

Moral Status. Obligations to Persons and Other Living Things,
by Mary Anne Warren (Oxford University Press, 1997)

Reviewed by Richard Joyce in *Philosophical Books* 40 (1999)
[penultimate draft]

Warren's goal is to present a 'multi-criterial' account of moral status—she eschews any view that holds 'X has moral status iff X has N' (where 'N' might be *life*, or *personhood*, or *sentience*, for example). Moral status, she asserts, is a more complex affair: it comes in degrees and there are a variety of sufficient conditions. The first part of the book (roughly three quarters of it) is devoted to outlining some standard 'uni-lateral' accounts, criticising them in so far as they purport to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for status, but selecting the plausible parts of each to come together later in the multi-criterial account.

The culmination of the project is seven principles concerning what entities get moral status and how much they get. The first principle, for example, holds that "living organisms are not to be killed or otherwise harmed, without good reasons" (reasons that do not violate the later principles). The second principle focuses on *sentience*, which also brings moral status, but rather more than mere life—one needs better reasons, in other words, for killing a dog than one does for killing a spider. Being a 'moral agent' brings even greater status ("full status", in fact). Later principles are brought in to cover special cases: severely mentally disabled humans, species close to extinction, domesticated animals, etc. The final quarter of the book presents the application of the multi-criterial approach to three contested areas of moral dispute: euthanasia, abortion, and our treatment of animals.

Moral status is a deontological concept—it is the basis of our having obligations *to* a being, as opposed to merely having obligations *regarding* that being—yet a great many of Warren's arguments for what will have moral status are *consequentialist* arguments. Species threatened by extinction, for example, ought to be given moral status, because we are likely to treat them with a more profound respect than if we were to make consequentialist calculations concerning our treatment of them. If we treat them with profound respect, the reasoning continues, then we are more likely to protect and restore their place in the eco-system, which is vital if humans are to "survive and flourish" (p. 168).

Moral status is, in Warren's hands, a kind of magical moral dust that we can spread at will over individuals, species and eco-systems. The reasons for where it ought to be spread are practical in nature, but the effect of the dust, once it settles, is to endow beings with a shield against consequentialist calculations to their detriment. (Of course, the shield may provide only partial protection: your status may be violated for the interests of a creature with greater status.) The extent of this pragmatic approach is revealed when Warren discusses environmental issues. Moral status is accorded not merely to any living individual, but to anything contributing significantly to the eco-system. So species, collectively, may have status, as may mountains and rivers (even "crystals and unusual rock formations" are contemplated (p. 175)). A species that is on the brink of extinction will be accorded extra status, which, presumably, will be downgraded if the species starts to thrive or becomes an environmental nuisance.

The methodology of the book is, unfortunately, never brought clearly to the surface, and its background presence brings a variety of worries. Warren can be read as addressing the question ‘Which things ought we to believe have moral status?’ There are two sorts of justification for a belief: evidential and instrumental. In the former case, my belief that *p* is justified by my having good evidence that *p*; in the latter case, belief-formation is treated as an action along with more familiar actions: if someone offers me a million dollars to believe *p*, then, *ceteris paribus*, I am justified in believing *p*. Warren’s book is lacking in arguments that spiders (etc.) *actually have* moral status so we ought to believe it; rather, we get a lot of pragmatic arguments for why having the belief that they have moral status will be in our best interests. But it is far from clear that, even if her pragmatic arguments concerning spiders are sound, one is free just to form that belief. (And if one did, would that belief be *true*?)

Perhaps one can have true, evidentially-justified beliefs about what has moral status, in the sense that one can have good evidence that ‘the moral dust has been scattered here’. But then what, exactly, *is* the status that is conferred—legislation on our behavior, perhaps? Dramatically lacking in such an account is a sense of being *bound* by another creature’s moral standing—and that, surely, is the whole point of having the concept of moral status. If a thing actually *has* moral status, then I actually *am* morally obligated to behave in certain ways. But if its status is merely something which a consensus has ruled it ought to be accorded, then I am bound only in so far as it has been decided that I am bound, and in so far as I may be punished if I violate that status. Such a status may be important, but I have my doubts that it deserves to be called *moral*.