

Ethical Implications of Indeterminate Cases of Consciousness

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Abstract

It's often of great ethical importance whether a particular agent, or a particular class of agents are conscious. For example, animals which are conscious need to be covered by animal welfare legislation. And different philosophical and scientific accounts of consciousness have importantly different implications about which creatures are conscious. For example, so-called higher-order accounts of consciousness (Carruthers 2016) have been said (Seager 2004) to imply that only human beings (and perhaps great apes) are ever conscious. In this talk I'll explore the ethical implications of the following possibility: there are real phenomena in the brain which fit distinct and incompatible philosophical or scientific accounts of what consciousness is; further there's no fact of the matter which of these phenomena counts as being consciousness, since each of the phenomena fits our pre-theoretic conception of consciousness equally well. I'll first motivate the idea that this's a realistic possibility. Then I'll discuss some problems about ethical decision making which arises if the possibility is realized. I'll focus on animal welfare, though there are cases involving coma patients where related issues arise. Consider a case where distinct accounts of consciousness imply conflicting answers as to whether, say, crustaceans are ever conscious. We can ask whether we should treat this as simply a case where it is *vague* whether crustaceans are conscious (see Sorensen 2012 on the relevant technical meaning of 'vague'), or if instead, we should treat such creatures as *partially but not fully* conscious. If we think vagueness is involved, then we can ask whether, when the answer to an ethical question turns on whether crustaceans are conscious, one answer can be more correct than another. If, on the other hand, we treat the relevant cases as involving *partial* consciousness, we can ask how to determine the degree of weight to give the interests of partially conscious beings, as against fully conscious ones. I'll say a little about each of these issues.

References

- Carruthers, Peter 2016: 'Higher-Order Theories of Consciousness', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/consciousness-higher/>
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- Sorensen, Roy 2012: 'Vagueness', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/vagueness/>