

Mark Coeckelbergh: Growing moral relations: critique of moral status ascription

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In the *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn (1962) famously distinguished between what he called “normal science” and those rare but necessary instances of paradigm shift, when there is a fundamental transformation in the very rules of the game. I do not think it is hyperbole to say that Mark Coeckelbergh’s *Growing Moral Relations: Critique of Moral Status Ascription* is a book that is situated at, and contributes to what can only be described as, a significant paradigm shift in moral thinking. It is, in other words, a real game changer.

The subject of Coeckelbergh’s book is moral status ascription, or more precisely the problem of deciding *who* is morally significant and *what* is not. These two small, seemingly simple words, as Jacques Derrida (2005, p. 80) has reminded us, are not unimportant. They make all the difference, for they distinguish between persons who have moral standing and what are considered to be mere things. This decision (quite literally a cut that is made within the very fabric of existence) is typically enacted and justified on the basis of the intrinsic properties of the entity in question. Coeckelbergh calls this transaction “the properties approach to moral status ascription,” and the book begins with a penetrating analysis and critique of this “normal science.”

The properties approach is rather straight forward and intuitive: “identify one or more morally relevant properties and then find out if the entity in question has them” (p. 14). But as Coeckelbergh insightfully points out, there are at least two persistent problems with this undertaking. First, how does one ascertain which properties are sufficient for moral status? In other words, which one, or ones, count? The

history of moral philosophy can, in fact, be read as something of an on-going debate and competition over this matter with different properties—rationality, speech, consciousness, sentience, suffering, etc.—vying for attention at different times. Second, once the morally significant property has been identified, how can one be certain that a particular entity possesses it, and actually possesses it instead of merely simulating it? This is tricky business, especially because most of the properties that are considered morally relevant are internal mental states that are not immediately accessible or directly observable from the outside. In other words, even if it were possible to decide, once and for all, on the right property or mix of properties for moral standing, we would still be confronted and need to contend with a variant of the “other minds problem.”

The history of moral philosophy can be interpreted as an ongoing (and perhaps even an inconclusive) struggle to respond to and resolve these two problems. And significant developments in the field are often the result of identifying some new criteria of inclusion. This is evident, for example, in animal rights philosophy, which, following the suggestions of Jeremy Bentham (2005), shifted attention from an active ability, like speech or conscious thought, to the passive capability of “Can they suffer?” (p. 283). Similarly recent efforts to address the moral status of machines, like artificial intelligence systems and robots, often propose clever reconstructions of the Turing Test (see Allen et al. 2000; Sparrow 2004) to help ascertain whether an artificial entity actually possesses a particular property or not.

Coeckelbergh, although recognizing the importance of these issues and debates, does not engage the question of moral status at this level. He realizes that this endeavor, although having the weight of tradition behind it, can only produce what G. W. F. Hegel called *schlechte Unendlichkeit*, a bad or spurious infinity that simply turns

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out more of the same. Consequently, Coeckelbergh seeks to move moral thinking beyond this intellectual *cul-de-sac* by proposing an alternative paradigm that proceeds otherwise—where the word “other” indicates another method that is able to accommodate other forms of otherness. Coeckelbergh, therefore, addresses the problem of moral status ascription not by playing according to the rules of the game—what Kuhn would call moral philosophy’s normal science—but by challenging and even changing the terms and conditions of the game itself.

Coeckelbergh’s alternative approach to moral status ascription can be described by three terms: relational, phenomenological, and transcendental. By “relational,” he emphasizes the way moral standing is always and already social, meaning that moral status is not something that is located in the inner recesses of an individual entity but transpires through the interactions and relationships situated between entities. This “relational turn,” which Coeckelbergh skillfully develops by capitalizing on innovations in ecophilosophy, Marxism, and the work of Bruno Latour, Tim Ingold, and others, does not get bogged down trying to resolve the epistemological problems associated with the standard properties approach. Instead it recognizes the way that moral status is socially constructed and operationalized. But Coeckelbergh is not content simply to turn things around. Like Friedrich Nietzsche, he knows that simple inversions (in this case, swapping the relation for the relata) changes little or nothing. So he takes things one step further. Quoting the environmental ethicist Baird Callicott (1989), Coeckelbergh insists that the “relations are prior to the things related” (p. 110). This almost Levinasian gesture is crucial insofar as it undermines the usual way of thinking. It is an anti-Cartesian and post-modern (in the best sense of the word) “intervention.” In Cartesian modernism the individual subject had to be certain of his (and at this time the subject was always gendered male) own being and his own intrinsic properties prior to engaging with others. Coeckelbergh reverses this standard approach. He argues that it is the social that comes first and that the individual subject (an identity construction that is literally thrown under or behind), only coalesces out of the relationship and the assignments of rights and responsibilities that it makes possible.

This relational turn in moral thinking is clearly a game changer. But like all conceptual innovations of this type, it is necessarily and unavoidably exposed to reappropriation and domestication by the dominant system it confronts and contests. And Coeckelbergh knows this. In fact, he explicitly recognizes and points out that the relational approach always runs the risk of “ontologicalization,” where the relation is turned into just another kind of relata. For this reason, he insists on the second descriptive term, “phenomenological.” Coeckelbergh’s “relationalism”

(a word that he uses to characterize his own position) is phenomenological insofar as it is concerned with what appears within the space and time of social reality and not with the usual metaphysical suspects, that is, those essential features that are commonly assumed to subsist “behind” or “underneath” the phenomena. “What matters, morally speaking, is not what the entity in question *is*, but how the entity appears” (p. 24) and how it has been situated and functions within a particular social ecology. Coeckelbergh, therefore, develops an approach to moral status that is not interested in probing the profound metaphysical depths of the *Ding-an-sich*. Instead his approach is and can be radically superficial. Understood in this way, moral status is not rooted in the ontology of an individual entity. It is something that is encountered and decided on the basis of “how we experience and construct the entity, how it appears to our consciousness and how we give it reality, meaning and status” (p. 25).

As innovative as this appears, Coeckelbergh recognizes that this strategy cannot be credited as a new moral ontology. In fact, as he argues, “the relational approach can only constitute an attractive alternative paradigm if it is not understood as an alternative moral ontology, in the sense of a better description of moral reality” (p. 6). In an effort to avoid the pitfalls of this kind of “dogmatic interpretation” that would effectively eviscerate the innovations of the moral-relational project, Coeckelbergh adds a third term to his characterization, “transcendental.” Coeckelbergh’s project is transcendental, in the strict Kantian sense of the term. He is, therefore, not interested in making indubitable claims about the true nature of moral reality but is concerned with tracking and exhibiting the condition for possibility of moral status ascription. For this reason, the operative question is not “What is moral status?” but “What are the conditions for an entity to appear as having a certain moral status?” or “What are the conditions for moral status ascription/construction?” (p. 7). And in the second half of the book, Coeckelbergh takes up and investigates a number of contributing factors: language and the way moral status not only has a particular linguistic form but is already partially given in and by language, socio-cultural structures that already inform and influence the way we encounter and contend with others, material and bodily conditions that place very real restrictions on what is possible and constitute the very matter of things, moral geographic patterns of domestication and alienation endemic to the colonial and postcolonial legacy of Western thought, and spiritual conditions whether formulated in religious or secular terms. In pursuing these transcendental conditions of possibility, Coeckelbergh seeks to account for the diverse constellation of forces that both make moral status ascription possible and also limit the range and reach of moral discourse.

Coeckelbergh tackles all of these items with remarkable insight, knowledge, and dexterity. The analyses he provides are insightful and detailed without losing sight of the big picture. The sequence and structure of the chapters is logical and organized without ever becoming formulaic or risking predictability. And the list of scholars he mobilizes in this effort is wide-ranging and includes major figures from both the analytic and continental traditions. If there is one thing that I could say by way of criticism of this thoroughly impressive work, it would only be a “sin of omission.” Despite the fact that Coeckelbergh is able to marshal an inspiring list of thinkers—Diogenes, Plato, Kant, Marx, Heidegger, Searle, Wittgenstein, Latour, etc.—one name is absent, Emmanuel Levinas. This is unfortunate, because so much of what Coeckelbergh develops under the rubric of his relational/phenomenological approach resonates with Levinas’s ethics of otherness. The pivotal Levinasian (1969) claim that “ethics proceeds ontology” is, for instance, remarkably close to and shares important points of contact with Coeckelbergh’s insistence that “the relations are ‘prior’ to the relata” (p. 45).

This is not to say that Levinas somehow trumps Coeckelbergh. In fact, Levinas’s philosophy has its own set of problems, not the least of which is its virtually unquestioned allegiance to humanism and the residue of a human exceptionalism that has the unfortunate effect of excluding both animals and machines from moral consideration. Unlike Levinas, Coeckelbergh’s *Grown Moral Relations* is, in fact, able to accommodate and make a place for these others. For this reason, Levinasian thought not only can be used to bolster Coeckelbergh’s relationalism by supplying additional evidence and perspective, but, and perhaps more importantly, Coeckelbergh’s text can provide critical perspective on and a useful corrective to Levinas’s humanism.

In conclusion, Mark Coeckelbergh has provided a penetrating analysis of moral status that does not simply

seek to challenge or even expand the circle of inclusion. Instead his book critiques the standard operating presumptions of moral status ascription and proposes an innovative alternative that is able to circumvent many of the problems that have plagued the individual properties approach typically employed to decide these matters. For this reason, *Growing Moral Relations* is a book that should be of interest to a wide and diverse audience. It clearly has a great deal to contribute to recent debates concerning the contested ethical status of others, especially those other kinds of others, like animals, the environment, and the increasingly intelligent machines of our own making. But it also provides an opportunity for perceptive critical reflection on the history of moral philosophy, the standard approach to moral status ascription, and the problems endemic to this legacy system.

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