> <p>Introducing the five “hard cases”.</p> <p>Introducing fundamental concepts of philosophical discourse: valid and sound arguments, necessary and sufficient conditions, and the concept of considered judgments.</p>
---	---	--

The Case for Moral Individualism:

2	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Short Reading:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Jeremy Bentham, excerpt from <i>The Principles of Morals and Legislation</i> (one page).• Main Reading:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Singer, Peter. 1986. "All Animals are Equal." In <i>Applied Ethics</i>, edited by Peter Singer, 215-228. Oxford: Oxford University Press.	<p>In this paper, Singer argues for <i>moral individualism</i>, and applies the view for the case of animals.</p> <p>The excerpt from Bentham offers one of the first historical formulations of the ideas elaborated in Singer’s work.</p>
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• McMahan, Jeff. 2005. "Our Fellow Creatures." <i>The Journal of Ethics</i> 9 (3/4):353-380.	<p>In this paper, McMahan offers a general defense of <i>moral individualism</i>.</p>

The Case for Species Norms:

4	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Williams, Bernard. 2008. "The Human Prejudice." In <i>Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline</i>, 135-152. Princeton: Princeton University Press.	<p>Bernard Williams offers an argument for partiality to members of the <i>homo-sapiens</i> species, against <i>moral individualism</i>.</p>
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Nussbaum, Martha C. 2006. <i>Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership</i>. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. PP. 69-81, 356-388, 392-401	<p>In this book, Nussbaum argues that species-membership constitutes moral status (and against <i>moral individualism</i>), but unlike Williams, hesitates about whether it is justifiable to “take sides” with human beings.</p>

PART 2: A CLOSER LOOK AT THE FIVE CASES

A Closer Look at Animals:

(Since we discuss the moral status of animals in the previous classes, this unit explores two views of the moral status of animals not covered yet in class: a strong denial of nonhuman animals' moral status (Narveson's) and a view of moral status that begins with a rich exploration of human practices (Diamond's).)

6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short Readings <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Thomas Aquinas, excerpt from the <i>Summa Theologica</i> (4 pages). ○ René Descartes, excerpt from <i>The Discourse on Method</i> (2 pages). • Main Reading: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Narveson, Jan. 1989. "A Defense of Meat Eating." In <i>Animal Rights and Human Obligations</i>, edited by Tom Regan and Peter Singer, 192-195. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall. 	<p>In this class, we read two short texts from the history of philosophy which argue that animals do not have moral status at all and can be used as means for the use of human beings.</p> <p>We also discuss one contemporary defense of such view, by Jan Narveson.</p>
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diamond, Cora. 1991 [1975-6]. "Eating Meat and Eating People." In <i>The Realistic Spirit : Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind</i>, 319-334. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press. 	<p>In this influential paper, Cora Diamond, a vegetarian, argues against <i>moral individualism</i> and against a moral-individualist defense of vegetarianism.</p> <p>She argues for a theory of moral status in which existing human practices should contribute to our understanding and employment of the concept of moral status.</p>

A Closer Look at Cognitive Disability:

8	<p>1st paper due.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watch in class: <i>The Eighth Day</i> (Belgium, 1996. Directed by: Jaco Van Dormael) 	<p>We start this unit with <i>The Eighth Day</i>, a Belgian movie dealing with issues of agency and autonomy of people with Down Syndrome, and the possibility of flourishing lives for them, as well as friendship across disability differences.</p>
---	---	--

9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion of <i>The Eighth Day</i>. • McMahan, Jeff. 1996. "Cognitive Disability, Misfortune, and Justice." <i>Philosophy & Public Affairs</i> 25 (1):3-35. 	<p>We start this session by discussing <i>The Eighth Day</i>.</p> <p>We then move to discuss what <i>moral individualism</i> has to say about cognitive disability, with McMahan as a representative of this tradition in this regard.</p> <p>In the assigned reading, McMahan argues that if it is moral attributes of individuals rather than species membership that counts for moral status, then individual human beings who have diminished cognitive capacities have less moral status than other human beings.</p>
10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kittay, Eva. 2005. "At the Margins of Moral Personhood", <i>Ethics</i>, 116 (1): 100-131 	<p>Eva Kittay, a philosopher and a mother of a cognitively disabled person, answers McMahan and argues for the equal moral status of all human beings regardless of individual levels of cognitive functioning. Her view draws on some moves from the species-norms approach. She also discusses the importance of relationships of care for moral status.</p>
11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nussbaum, Martha C. 2010. "The Capabilities of People with Cognitive Disabilities." In <i>Cognitive Disability and its Challenge to Moral Philosophy</i>, edited by Eva Feder Kittay and Licia Carlson, 75-95. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell. 	<p>In this paper, Nussbaum argues for the full political inclusion of persons with cognitive disabilities, including an argument to the effect that they should have an equal right to vote.</p>

A Closer Look at Fetuses:

12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tooley, Michael. 1986. "Abortion and Infanticide." In <i>Applied Ethics</i>, edited by Peter Singer, 57-85. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 	<p>In this paper, Tooley claims that fetuses are not persons and so lack moral status, based on the idea that persons must possess a concept of themselves as continuous selves over time. The implications of this view for the rights of infants are discussed.</p>
----	--	---

13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stone, Jim. 1987. "Why Potentiality Matters." <i>Canadian Journal of Philosophy</i> 17 (4):815-829. Cooney, William. 1991. "The Fallacy of all Person-Denying Arguments for Abortion." <i>Journal of Applied Philosophy</i> 8 (2):161-165. 	<p>In these papers, Stone and Cooney argue for a high moral status for fetuses based on the importance of the potential to become adult human beings.</p> <p>(There are two papers assigned to this class, but both are relatively short)</p>
14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Harman, Elizabeth. 1999. "Creation Ethics: The Moral Status of Early Fetuses and the Ethics of Abortion." <i>Philosophy & Public Affairs</i> 28 (4):310-324. 	<p>In this paper, Harman makes an interesting claim about the moral status of fetuses: their moral status depends on their actual futures, so that fetuses that are aborted have a different moral status than fetuses that are not, even at the same stage of development.</p>
15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thomson, Judith Jarvis. 1971. "A Defense of Abortion." <i>Philosophy & Public Affairs</i> 1 (1):47-66. 	<p>In this paper, Thomson argues for a surprising claim: even if fetuses have full moral status, it is legitimate to abort them.</p>

A Closer Look at Robots and Super-persons:

(These cases are still largely hypothetical, so we devote less time for each compared to the previous cases. The interest in these cases lies primarily in the ways they push the discourse on moral status in new directions).

16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Watch before class: <p><i>A.I. Artificial Intelligence</i> (USA, 2001. Directed by: Steven Spielberg).</p> <p>(There will be a screening organized for the class before the session).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Read: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Versenyi, Laszlo. 1974. "Can Robots be Moral?" <i>Ethics</i> 84 (3):248-259. 	<p><i>A.I. Artificial Intelligence</i> deals with the problem of the moral status of robots: Do robots that function similarly to humans have rights? Do they deserve to be loved?</p> <p>We will watch the movie before class, and discuss it in class in relation to Versenyi's paper.</p> <p>In his paper, Versenyi claims that sufficiently sophisticated robots do have rights equivalent to that of human beings, that they can and should be loved, and that there are moral reasons to create them. He draws surprising inspiration from Plato and Kant in developing his claims.</p>
17	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Douglas, Thomas. 2013. "Human Enhancement and Supra-Personal Moral Status." <i>Philosophical Studies</i> 162 	<p>Douglas argues that if science succeeds in creating human beings</p>

	(3):473-497.	(or some other species) who are much better than us in properties that are traditionally thought to ground moral status (like rationality), then science would create beings with a greater moral status than we currently possess. Human beings, he concludes, do not have the highest possible moral status.
18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concluding discussion: no readings assigned 	An open conversation about feelings and thoughts that arose in the course of reading and discussing moral status during the quarter.
	2 nd paper due on Friday of 11 th week, at midnight.	