Chapter I
The Moral Status of Information and Information Technologies:
A Relational Theory of Moral Status

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to explore whether information and information technology in certain cases ought to be valued as ends in themselves rather than as mere means to other ends. I will address this problem by proposing a theory of moral status: a theory of who or what has moral status in the sense that we, as moral agents, have an obligation to take their well-being into consideration when making ethical judgments. The proposed relational theory of moral status draws on insights from both classical Western and East Asian philosophy in order to question the exclusion of all nonliving entities in most theories of moral status. The relational properties constitutivity and irreplaceability are singled out as ethically relevant and are suggested as one possible way to ground the moral status of information and information technologies.

INTRODUCTION

In its *Charter on the Preservation of the Digital Heritage*, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) states that a vast amount of information "is at risk of being lost. Many of these resources have *lasting value* and significance, and *therefore … should be protected and preserved* for current and future generations" (UNESCO, 2003, pp. 67-68, emphasis added). UNESCO further states that the seriousness of this threat has not been grasped fully and stresses the important role of information technologies (IT) in preserving this information.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore one possible theoretical grounding for the claims made by UNESCO. In what sense does information have lasting value, what kind of value can it be, why should we protect and preserve it, and what is the role of IT? I will address these problems by proposing a theory of moral status: a theory

of who or what has moral status in the sense that we, as moral agents, have an obligation to take their well-being into consideration when making ethical judgments. I have termed this general, stand-alone theory *the relational theory of moral status.* It consists of an intrinsic and relational component, ascribing moral status in virtue of intrinsic and relational properties, respectively. The intrinsic component is based on traditional Western accounts of moral status, whereas the relational component is based on insights borrowed from classical East Asian philosophy. By proposing this theory, I wish to question the exclusion of all nonliving entities in most theories of moral status and explore whether it is at all possible to extend the notion so as to include information and information technologies.

The argument proceeds in several steps, gradually extending the range of entities whose well-being we have an obligation to take into consideration. Due to constraints on space, I will limit myself to opening up the possibility of ascribing moral status to nonliving entities in very special circumstances. I also will outline in what sense this can be a step toward identifying in what sense information has lasting value. In line with UNESCO's claim, it is important to emphasize the importance of preventing irreversible loss of our informational heritage, which often follows when information is ascribed value only in virtue of its perceived utility. The goal is a more sustainable development of the infosphere.[1]

THE MORAL STATUS DEBATE

The debate on who or what has moral status has been prominent in animal and environmental ethics in the last couple of decades, and the notion is central to the controversies surrounding abortion and stem cell research. The notion *moral status* signifies whether or not we have an obligation to take an entity's well-being into consideration when making ethical judgments. In order not to beg the question, well-being initially should be defined in a broad sense. The broad definition of well-being is analogous to *soundness*, which can describe the condition of both living and nonliving-entities. A sound entity is free from disease, damage, and decay; it is unimpaired, uninjured, and in good condition.[2] We should at least start out with this broad definition and then make it more restrictive once we know what entities to include among the class of entities whose well-being should be taken into consideration.

Some entities have moral status in virtue of certain properties that are deemed ethically relevant. This is based upon the Principle of Formal Equality, which is a guideline for consistent thinking when it comes to practical matters. The principle can be formulated as follows: entities that are relevantly similar should be treated in a similar manner; a differential treatment requires an ethically relevant difference (Wetlesen, 1999). Thus, the crucial questions in the moral status debate become as follows:

1. What properties are ethically relevant in the sense that a differential treatment of x and y can be justified on the basis that x has property F, whereas y does not (or at least not to a sufficient degree)?
2. What entities are in possession of these properties?

Mary Anne Warren (1997) has introduced a helpful distinction between uni-criterial and multi-criterial theories of moral status. Unicriterial theories single out one property; for instance, rationality (Kant, 1996), sentience (Singer, 1990), or self-consciousness (Regan, 1983), and claim that all entities that satisfy that criterion should be treated equally. Multi-criterial theories (Warren, 1997; Wetlesen, 1999) utilize a number of criteria, resulting in theories in which some entities have higher moral status than others.

Among the most prominent theories in Western accounts of moral status, we find the theories of

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