CHAPTER 12

A Relational Approach to Moral Standing: Reframing Ethical Boundaries in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

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Introduction

The question of moral standing—for example, deciding who or what is deserving of moral consideration—is central to contemporary ethical theory. Traditional frameworks for determining these matters have often relied on anthropocentric and essentialist criteria, properties such as rationality, sentience, and species membership (Singer 1975). These views tend to limit moral consideration to a narrow category of beings, excluding nonhuman animals, marginalized human groups, and nonbiological entities like artificial intelligence (AI) and robots. In contrast, the relational approach to moral standing, developed by Mark Coeckelbergh and David

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J. Gunkel, redefines moral consideration as arising from the nature of relationships between entities rather than from fixed attributes (Coeckelbergh 2012; Gunkel 2012).

This chapter provides an introduction to and overview of this relational approach to moral standing, emphasizing the critical shift in ethical thinking that it develops and deploys. By focusing on interactions, relationships, and context, Gunkel and Coeckelbergh provide a more inclusive and dynamic framework for moral consideration—one that can respond to and take responsibility for others and other forms of morally significant otherness. The chapter will explore the theoretical foundations of the relational approach, assess its strengths, address potential criticisms, and conclude with suggestions for future research to further refine and apply this approach—including links to work in sociology.

The Relational Approach to Moral Standing: Overview and Theoretical Foundations

Beyond the Properties Approach

The relational approach to moral standing, as articulated by Coeckelbergh and Gunkel, challenges traditional essentialist frameworks by rejecting the idea that moral status is inherent in and derived from certain ontological or psychological properties belonging to an entity, such as consciousness, sentience, rationality, and so on. Standard approaches to deciding the question of moral status typically proceed, as Coeckelbergh (2012, 14) has demonstrated in *Growing Moral Relations*, by following a rather simple decision-making process, which he calls the "properties approach":

1. Property *P* is sufficient for moral status *S*
2. Entity *E* has property *P*
3. Entity *E* has moral status *S*

In this transaction, we first determine what property or set of properties are sufficient for something to have a particular claim to moral recognition and respect. We then investigate whether an entity actually possesses that property or not. Finally, and by applying the criteria decided in step one to the entity identified in step two, it is possible to determine whether this entity can have a claim to moral status or is to be regarded as a mere thing.

On this account, then, the question regarding moral status is firmly anchored in and justified by the essential nature or being of the entity that is determined to possess them. In this transaction, what something *is* determines how it *ought* to be treated. Or to put it in more formalistic terminology: ontology precedes and determines social, moral, and even legal status.

This way of thinking raises a number of epistemological problems. How do we know that a particular class of entities deserves a particular moral status? And how do we know that the entity in question actually possesses the qualifying property or set of properties? The traditional approach is vulnerable to these skeptic responses. These are especially relevant in cases where there is doubt about an entity's moral status and/or that entity's properties, or where there is criticism of the traditional categories. For instance, why, exactly, does a particular AI lack sentience? And is it not problematic to suppose that humans are on top of the moral hierarchy, being authorized somehow to decide about the moral status of all other entities?

The relational approach flips the script on the standard way of thinking. In this case, moral status is decided and conferred not on the basis of subjective or internal properties determined in advance but according to objectively observable, extrinsic social relationships. As we encounter and interact with others—whether they be another human person, a nonhuman animal, or a seemingly intelligent machine—it is first and foremost experienced in relationship to us. Consequently, the question of moral status does not depend on what the other is in its essence but on how it stands in relationship to us and how we decide to respond and take responsibility for the mode of responding.

This means that the order of precedence in moral decision-making is reversed. Internal properties do not come first, and then moral respect follows from this ontological fact. We have had things backward. We have projected the morally relevant properties onto or into those others who we have already decided to treat as beings that are socially and morally significant. In social situations, then, we always and already decide between *who* counts as morally significant and *what* does not and then retroactively justify these actions by "finding" the essential properties that we believe motivated this decision-making in the first place. Thus, properties, according to this view, are not the intrinsic prior condition for moral status. They are products of extrinsic social interactions with and in the face of others. They are, in other words, the outcome and not the starting point. Or to

give it a Humean spin (Hume 1980; Hudson 1969): whereas standard forms of Western ethics (virtue ethics, consequentialism, deontology) derive the moral *ought* from a prior *is*, the relational approach reverses the direction of the derivation.

One Approach; Different Theoretical Angles

While Coeckelbergh and Gunkel largely agree on what it means to have a relational approach, they partly come at it from different theoretical angles and have different points of emphasis. Gunkel, inspired by Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, and others, often uses the language of otherness to talk about the moral standing of nonhuman "others." In order to provoke discussion about this topic, he has—following the example of a generation of post-Levinasian ethicists (Benso 2000; Calarco 2008; Derrida 2008)—advocated for opening up the Levinasian category of "other" to other forms of socially significant otherness, including technological artifacts, robots, and artificial intelligence (Gunkel 2007, 2012, 2014, 2018). This effort has now culminated in what is the third book in his Machine Question trilogy—*Person, Thing, Robot: A Moral and Legal Ontology for the 21st Century and Beyond* (2023)—which deconstructs the person/thing dichotomy that has been the main organizing principle of Western moral and legal philosophy.

Coeckelbergh has put less emphasis on the moral standing of machines and has come to the topic from a partly different theoretical background. He argued for a transcendental approach that sees not only social relations but also language and technology as "conditions of possibility" for what he calls "moral status ascription" (Coeckelbergh 2012): at the moment when we ascribe moral status, our view of the entity is already shaped by preexisting social relations, linguistic frameworks (language games), and technological operations. More recently (and taking up the point about language again), he has also outlined a performative way of expressing the relational approach (Coeckelbergh 2023), partly inspired by theories of performativity in philosophy of language. Language, in his view, co-creates moral status by means of moral status declarations. We do not only recognize moral status we find in the world but also perform and reperform it within a world that is always already social and mediated by language. This is yet another way to achieve a more-relational and less-static approach to moral standing.

Strengths of the Relational Approach

The relational approach offers several compelling advantages over traditional ethical frameworks:

Flexibility, Dynamism, and Situational Ethics

One of the key strengths of the relational approach is its flexibility. It allows for the moral consideration of a wider range of entities by emphasizing context, interdependence, and interaction. Rather than relying on rigid criteria, the approach adapts to the evolving nature of moral relationships, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of moral responsibility (Coeckelbergh 2020). Instead of applying fixed ethical principles, the relational approach sees moral standing as emerging from interactions rather than being predetermined by intrinsic properties such as consciousness and intelligence. This allows for situational flexibility, where moral responsibilities depend on the relation to the entity. Moreover, instead of categorizing entities into strict and fixed moral categories (such as person vs. thing), the relational approach is sensitive and open to different contexts. Meaning, agency, and moral consideration are co-constructed through relationships, for example human–animal relationships or human–technology relationships. This enables the relational approach to allow for evolution in time as social norms, cultural expectations, and technological capabilities change and have always been in flux.

Inclusivity: Avoiding Anthropocentric Bias

The relational approach avoids the anthropocentric bias that has traditionally plagued ethics, including decisions regarding moral consideration. The approach allows for ascribing moral status to nonhuman animals and even for considering what was previously seen as unthinkable: asking the question regarding the rights of robots and AI (Gunkel 2012). In this sense, the relational approach, as developed by Coeckelbergh and Gunkel, is in line with (critical) posthumanism, which also argues for the inclusion of nonhumans into our moral and political world. By focusing on the relational nature of moral standing, the relational approach thus provides a more inclusive framework, addressing entities that have traditionally been the excluded other of Western moral philosophy, such as nonhuman animals, ecosystems, and artificial intelligences. These entities may not meet

the traditional criteria for moral consideration, but the relational approach suggests that their interactions with humans and other beings *could* give rise to moral duties and obligations.

Avoidance of Hierarchy, Hegemony, and Domination

Traditional essentialist views have often led to exclusionary practices, using characteristics like consciousness or rationality to justify the abuse and marginalization of certain beings (Singer 1975). Hierarchies based on intrinsic properties have been imposed on entities that were considered as having subhuman status. By rejecting these fixed traits in favor of dynamic relationships, the relational approach avoids perpetuating these hierarchical models, promoting a more egalitarian and context-sensitive understanding of moral standing. If moral standing is not dependent on preexisting qualities but emerges from relationships, then this enables us to question and disrupt assumptions regarding human supremacy. Humans need not be the moral reference point.

In so doing, the relational approach deliberately interrupts human exceptionalism by recognizing the diverse ways that moral significance arises out of different kinds of relationships and interactions. It therefore criticizes the traditional ways in which moral worth has been imposed and legislated. Moral status ascription has typically been shaped by social power dynamics, where certain groups have the power and privilege to dictate moral standing while others have been marginalized and consequently excluded from the moral and political realm. The relational approach thus enables the questioning and interruption of colonial, patriarchal, and technocratic power structures, replacing domination based on one-way imposition with mutual recognition based on relations and interactions.

More generally, the relational approach not only enables us to critically reflect on the standing of moral patients and moral objects but also turns our critical gaze to the moral agents and moral subjects—in other words, to us, to human moral thinking and the ethics of human practices. While initially developed as a way to better address the issue regarding the moral standing of nonhumans, the approach is not only about animals, AI, or robots, but also about humans and the way they think about, and relate to, others. Perhaps more than the properties approach, it functions as a mirror that reflects how we morally relate to other entities—including humans.

Criticisms of the Relational Approach

Despite its strengths, the relational approach has faced several important criticisms. In this section, we briefly characterize two of the most common and prevalent ones and provide our responses.

Relativism

One criticism is that by making moral standing contingent on social contexts and relationships, the relational approach risks vulnerability to the charge of moral relativism. Critics like Vincent Müller (2021), Kęstutis Mosakas (2021), and Anna Puzio (2024) argue that without fixed criteria for moral standing, the relational approach may undermine moral consistency, leading to subjective or inconsistent moral judgments across different contexts. The perceived problem with relativism is that it encourages and supports a situation where, it seems, anything goes and all things are permitted. But as both Gunkel and Coeckelbergh have argued in other contexts (Gunkel 2018; Coeckelbergh 2020, 2023), this particular understanding of "relative" is limited and the product of a culturally specific understanding of, and expectation for, ethics.

Robert Scott (1967), for instance, understands "relativism" otherwise. He sees it as a positive rather than negative term: "Relativism, supposedly, means a standardless society, or at least a maze of differing standards, and thus a cacophony of disparate, and likely selfish, interests. Rather than a standardless society, which is the same as saying no society at all, relativism indicates circumstances in which standards have to be established cooperatively and renewed repeatedly" (Scott 1967, 264). Charles Ess (2009, 21) calls this alternative "ethical pluralism," which he distinguishes from "relativism" strictly speaking: "Pluralism stands as a third possibility—one that is something of a middle ground between absolutism and relativism. Ethical pluralism requires us to think in a 'both/and' sort of way, as it conjoins both shared norms and their diverse interpretations and applications in different cultures, times, and places."

Coeckelbergh (2023) has argued that moral status that is established performatively and relationally also has a kind of stability since it then becomes a social fact. Within a particular social and cultural context, it is not the case that anything goes or is a matter of what individuals believe, think, or want. In addition, within a particular linguistic community only some linguistic utterances about moral status will make sense; this also

puts limits on what can be said and done about moral status within a particular context. Coeckelbergh's argument also relies on pragmatism to question moral fundamentalism: according to this view, moral status does not exist in a separate eternal realm of value as opposed to a realm of facts, but is a problem that we need to resolve in a social situation. While this position differs from Nietzschean perspectivism (which is arguably more radical), it also allows us to criticize hegemonic forms of exclusion and abuse in the name of moral fundamentalism.

Others, like Rosi Braidotti, call upon and mobilize a form of non-Western perspectivism, which exceed the grasp of Western epistemology. "Perspectivism," as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2015, 24) explains in his work with Amerindian traditions, "is not relativism, that is the affirmation of the relativity of truth, but relationalism, through which one can affirm the truth of the relative is the relation." For this reason, Braidotti (2019, 90) finds that perspectivism is not just different from but is "the antidote to relativism." "This methodology," as she explains, "respects different viewpoints from equally materially embedded and embodied locations that express the degree of power and quality of experience of different subjects." Braidotti therefore recognizes that what is called "truth" is always formulated and operationalized from a particular subject position, which is dynamic, different, and diverse.

The task, then, is not to escape from these differences in order to occupy some fantastic transcendental vantage point but to learn how to take responsibility for these inescapable alterations in embodied perspectives and their diverse social, moral, and material consequences. The relational turn, therefore, does not endorse relativism (as it is typically defined) but embodies and operationalizes an ethical pluralism, relationalism, or perspectivism that complicates the simple binary logic that defines relativism in opposition to moral absolutism.

The Return of the Properties

The second major criticism concerns what might be called "residual properties" and is related to the challenge of rendering the approach practically applicable. There have been at least three different versions of this criticism developed in the recent literature on the subject. In his essay "An Outline of Enactive Relationalism in the Philosophy of Robotics," Abootaleb Safdari argues that relationalism—especially as it has been formulated by Coeckelbergh—remains "superficial." "By superficial," as

Safdari (2025, 15) explains, "I mean that Coeckelbergh's version risks implicitly slipping back into the same properties-based approach that it originally aimed to avoid." In other words, the relational turn is essentially incomplete and therefore, to borrow a phrase introduced by Puzio (2024), "not relational enough."

A similar criticism has been advanced by Sætra (2021, 7): "My second objection is that relationalism is in reality a camouflaged variety of the properties-based approach. This is so because how we relate to other entities is determined by the properties of these others." In other words, the relational turn can say that it puts relations before relata and makes determinations about moral status dependent on "how something is treated, and not what it is" (Sætra 2021, 6). But this is just patently false, because properties still matter. "How we relate to someone, and how an entity acts, is dependent on their properties."

Finally, Sven Nyholm (2020) argues that even if the conceptual inversion instituted by the relational turn is persuasive and probably correct, properties still play an important role in shaping the relationship.

> I think that Gunkel is probably right that we typically do not attribute purely descriptive, nonmoral properties to others first, and then, only after that, reason our way to what forms of moral consideration we think is appropriate … However, I do not think that this shows that properties—and in particular mental properties—do not play an important role in determining what type of treatment or interaction is morally appropriate in relation to those around us. (Nyholm 2020, 197–198)

All three criticisms proceed on the assumption that the relational turn either wants to do without or even needs to purge itself of properties. But this is a mistake. The relational turn does not seek to avoid, deny, or completely do without properties. It simply alters their function. As Joshua Gellers has insightfully pointed out, properties are not antithetical to or excluded from relationalism; they are just recontextualized and understood in relational terms. "Coeckelbergh," as Gellers (2020, 19) explains, "does not foreclose the possibility that properties may play a role in a relational approach to moral consideration. Instead, he leaves room for 'properties-as-they-appear-to-us within a social-relational, social-ecological context' (Coeckelbergh 2010, 219)."

This inverts the usual order of things, altering the way properties function in decisions concerning moral status ascription. In moral

philosophy—at least its standard Western varieties—what something is commonly determines how it ought to be treated. According to this largely unchallenged standard operating procedure, the question concerning the status of others—whether they are someone who matters or something that does not—is entirely dependent on and derived from what they are and what properties they possess (or do not possess).

The relational alternatives (which should be written in the plural to indicate that there is not one alternative but a multiplicity of different versions of this alternative) not only challenge this way of thinking but deliberately reverse its procedure. This does not diminish the role of properties it simply inverts the direction of the derivation, for example deriving the *is* from a prior *ought*. Thus, the morally significant properties—those ontological criteria that had been assumed to ground decisions regarding moral respect—are actually what Slavoj Žižek (2008, 209) calls "retroactively (presup)posited" as the result of and as justification for prior decisions made in the face of social involvements and interactions with others. Consequently, even before we know anything at all about what something is in its essence (e.g. what properties it has, can have, or does not possess), we have already been called upon and obligated to make a decisive response.

To formulate it in Kantian terms, we can say that what something is in itself—*das Ding an sich*—is forever inaccessible insofar as all we ever have access to is how something appears to be relative to us. Whatever we think it is in-itself is the result of something we project onto or into it after the fact. Thus, it is not accurate to conclude, as Sætra does, that "relationalism is in reality a camouflaged variety the properties-based approach." Such a conclusion is possible if and only if one normalizes and naturalizes the standard derivation of "ought" from "is" (Hume 1980; Hudson 1969). It is just as likely—and maybe even more epistemologically honest—to conclude that what is actually an effect of embedded and embodied interactions with others has been mistakenly dressed-up and masquerading as a cause. This means, to repurpose and invert Sætra's objection, that the properties-based approach is (and has actually always and only been) a camouflaged variety of relationalism.

Some Applications of the Relational Approach: Animals, AI, and the Environment

The relational approach offers a robust framework for addressing contemporary questions regarding the moral standing of nonhuman animals, the environment, and technological artifacts:

Animal and Environmental Ethics

The relational approach emphasizes the importance of relationships in determining the moral consideration of nonhuman animals (Nussbaum 2006). Rather than focusing solely on characteristics like sentience or suffering (Singer 1975), the approach highlights the ethical significance of the relationships human beings have with a wide array of nonhuman animals, such as domestication, environmental stewardship, and interspecies interaction.

An example of an application to this area is Coeckelbergh and Gunkel's (2014) paper "Facing Animals," which exemplifies a relational, other-oriented approach to moral status. Criticizing the assumptions shared by thinkers such as Peter Singer and Tom Regan, the paper mobilizes Levinas, Heidegger, and Derrida to argue that we should alter the question from "What properties does the animal have?" to "What are the conditions under which an entity becomes a moral subject?" The question, then, is not "Can they suffer," as Bentham (1780) put it; the ethical question arises in the concrete relation to the animal. My exposure to the animal as other is ethically prior to whatever ontological properties it might have (or lack). We begin, therefore, from the ethical relationship itself and its implications. Using Levinas but going beyond his anthropocentrism, Coeckelbergh and Gunkel talk about "facing animals" as an opening to the animal's otherness and the ethical appeal (or challenge) that calls for a responsible response. This way of proceeding, then, asks us to critically reexamine the conditions that deface animals, that exclude them from moral consideration. It is through language, technologies, and (the absence of) social relations we typically make animals into "what–s" instead of "who–s," objects instead of subjects, and things instead of persons. Consider, for instance, industrial agricultural practices that define animals as raw materials for food, clothing, and other products. A relational approach that considers the otherness of entities (Gunkel 2012) and looks into the conditions of possibility of their moral standing

(Coeckelbergh 2012) can thus fill an important critical role, next to exposing the limitations of properties approaches à la Singer.

The relational approach is also applicable to those areas of environmental ethics where the focus is on the relationships between humans and ecosystems (Coeckelbergh 2012). Here, moral standing arises from the interdependencies between humans and the natural world, which challenge traditional views that place human interests above environmental concerns (Nussbaum 2006; Singer 1975). In fact, the very possibility of an environmental ethics provides for a more substantive challenge to the properties approach, since the usual list of morally significant qualities and capabilities—such as consciousness, sentience, and rationality—does not apply to mountains, rivers, and forests (though there are some developments in plant science that have recently introduced interesting and important complications to this seemingly commonsense verdict; see Schlanger 2024). Consequently, environmental ethics unlike animal ethics has, from the very beginning, needed to be formulated in relational terms (Gunkel 2012, 143–144), and other researchers, responding to these opportunities/challenges, have taken up and further developed an explicitly formulated relational approach to environmental ethics (see Gellers 2020 and Puzio 2024).

Artificial Intelligence and Robots

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence has raised ethical questions about the moral status of these entities. Following the standard operating procedure for deciding these matters, researchers have responded to these questions by mobilizing the usual batch of intrinsic properties such as consciousness, sentience, or rationality. Consequently, the questions that have typical been asked in the face of seemingly intelligent machines include ones like the following: Does a particular AI have sentience? Is it conscious? Does the AI have interests that need protecting? A good example of how this properties-based approach is already being mobilized for AI can be seen in Jeff Sebo's *The Moral Circle* (2025), which argues for the moral status of AI, or what he calls "AI welfare," based on the capacity—or even just a high probability of the capacity—for sentience.

In *Person, Thing, Robot* (Gunkel 2023) and earlier in *Robot Rights* (Gunkel 2018), Gunkel not only identifies persistent and seemingly irreducible problems with this properties based decision-making procedure but demonstrates how the moral and legal standing of robots and AI can

and should be determined by the roles they occupy and play in human society. Thus—and counter to the essentialist arguments made by Sebo and others—moral status is not something inherent to the AI because of its capabilities (or lack thereof) but is a socially constructed recognition that emerges from the relationships in which it is situated and operates. Consequently, the moral significance of an artifact, like a robot or an AI system, is dependent upon and derived from its integration into social reality and the responsibilities humans have toward these entities (Coeckelbergh 2010). What ultimately matters is how we interact with these technologies and perceive them. Gunkel has therefore criticized views of the moral status of machines that a priori exclude considering that they might have—or that we might need them to have—moral status as well as social responsibilities and rights.

Coeckelbergh emphasizes the social and phenomenological aspects as moral standing depends on human subjectivity in important ways. In "The Moral Standing of Machines" (Coeckelbergh 2014), he has argued that moral status depends on human language use and human thinking in a specific cultural and historical context; it is thus about a relation between moral subject and moral object. To assert, for instance, that an AI is "just a machine" neglects these complex ways in which moral standing is constructed. Based on his use of the later Wittgenstein, Coeckelbergh has argued that our moral experience of machines is shaped by our form of life: the specific way our culture constructs machines. He has therefore questioned the Western (in particular Cartesian) obsession with keeping up distinctions between humans and machines and has, like Gunkel (2023), explored non-Western and nonmodern approaches. For example, Cocekelbergh has explored what it would mean to create a robot that would be embedded in Umbuntu culture (Coeckelbergh 2022) and Gunkel (2023) has called upon the insights and wisdom of various indigenous traditions that focus on our shared kinship with the machines (Lewis et al. 2018).

Future Directions for Research

The relational approach to moral standing as developed by Coeckelbergh and Gunkel opens several avenues for future research:

First, more fundamental research is needed to better understand and improve the ways we ascribe, think about, and decide questions of moral

standing and moral status in general. The relational approach is not only relevant within moral philosophy at large but also engages us in a potentially dangerous, albeit highly interesting set of philosophical problems that go beyond moral philosophy narrowly defined and reach into metaphysics, philosophy of language, epistemology, political philosophy, and other related domains. For over two millennia, Western philosophy has operated on the assumption that metaphysic is "first philosophy", thus relegating ethics to a secondary position as a kind of applied philosophical thinking. The critical interventions released by the "relational turn" also turn this tradition on its head, making ethics first philosophy (see Levinas 1969).

Second, the relational approach to moral standing as developed by Gunkel and Coeckelbergh can be brought into further dialogue with other approaches within philosophy that call themselves relational, for example—but not limited to—feminism, posthumanism, Eastern philosophy, indigenous thinking, and so on. As indicated previously, some of these conversations have been started, also by Coeckelbergh and Gunkel, but more work can and should be done in this direction.

Third, as technologies like AI, biotechnology, and synthetic life continue to evolve, further research is needed to refine how the relational approach can account for these new developments. Specifically, research could explore how robotic entities or artificial life forms can be integrated into ethical and political frameworks without resorting to traditional essentialist and human-centred criteria. The need for this kind of innovative thinking has already been identified by both moral philosophers and legal scholars (Pietrzykowski 2018; Kurki 2019; Beckers and Teubner 2021).

Fourth, the relational approach offers a promising framework for addressing global environmental challenges. Research could further explore how more attention to the moral relevance of interdependent relationships between human beings, ecosystems, and the biosphere can inform more sustainable and ethical environmental practices. So far, for example, the relational approach has not been applied to respond to the problems of climate change. The alternative moral framework offered by Gunkel and Coeckelbergh could provide a more substantive and successful means for addressing and responding to these epoch-defining challenges.

Finally, relational ethics needs to become a fully interdisciplinary subject. So far work in this domain has been largely limited to moral theory. It

would therefore be important and useful to foster more interdisciplinary work on the question regarding moral standing from a relational perspective. Especially important here would be empirical investigations that study how different human subjects actually construct moral status and decide about the social significance and standing of others. Conducting this research would require combining theoretical work in philosophy with more practical efforts in the social sciences, including sociological work on interactions with machines, the institutional context of ethics, cultural variations, the question of power, and thinking about how to include nonhumans in our moral and political world and how to (re)integrate the natural and the social (see, for instance, Latour 1993 and Stengers 2010). There is already some evidence of success with these efforts (Küster et al. 2020; Banks 2021; Lima et al. 2021), but there is clearly a wide range of opportunities that have yet to be developed and pursued. Additionally, future work could (and should) also focus on how the relational approach can be applied to legal and policy contexts, where practical decisions about the moral/legal standing of entities often need to be made. Consequently, research is needed to begin bridging the gap between heady ethical theory and pragmatic policy implementation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the relational approach to moral standing as articulated by David J. Gunkel and Mark Coeckelbergh offers a novel, dynamic, context-sensitive, and power-sensitive alternative to traditional essentialist views of moral consideration. By emphasizing the significance of relationships, interactions, and performances, the relational approach provides a more inclusive and flexible framework for thinking about moral status. Although it faces criticisms, particularly regarding the risk of relativism, the role of properties, and its practical application, Coeckelbergh and Gunkel's responses demonstrate the approach's potential for addressing contemporary practical moral challenges, particularly in the fields of AI and robotics, animal ethics, and environmentalism. Consequently, the potential reach of this theory goes beyond philosophical questions regarding moral standing and provides us with a robust moral framework that can respond to, and take responsibility for, the opportunities and challenges of the twenty-first century and beyond.

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