Chapter 5
On the Moral Equality of Artificial Agents

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ABSTRACT

Artificial agents such as robots are performing increasingly significant ethical roles in society. As a result, there is a growing literature regarding their moral status with many suggesting it is justified to regard manufactured entities as having intrinsic moral worth. However, the question of whether artificial agents could have the high degree of moral status that is attributed to human persons has largely been neglected. To address this question, the author developed a respect-based account of the ethical criteria for the moral status of persons. From this account, the paper employs an empirical test that must be passed in order for artificial agents to be considered alongside persons as having the corresponding rights and duties.

INTRODUCTION

Increasingly interdisciplinary work in fields such as synthetic biology, molecular medicine, nanotechnology, and computational and cognitive sciences is presenting new challenges for ethical thought. These challenges have given rise to the evolving discipline of technoethics, which focuses on humans’ complex ethical relationships with our rapidly changing technological environment. An emerging feature of this environment is the increasingly significant array of social roles performed by artificial agents such as robots. As Mark Coeckelbergh (2010) notes, the uses of robots have diversified to include warfare, education, entertainment, sex, and healthcare. Evidence suggests that humans often treat robots as companions and partners, and not merely as objects (Libin, A., & Libin, E. 2004). Inevitably their increased social importance has generated
interest in the ethics of artificial agents. Some of this interest is focussed on the types of moral rules artificial agents should have and how these rules could be acquired.\(^3\) Theorists have also discussed the moral status of artificial agents; that is, whether artificial agents should be treated as objects of moral concern.\(^5\) However, despite the burgeoning literature claiming that artificial agents have moral worth, and could learn and apply moral rules, few have considered whether artificial agents could gain the same moral status as human persons.\(^6\) In response to this question I develop an account of the ethical criteria for the moral status of persons. Such an account will, of course, face difficulties in its application. In order to mitigate these difficulties, I defend an empirical test that must be passed in order for artificial agents to be considered alongside persons as having the corresponding rights and duties.

**MORAL STATUS AND PERSONHOOD**

Moral theorists use the word ‘person’ in a way that is different to the common usage of the term. In moral theory, a person is a being with particular types of interests, such as an interest in preference satisfaction, or particular capacities, such as the ability to reason. On the basis of these interests or capacities, persons are regarded as having the highest moral status. Significantly, it is a core intuition of moral and political theory that all persons have equal moral status and are thus attributed the same basic rights and duties.

It is important to note that in secular ethical theory not all humans are persons.\(^7\) For instance, foetuses and humans that are severely cognitively impaired lack the relevant interests or capacities that persons have.\(^8\) More pertinently to the issue at hand, in order to avoid arbitrary anthropocentrism, most moral theorists accept that non-humans can in principle have the status of persons. For instance, if an alien or an animal had the relevant interests or capacities, it would be a person. Indeed, some theorists have argued that higher mammals such as dolphins should be recognised as having higher moral status.\(^9\) Thus, if an artificial agent fulfilled the relevant criteria it should be considered as having rights and duties that persons have.

But what are the relevant criteria? In the rest of this section I examine the ethical basis for the higher moral status of persons in order to clarify criteria for equivalent moral status. Two main families of theory are thought to explain moral status: interest-based theories and respect-based theories. I argue that the former should be rejected, since they undermine the ideal that persons are moral equals. I argue that if respect-based accounts are suitably fleshed out they can provide adequate ethical criteria for the moral worth of persons.

**Interest-Based Theories**

Interest-based theories attribute moral status according to how much good a being’s life contains. For instance, a flea’s life contains very little recognisable as good, while a dog’s life might contain goods such as the pleasure of gnawing on a squeaky toy.

On this type of account, persons have higher moral value since their lives contain higher order goods. John Stuart Mill, for instance, claimed that human happiness is qualitatively superior to that of animals, since humans have higher order intellectual and emotional capacities.\(^10\) If this type of account is accepted, then, an artificial agent would have the same moral status as persons if its life contained the same degree of higher goods that humans qua persons generally possess.

However, interest-based accounts of the moral status of persons should be rejected, since they contradict a fundamental ethical tenet: the idea that persons have equal moral status and are thus deserving of equal respect.\(^11\) Interest-based accounts attribute moral status according to the amount of good that a being’s life contains. Thus if some person has a life that contains a greater degree of well-being than another person’s life
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