

Defending Sentientism

Walter Veit & Heather Browning

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Defending Sentientism

Walter Veit^a  and Heather Browning^b 

^aUniversity of Bristol; ^bUniversity of Southampton

INTRODUCTION

The last decade has seen an explosion of interest in the possibility of suffering in nonhumans, including animals only very distantly related to us, as well as artificial intelligence systems. Much of this research takes a stance that has come to be known as “sentientism”—that is, that a capacity to have negative or positive feelings is necessary (and, typically, sufficient) for moral status. Dissatisfied with this development, Shepherd (2023) recently offered a series of arguments against the view that consciousness is necessary for moral status. However, as researchers involved in research on sentience in nonhuman animals and artificial intelligences, as well as ethics regarding nonhuman minds, we did not find his arguments very convincing. Here, we use this opportunity to defend sentientism, which we hope will clarify why the view is becoming ever closer to the mainstream position in the field and will eliminate some common misconceptions. We do so by addressing each of his arguments in order.

THE ARGUMENT FROM ILLUSIONISM

Illusionism is the view that qualia or phenomenal properties do not exist (Frankish 2016; Dennett 2016,

2019). Shepherd used this popular view in the philosophy of mind to support the idea that we should not take a consciousness-based approach to moral status. After all, if no conscious beings exist, it would seem obvious that consciousness can't be a necessary property for moral status—for then none of us would have moral status! Unfortunately, this relies on a misrepresentation of the illusionist literature. Illusionists such as Frankish or Dennett argue neither that consciousness doesn't exist nor that suffering doesn't exist. Rather, they take it that these notions are different from our folk understanding or the way the typical philosopher of mind understands them. Hence, the argument from illusionism would only apply to the view that requires phenomenal properties (more narrowly understood) to be necessary for moral status, not consciousness more broadly (see also Dung [2022] for arguments that illusionism is compatible with sentientism based instead on quasi-phenomenal properties). Whether feelings are “illusions” or not does not influence their moral relevance. It is perfectly coherent for an illusionist viewpoint to align with sentientism as evidenced by the positions we ourselves hold: a sentientist ethics alongside an illusionism-adjacent view¹ based on the worry that the notion of phenomenal properties often carries problematic Cartesian

CONTACT Walter Veit  wrvweit@gmail.com  University of Bristol, Bristol, BS8 1QU, UK.

¹While we consider ourselves akin to illusionists, we do not typically use the term, since it invites just these kinds of confusions among those less familiar with the position.

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assumptions (see Veit 2022). The possibility of illusionism is thus no reason to reject sentientism.

THE ARGUMENT FROM HUMAN IGNORANCE

The second argument Shepherd (2023) advances is that consciousness-based views of moral status are based on introspection, but that the seeming connection between value and consciousness merely arises from our inability to imagine value *without* consciousness, since these states are so connected within ourselves. However, we find several flaws within this argument. First, talk of avoidance of pains and pursuit of pleasures in the absence of subjective experience is simply a misuse of these terms, which aim to pick out the subjectively experienced aspect—precisely why scientists have introduced terms such as nociception and reward mechanisms to distinguish unconscious processes from conscious ones. Second, even if it is true that there are “evaluative” processes going on—inside our brains, in computers, or in some invertebrates—that do not bear out in hedonic feelings, it is entirely unclear why these states should *matter* to these systems. It’s not our ignorance, but the entire lack of any plausible argument having been seen within the last centuries of moral philosophy.

Avoiding damage may matter from an evolutionary perspective to the continued survival of an organism, but that is not at all an argument for why it matters *morally*. It is only with consciousness that felt interests can exist that can bring pleasure and pain. It’s not the mere fact that we have “access” to some mental processes; the felt aspect itself is what brings about value. Even if we may be “biased” in this way, it is up to critics of sentientism to provide a convincing argument for why nonconscious mental processes have any sort of value. After all, even simple machines can perform basic evaluations but we do not typically consider these processes to be morally relevant—and similarly too for considerations of preferences. The preferences of nonconscious entities such as plants are not typically taken as valuable, nor are preferences that bring unhappiness, such as through addiction. It is the subjective valuing that adds moral value to evaluations or preferences.

THE ARGUMENT FROM POSITIVE GOODS

The third argument Shepherd advances is the idea of positive (or objective) goods, common in objective list theories of well-being that claim that a good life consists in possessing a certain number of goods themselves claimed to hold intrinsic value, whether or not

the individual is conscious. First, it is important to note that while some might find it intuitively plausible that there are several “goods” beyond hedonic experiences from which to derive value, there is no consensus about what such a list would contain. Shepherd’s previous criticism about the weaknesses of relying on intuition seem then to apply here. All the suggestions he makes for possible items on a list—such as “knowledge,” “achievement,” “perfection of one’s nature”—are just those things he finds intuitively plausible to carry moral weight. There is no additional argument provided for how to distinguish those goods that actually do hold value from anything else one might mistakenly want to claim belongs there. There is a worry in all approaches like this that there may be an element of paternalism in setting a list of objective goods that supposedly benefit all individuals, regardless of their attitude toward these goods. Claiming to know what is good for others without requiring any insight into their likes and dislikes is a dangerous moral and political doctrine that can be and has been used to justify all forms of restrictions on personal freedom, gender expression, and the like. Indeed, such an approach is much more likely to be speciesist and to restrict moral status for nonhumans by putting weight on those things considered important by humans. This is a concern that a sentientist approach can avoid, by advocating for only those goods that the creatures themselves feel positively toward.

Perhaps more importantly, this does not have to be a direct argument about the use of consciousness to ground moral status. Objective list theories of well-being, ascribing value to positive goods other than hedonic states, can also acknowledge that the beings to whom those goods are valuable will only be conscious creatures. The projects of finding a ground for moral status (i.e., which entities matter morally) and that of determining what is good for those entities are distinct, and the answer to one need not determine the answer to the other. Establishing that these are plausible goods for conscious individuals to attain says nothing about whether they are goods for nonconscious individuals, and indeed it is not easy to see why one should think so. One can be an objective list theorist about well-being while remaining a sentientist about moral status.

VERDICT

The three strongest arguments Shepherd has provided to convince us that consciousness is not necessary for moral status have not been strong enough to overcome

the position. His first argument misunderstands illusionism, conflating being a view that denies phenomenal properties—as typically conceived by philosophers—with denying consciousness and suffering. His argument from human ignorance fails to show why nonconscious evaluations or preferences matter morally. Finally, his appeal to positive goods suffers from concerns about the intuitions grounding the construction of objective lists, as well as missing the target of importance—moral status itself. If these are the strongest available arguments against sentientism, we could consider the view strengthened through their lack of success.

Shepherd has not provided any positive case for which other things beyond consciousness we should consider. Factors such as “cognitive sophistication” that he has tentatively suggested can be accounted for within a sentientist picture, as cognitive capacities are used to provide evidence for the degree or level of sentience in an animal—and thus its scope for suffering and pleasure. The absence of a positive argument leaves the criticisms of sentientism with little force to encourage one to try to seek them out in an attempt to be more pluralist. While there can be benefits to a pluralist approach, only if the additional components can themselves be established to matter will this be an improvement to ethical deliberation or policymaking.

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ORCID

Walter Veit  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7701-8995>
Heather Browning  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1554-7052>

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Do You Mind? Toward Neurocentric Criteria for Assessing Cognitive Function Relevant to the Moral Regard and Treatment of Non-Human Organisms

Sherry E. Loveless^a and James Giordano^{a,b}

^aGeorgetown University Medical Center; ^bUniformed Services University of the Health Sciences

In this issue, Joshua Shepherd (2023) offers defensible argument for broader consideration of cognitive and psychological features viable and valuable for sentiments about and interactions with non-human

organisms (NHOs). We concur, as based upon our prior and ongoing work—pro-Richard Ryder (Ryder 2001), and historically, Jeremy Bentham (Bentham, 1823)—proposing painism as constitutional for moral

CONTACT James Giordano  james.giordano@georgetown.edu  Departments of Neurology and Biochemistry, Neuroethics Studies Program, Pellegrino Center for Clinical Bioethics, Georgetown University Medical Center, 4000 Reservoir Rd., Washington, DC 20007-2145, USA; Defense Medical Ethics Center, Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, Bethesda, MD 20814-4712 USA.

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