HUMAN CAPACITIES AND MORAL STATUS
Philosophy and Medicine

VOLUME 108

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HUMAN CAPACITIES
AND MORAL STATUS

by
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For Gabriel
Not here but not forgotten
I would like to thank several groups of people, without whom the writing of this book would have been much more difficult, if not impossible.

First, three of my philosophy professors from my time as an M. A. student at Biola University: J. P. Moreland and Scott B. Rae, whose 2000 book *Body and Soul* persuaded and motivated me to develop the main ideas of this book, and Garry DeWeese, whose friendship and advice the last 10 years have been instrumental in bringing these ideas to print.

Second, a number of people helped an earlier draft of this book take shape as my doctoral dissertation at Bowling Green State University. My dissertation committee at Bowling Green State University generously gave their time and effort in various ways to help the dissertation come together: R. G. Frey, Fred Miller, Loren Lomasky, Michael Tooley, and Younghee Kim. The members of Fred Miller’s dissertation reading group gave me helpful feedback on each part of the dissertation over a period of several months: Pete Cellelo, Kathy Erbeznik, Leanne Kent, Nico Maloberti, Chris Metivier, John Milliken, Jonathan Miller, Sangeeta Sanga, and Matt Stichter.

Third, different groups provided me with financial support during the writing of the dissertation, and then the book. For the dissertation, financial support came from The Bowling Green State University Philosophy Department, the Earhart Foundation, and the Charlotte and Walter Kohler Charitable Trust, who support the Kohler Fellows program at the Howard Center for Family, Religion, and Society. For the book, financial support came from California State University-Sacramento.

Fourth, a number of colleagues here at CSUS have given various types of support in writing and bringing the book to print. For example, Tom Pyne, Chris Bellon, Randy Mayes, and Scott Merlino all gave constructive feedback when I read a paper which became the basis for Chapter 2 and 3 in the spring of 2006. Jeremy Garrett was instrumental in encouraging me and helping me to contact Springer with the manuscript.

Fifth, the kind and professional people working in or with Springer’s Philosophy and Medicine Series have been a delight to work with: Aaron Hinkley, Lisa Rasmussen, Marion Wagenaar, and Indumadhi Srinivasan. Also, Chris Tollefsen and another anonymous reviewer at Springer made many (!) excellent (!!) comments challenging me to rethink and expand on various parts of the argument.
Sixth, a number of journals kindly granted permission to reprint material that originally appeared in their pages. “Capacities, Hierarchies, and the Moral Status of Normal Human Infants and Fetuses.” *Journal of Value Inquiry* 43: 479–492 (December 2009). “A Qualified Endorsement of Embryonic Stem-Cell Research, Based on Two Widely Shared Beliefs about the Brain-Diseased Patients Such Research Might Benefit.” *Journal of Medical Ethics* 34: 563–567 (July 2008). “Not Every Cell is Sacred: A Reply to Charo.” *Bioethics* 20(3): 146–157 (June 2006). “Human Embryos in the Original Position?” *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 30(3): 285–304 (June 2005). Of course, when thanking journals, let me also thank all of the anonymous reviewers out there who read, commented on, rejected, and sometimes accepted, bits and pieces of this book when it was under review as journal submissions: you know who you are, even though I do not!

Seventh, a number of publishers agreed to let me reprint longer portions of the following pieces:


The President’s Council on Bioethics, *Controversies in the Determination of Death: A White Paper by the President’s Council on Bioethics*; copyright © 2009: The President’s Council on Bioethics; reproduced here by kind permission of The President’s Council on Bioethics.


Eighth, as this book was in its final stages of production, Martha Nussbaum graciously pointed out to me that her views (which I interact with in Chapter 3) had changed in ways that I had not been aware of, thereby saving me from a number of potentially embarrassing errors. While this acknowledgment should not be construed as her endorsement of my argument, I am grateful to her for giving me the opportunity to significantly improve that part of my argument prior to publication.

Finally, my immediate and extended family gave me various kinds of valuable support throughout the process of writing the material that has now become this book: my in-laws Phillip, JoAnne, Ian, Sean, and Nick McDaniel; my siblings Frank and Elizabeth; my parents Ruth and Frank; my children Hannah, Grace, Bethany, Joshua, and Mary; and last of all, most of all, and with my all, I thank my wife, Heather. There are things that philosophers simply cannot do with words; expressing adequately my thanks to you, Heather, is one of them.
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The thesis of this book is that if something is human, it has the sort of moral status that you and I each have—what I shall henceforth call “serious” moral status. The reason for labeling it “serious” is to explicitly distinguish it from the many real yet lower-grade sorts of moral status that other things in the universe have, such as works of art, natural landscapes, plants, trees, and at least some non-human animals. The reason for labeling it “serious” instead of “human” is that there could be other things besides humans that have the sort of moral status that you and I each have. Or so I argue.

I take it for granted that you and I each have serious moral status. This assumption is not something I argue for in this book. But this assumption is not controversial. Each of us firmly believes that we have serious moral status. You believe, for example, that other people owe you a certain amount of respect, and that they should not try to harm you unless they have very good reasons to do so.

Serious moral status has many dimensions or aspects besides the two just mentioned, which focus on respect and harm. Perhaps certain natural rights are a part of serious moral status, such as the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Perhaps serious moral status prescribes a certain sort of aesthetic response on the part of those who encounter it in others. Like love, serious moral status is a many-splendored thing. The nature of serious moral status—its precise shape, structure, and content—is something open to debate. But the nature of serious moral status, like the reality of your moral status and mine, is not something I argue for in this book.

What I argue for in this book is a pair of claims, which focus, not on the reality or nature of serious moral status, but on the basis of serious moral status—that is, on the features about us in virtue of which we possess serious moral status. The thesis of the book, recall, is that if something is human, it has serious moral status. Is being human, then, the basis of serious moral status? Well, yes and no. I argue that being human involves possessing a feature that is itself a basis of serious moral status, in anything that possesses it, whether its possessor is human or not. I argue that the feature of us humans, in virtue of which we have serious moral status, is the possession of certain capacities.

The move towards capacities, in the context of discussions about moral status, is both common and controversial. It is common because many current debates
about the moral status of things—whether the things in question are nonhuman animals, human fetuses, or what have you—eventually migrate towards a discussion of the capacities of the things in question—for example, the capacity to feel pain, the capacity for self-consciousness, and the capacity to think rationally. However, the move towards capacities is controversial because, more often than not, this move is an indication—indeed, a bright red flag—that certain humans are about to be assigned a different moral status than the sort of moral status you and I each have. After all, if a human’s capacities are the basis of its moral status, how could a human having lesser capacities than you and I have the same “serious” moral status as you and I? For this reason, the move towards capacities is strongly resisted in some quarters—and eagerly welcomed in others.

If the main argument of this book is correct, then resisting (or welcoming) capacities for this reason is premature. For this main argument consists in a pair of claims, which, taken together, entail that all human beings have the same sort of moral status that you and I each have:

1. If something is human, it has a set of typical human capacities.
2. If something has a set of typical human capacities, it has serious moral status.

Therefore,
3. If something is human, it has serious moral status.

This argument is sound, I argue, because typical human capacities include both what might be called “active” capacities and “passive” capacities, and also include both what might be called “lower-order” capacities and “higher-order” capacities. Although both distinctions are somewhat rough, I have an active capacity to raise my arm on purpose, a passive capacity to feel pain when pricked, lower-order capacities to do each of these things right now, and higher-order capacities to do each of these things even when I am relatively “incapacitated”; for example, when I am temporarily comatose. Most writers who focus on the moral relevance of capacities tend to ignore a thing’s higher-order capacities, or its passive capacities, or both. But I argue that all of a thing’s capacities—whether active or passive, whether higher-order or lower-order—are relevant to its moral status. Allowing passive higher-order capacities to be relevant to an entity’s moral status solves a number of problems that are otherwise very difficult to solve. But, as we shall see, allowing passive higher-order capacities to be relevant in this way also generates many new problems that other accounts do not face.

So, then, this book brings together a discussion in ethics, over the existence, nature, and types of moral status, with a discussion in metaphysics, over the existence, nature, and types of capacities. I argue that certain metaphysical distinctions among capacities are helpful for answering questions in the moral arena, and that the position I advance is better at solving certain problems than other positions.

This book employs a certain sort of controversial methodology, and reaches certain sorts of controversial conclusions. The methodology I employ relies upon our intuitions: in particular, it relies not only upon our intuitions about familiar
cases, but also upon our intuitions about unusual—some would say metaphysi-
cally bizarre—thought experiments from time to time. Some of the hypothetical
cases in my argument involve machines that can instantly duplicate a human body,
futuristic brain surgery that cannot currently be practiced in modern hospitals (at
least not legally), non-human aliens, and causal overdetermination. In other words,
I am working within a stream of contemporary philosophy that imitates the work of
authors like Jeff McMahan, Derek Parfit, and Michael Tooley. The methodology I
employ is also controversial because it relies upon the work of contemporary moral
and political philosophers like John Rawls and Martha Nussbaum. This, by itself, is
not especially controversial, since these philosophers are widely discussed already.
What makes reliance upon Rawls and Nussbaum controversial in my case is the fact
that I use their work in tandem with the unusual thought experiments, and the fact
that I use their work to reach the controversial conclusions.

The conclusions I reach commit me to the idea that human fetuses and embryos
have serious moral status. They also commit me to the idea that serious moral status
is possessed by humans in a permanent vegetative state, humans suffering from terri-
ble brain diseases, and humans born with terrible genetic disorders. In other words,
I am reaching conclusions that are just as “conservative” and “pro-life” as those
reached by many Roman Catholic philosophers such as Pope John Paul II. Indeed,
in certain places, and for reasons that will become clear as the argument progresses,
I reach conclusions that seem to be more conservative than some leading Roman
Catholic writers in the natural law tradition. However, no theological premises are
involved in any part of my argument. This is not only a book that a pro-life Catholic
can give to an atheist in order to explain why the Catholic position is correct as far
as it goes; it is also a book that a pro-life atheist can give to a Catholic in order to
explain why the position of some Catholic authors does not go quite far enough.

This, then, is a book that begins with certain intuitions we all have about our-
selves, works through a few metaphysical distinctions, a few thought experiments,
and a few contemporary moral philosophers, and ends up with substantive, and con-
troversial, conclusions about the moral status of humans at the beginning and ending
stages of life. If the argument of this book is sound, this will have important implica-
tions for the proper way of framing a number of debates in the context of biomedical
ethics. For if all human organisms really do have serious moral status, whether or
not they are very undeveloped, diseased, or damaged, then this must have some
impact on our ongoing moral and political debates about the proper treatment of
such organisms at various stages of their biological lives.

The chapters of the book are structured as follows. Chapter 1 explains the con-
ccepts of the main argument in more detail, and explains why personal pronouns
such as “you” and personal names such as “Ronald Reagan” are applied to human

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1See McMahan, J. *The Ethics of Killing: Problems at the Margins of Life*. Oxford: Oxford
University Press (2002); Parfit, D. *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Clarendon Press (1984); Tooley,
organisms throughout the book. Chapter 2 defends the first step of the main argument by focusing on human organisms that undergo temporary changes involving “incapacitation” of one sort or another. Chapter 3 defends the second step of the main argument, partly by focusing on the same sorts of “incapacitation” cases that appeared in Chapter 2, and partly by focusing on moral arguments that emerge from Rawls and Nussbaum. Chapter 4 and 5 relate the main argument to two controversial arguments in contemporary applied ethics: the Argument From Potential, which focuses on normal human organisms at the beginning stages of life (such as human infants, fetuses, and embryos), and the Argument From Marginal Cases, which focuses on abnormal human organisms (such as human organisms that are disabled, diseased, or genetically deficient). Finally, Chapter 6 considers a number of lingering objections, focusing especially on those objections related to my methodology, my treatment of the line between life and death, and my treatment of the line between defective humans and nonhuman entities.