

On Stopping at Everything: A Reply to W. M. Hunt

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Contrary to W. Murray Hunt's suggestion, living things deserve moral consideration and inanimate objects do not precisely because living things can intelligibly be said to have interests (and inanimate objects cannot intelligibly be said to have interests). Interests are crucial because the concept of morality is noncontingently related to beneficence or nonmaleficence, notions which misfire completely in the absence of entities capable of being benefited or harmed.

Some people will stop at nothing. Others will stop at everything, or so argues W. Murray Hunt in a recent discussion of my article "On Being Morally Considerable."¹ After summarizing with admirable clarity the substance of the article in question, Hunt mounts an objection which was not explicitly considered:

The objection, intentionally expressed at first baldly and, perhaps, a bit flippantly, is: so why stop with "being alive?" That is, if, as Goodpaster argues, rationality, the capacity to suffer and to enjoy, and having interests, are all arbitrary stopping points for determining moral considerability, why is not stopping at "being alive" also an arbitrary stopping point? Why should not the condition of *being in existence* be the criterion of moral considerability? (p. 61)

This objection, as stated, permits at least two rather different interpretations. On the one hand, it can be read as a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* of the line of argument I was pressing, while on the other hand it can be read as a serious defense of a stronger thesis, one which I would not want to defend, to the effect that inanimate objects deserve (noninstrumental) moral consideration. In the former case, I take it I am being accused of adopting too broad a criterion, while in the latter case, too narrow a criterion. Presumably *some* criterion is the correct one, and since it is unclear from which side of the road Hunt is doing the shooting, let me try to protect both flanks.

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¹ Kenneth Goodpaster, "On Being Morally Considerable," *Journal of Philosophy* 75 (1978): 308-25; W. Murray Hunt, "Are Mere Things Morally Considerable?" *Environmental Ethics* 2 (1980): 59-65. All page references in the text are to Hunt's article.

With regard to the second interpretation of Hunt's objection, I would have to side with the philosophers I was criticizing in my article (Frankena, Singer, Warnock, and Feinberg) and insist that I find the thought of considering the interests of inanimate objects *simply incoherent*. I agree with Feinberg when he says that "a being without interests is a being that is incapable of being harmed or benefited, having no good or 'sake' of its own . . . a being without interests has no 'behalf' to act in, and no'sake' to act for."² For this reason, extending the class of morally considerable beings to include *everything* is not, pardon the pun, a live option. And to Hunt's suggestion that a porch might be said to have needs (like the need to be painted), the obvious response is that the needs in question are at best the needs of persons owning the porch, not the needs of the porch.³

Turning to the first interpretation of the objection, let us ask why it is plausible to extend moral consideration beyond rationality and sentience to living beings generally. For, as Hunt writes:

The point of the objection here is not that there *can* be no such ethical demarcation line (between the living and the nonliving, or elsewhere); rather it is that if such a line is to be drawn, it needs a stronger justification. (p. 65)

The worry seems to be that taking *life* as the key to moral considerability might have no more to recommend it than taking *existence* as the key—hence the *reductio*, since *existence* pretty clearly has little or nothing to recommend it as the key.

I think the core of my answer must derive from reflection on the concept of morality itself. Though this concept is not *exhausted* by its inclusion of reference to the *good* and *harm* done to others by an agent, this reference is surely a central part of it. Beneficence and nonmaleficence, then, are not only necessary ingredients in our shared conception of moral (vs. nonmoral) obligation, they are *central*. But one cannot do good for or avoid harm to entities that have no interests. Inanimate objects have no interests. So they cannot be given moral consideration in the relevant sense. Full stop. End of slippery slope. Feinberg's mistake, as I suggested in my article, was *not* that he embraced "having interests" as the key to moral considerability, but that he limited "having interests" to beings capable of wants, desires, pleasure, pain, etc. My point in the context was that a being does not need a fancy central nervous system or "feelings" to qualify as having interests: being alive is enough.

² Feinberg, Joel, "The Rights of Animals and Unborn Generations," in Blackstone, ed., *Philosophy and Environmental Crisis* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1978), p. 51.

³ In this connection, it is worth noting that Hunt's use of the quotation from William James (p. 62) does not help his case. It is precisely because "mere things" make no demands that they lack what it takes for *moral* consideration. I think it is no accident that James limits his concern to the "demands" (interests) of "creatures."

Three additional points. First, notice that I spoke just above of "moral consideration in the relevant sense." This is important, I think, because it is conceivable that there might be other forms of "consideration" related to the moral point of view which are not, strictly, forms of beneficence or nonmaleficence. I might, for example, admire or exhibit reverence for certain persons or living things or even inanimate objects (art objects; the stars) as creatures of God or as marvelous or wondrous in their own right. Such attitudes, on the borderline perhaps between the moral and the aesthetic, might not be rooted in beneficence (directly or indirectly)—but might involve something that could be called moral or quasi-moral "consideration." I think this is an interesting subject, but it is not the one I was dealing with in my original article.

Second, with respect to Hunt's remarks about the interests of deceased persons and the interests of deceased plants (i.e., coal), there seems to be a confusion. Hunt writes:

... there is one important respect in which the condition of "being alive" is narrower than that of having interests. Take, for example, the common problem of fulfilling the wishes of a person who has died. Surely for most ethicists moral consideration is due to those wishes. If the retort is given that the reason why this is so is that they represent the wishes of someone who was alive, then the condition of "being alive" has to be extended to become "being or having been alive." If that is the case, then moral considerability ought to be extended to "mere things" like coal, e.g., on the grounds that the deteriorated vegetable matter out of which it is composed was alive however many eons ago. (p. 63)

Without venturing into the thicket of problems attending the attribution of rights and interests to past and/or future persons,⁴ I think it is clear that whatever consideration we owe to beings temporally separated from us is not owed to the *remains* or, for that matter, to the material out of which such beings will one day be formed. Hence, the coal example is beside the point. If I promised Smith something before he died, it is not to his bones that I owe the moral consideration deriving from that promise. So there is no need to expand the criterion to "being or having been alive" in the way that Hunt suggests. If there is a puzzle here, it does not have to do with moral consideration due to remnants of living beings. It has to do with moral consideration due nonexistent living beings in virtue of promises made in the past or potential harms which might result in the future. Frankly, I am uncertain as to the proper strategy here—either to talk of present interests of past and future moral claimants (as Feinberg does) or to talk of present obligations deriving

⁴ For two opposed views on the subject, see Joel Feinberg, "The Rights of Animals and Unborn Generations," in Blackstone, *Environmental Crisis*, and Richard T. DeGeorge, "The Environment, Rights, and Future Generations," in Goodpaster and Sayre, *Ethics and Problems of the 21st Century* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979).

from past or future interests (as DeGeorge does).⁵ The point is that the problem arises for *any* criterion of moral considerability—rationality, sentience, life, and even existence—and it is therefore something of a red herring with respect to Hunt's criticisms of the life criterion.

The third and final point has to do with continuity. Hunt suggests that continuity in nature makes ethical linedrawing arbitrary: "If there is force in the notion of the continuity of all existence, then where is the justification for marking the ethical demarcation line between the living and the nonliving?" (p. 65). I think it is clear from the foregoing that the justification comes from the noncontingent relations between the concept of ethics or the concept of morality and doing good, between doing good and having interests, and between having interests and being alive. I would only add that, so far as I can see, whether there is continuity or discontinuity between the living and the nonliving is irrelevant. Continuity would at best show that moral considerability trails off into the non-living hand in hand with the criterion of life, not that the two are independent.⁶

So, in conclusion, I must decline to repent. Most of Hunt's worries can be met, I think, in the ways sketched above. I continue to believe that "being alive" is the only plausible and nonarbitrary criterion of moral considerability.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ There seems to be a suggestion here that the need for justification is somehow increased by the phenomenon of continuity—as if sharp lines and strong justifications went together. But this isn't right. The sharpness and justification of the criterion (life) does not require nor is it required by the fact that in nature there is no fine line.