Moral Agent and Subject of Moral Worth
by Professor Deni Elliott

More than 2000 years ago Aristotle and other wealthy Athenian men decided how people like themselves should treat one another. Everyone should be free to pursue their own idea of the good life as long as that person’s choice did not interfere with somebody else’s pursuit of the good life.

That idea of “don’t cause unjustified harm” was probably the first statement of Western Moral Philosophy.

It’s only natural that we should first begin our ethical inquiry by thinking about ourselves, and how we want to be treated by the people around us. Take a few minutes to watch children on a playground. You don’t have to wait long before you hear somebody yell, “That’s not fair!” or “Cheater.” By the time that kids are about 5, they begin to make rules for how to take turns and how to give special privilege to those younger or less able. These children are practicing moral agency.

The difference between a moral agent and a subject of moral worth is this: A moral agent is someone who has the power to intentionally cause harm to another. A subject of moral worth is any being or natural system that is vulnerable – it can be harmed. It’s easy to see that children, pets, and even natural resources like water are all subjects of moral worth. They are all clearly vulnerable to harms caused by those who have power over them.

Throughout our history and across cultures, there have been people who were stripped of their ability to have moral agency or sometimes even to count as subjects of moral worth because of inescapable characteristics. That includes people from minority ethnic, racial or religious groups, women, people who are lesbian, gay, or transgendered, and people with disabilities. The moral obligation of moral agents is to use their power with care and never, intentionally cause unjustified harm.
Questions for classroom discussions:

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1) Name some abilities that are essential for someone to be a moral agent.

2) What is necessary for someone to be a subject of moral worth?

3) What is the difference between someone being a subject of moral worth and someone being included in the moral community?

4) Is it consistent with ethical theory for individuals and cultures to have different ideas of what counts as subjects of moral worth outside of the moral community? Why?

5) Is it consistent with ethical theory for individuals and cultures to have different ideas of what counts as members of the moral community? Why?

6) Subjects of moral worth that are outside of the moral requirement require stewards who are within the moral community to protect them and advocate on their behalf. Why is that necessary?