

Abstract.

This dissertation suggests that sentience represents a plausible criterion of moral status. Sentient beings capable of having pleasant or unpleasant experiences have an inherent interest in not suffering by virtue of this capacity, and humans as moral actors commonly assume that it is wrong to inflict pain without a good reason. The first part of the dissertation aims to uphold the following three theses: 1) Biological life represents a too broad criterion of moral status; 2) Rationality (reason, language, moral autonomy, ability to reciprocate) represents a too narrow criterion of moral status; 3) Sentience constitutes a plausible criterion of moral status. The text presents the ethical theories of Albert Schweitzer, René Descartes, Immanuel Kant and Peter Carruthers. It unfolds the argument from marginal cases and the critique of speciesism. It focuses on basic concepts of consciousness, the issue of subjective character of consciousness, and the problem of other minds. It also reviews the existing scientific evidence of sentience in mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, fish, cephalopods, and arthropods.

The second part of the dissertation aims to present and evaluate normative theories that address the criterion of sentience. At the same time, it aims to defend the thesis that contractualism, properly understood, provides plausible theoretical basis for the attribution of direct moral status to animals. The text first deals with the theory of preference utilitarianism by Peter Singer, whose normative conclusions are evaluated as objectionable. It then focuses on the Tom Regan's rights-based theory, whose normative conclusions are evaluated as plausible, as opposed to the considerations that lead Regan to those normative conclusions. As a possible way out, it then offers a modified version of John Rawls's contractualism, which ultimately turns out to be the most plausible of the addressed normative theories.

Key words: ethics, sentience, moral status of animals