

Moral Agent & Subject of Moral Worth

This video introduces the general ethics concepts of moral agent and subject of moral worth. A moral agent is capable of acting with reference to right and wrong, and has the power to intentionally cause harm to another. A subject of moral worth is anything that can be harmed.

To learn about related general ethics concepts, watch *Fundamental Moral Unit* and *Causing Harm*.

The case studies covered on this page explore moral agency and subjectivity in terms of scientific research and prenatal care. “Cadavers in Car Safety Research” examines the case of a group of engineers who insisted that their use of human cadavers in car safety research was ethical because their research could save lives. “Prenatal Diagnosis & Parental Choice” looks at the debate over the ethics of prenatal diagnosis and reproductive freedom in instances where testing reveals genetic abnormalities and frequently result in parents choosing to terminate the pregnancy. For a case study that examines child migrants as subjects of moral worth in the face of U.S. immigration policies, read “Responding to Child Migration.”

Terms defined in our ethics glossary that are related to the video and case studies include: framing, moral agent, and subject of moral worth.



Discussion Questions

This video focuses on distinguishing between the concepts of *moral agent* and *subject of moral worth*. Also important to this relationship is the *moral community*, which includes every person from birth to death. According to philosopher Deni Elliott, all members of the moral community are subjects of moral worth, but not all subjects of moral worth are part of the moral community. For example, animals, art, artifacts of culture, and the environment are not members of the moral community although they should also be protected from unjustified harm. Moral agent, subject of moral worth, and moral community are not static categories. In some situations, a person is a moral agent and is a subject of moral worth in others. Non-human subjects of moral worth generally require a human steward, someone to protect them from harm, to be recognized as a subject.

1. Name some abilities that are essential for someone to be a moral agent.
2. What is necessary to qualify as a subject of moral worth?
3. What is the difference between being a subject of moral worth and being included in the moral community? Do you agree with this distinction? Why or why not?
4. Individuals or groups of people from different cultures might have different ideas of what counts as membership in the moral community and what counts as other subjects of moral worth. Explain with examples.
5. Subjects of moral worth that are outside of the moral community require moral agents who are within the moral community to protect them and advocate on their behalf. Why is that necessary?

Additional Resources

For more information on concepts covered in this and other videos, as well as activities to help think through these concepts, see Deni Elliott's workbook *Ethical Challenges: Building an Ethics Toolkit*, available for free download. This workbook explores what ethics is and what it means to be ethical, offering readers a variety of exercises to identify their own values and reason through ethical conflicts. A discussion of moral agency and what makes an ethical being may be found beginning on page 1. A detailed description of moral community and subjects of moral worth begins on page 30.

Transcript of Narration

Written and Narrated by:

Deni Elliott, Ph.D., M.A.
Department of Journalism & Media Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
The University of South Florida at St. Petersburg

"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 is 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 do not 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 is easy to see that children, pets, and even natural resources like water and air 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 be moral agents 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."