

Genetic Enhancement, Post-persons, and Moral Status: Author reply to commentaries

David DeGrazia

I am grateful to the journal for commissioning commentaries by Allen Buchanan,¹ Nicholas Agar,² James Wilson and Thomas Douglas,^{3,4} and to those authors for their thoughtful remarks. In this brief reply, I respond to them in turn.

Buchanan remains doubtful that there could be post-persons in the sense of beings who might plausibly be regarded as having higher moral status than (mere) persons. According to Buchanan, moral status is a threshold concept, and the property one needs in order to reach the threshold is accountability for reasons. He makes a decent case for his claim that dogs are not accountable for reasons *at all* and that persons are. Although I am sceptical that the most immature persons are significantly accountable for reasons and that there is a meaningful break between them and the most cognitively complex non-persons, here I set these doubts aside. Importantly, Buchanan claims that accountability for reasons is the only property that matters for the possession of moral status. (Note that on his view—and in his terminology, which differs from mine—dogs have moral *standing* in virtue of being sentient, but only persons have full and equal moral *status* in virtue of being accountable.) This claim strikes me as somewhat arbitrary and perhaps ad hoc as well. Consider alternative criteria that philosophers have suggested as the basis for full and equal moral status: temporal self-awareness, agency, the capacity for symbolic thought, and moral agency in a broader sense than simply accountability for reasons. These criteria seem no less plausible than Buchanan's for undergirding our moral status—assuming, for the moment, that the latter is closely connected with personhood and that sentience is insufficient—yet a wealth of empirical data suggest that the relevant characteristics come in various forms and

different degrees, and that many animals have them to some degree.⁵ The imagined post-persons, meanwhile, may have equal justification for picking out a property such as excellence or reliability in moral agency as the basis for a moral status higher than that possessed by persons.

Buchanan's commentary contains a reply to this idea: '... the moral difference between beings that have the capacity for accountability for reasons and those that do not is of a profoundly different sort than differences among beings as to how well they can exercise the capacity'. This is to say that only a difference in *kind*, as opposed to a difference in *degree*, can justify a threshold. One might doubt this. It is not self-evident that a huge difference in degree of some relevant property cannot underlie different levels of moral status, at least where there are no intermediate beings filling in the gulf. But, even if we accept Buchanan's implicit insistence on a difference in kind, post-persons might conceptualise the relevant difference as indeed being one of kind. They might, for example, maintain that they are genuine moral agents, whereas persons are not, using the term 'moral' as a sort of success term that applies only to beings who consistently act morally. Thus I do not think we have to accept Buchanan's thesis that accountability for reasons delineates the one and only threshold relevant to moral status.

In his commentary, Agar asserts that we are incapable of understanding criteria for a higher plane of moral status. Why should we accept this assertion? At the very least, we can stipulate criteria that strike us as plausible. The mere possibility of the scenario described in my thought-experiment about post-persons is sufficient to motivate the issues raised in my article.

Agar also suggests that our concept of a person—as comprising certain cognitive properties and grounding moral status—is fairly pliable, stretching 'downward' to include many human beings whose cognitive abilities are considerably below

average; so perhaps it can stretch upward to include those I have characterised as post-persons. His point about the pliability (or perhaps capaciousness is a better metaphor) of our concept of a person is a good one. But, in my thought-experiment, I emphasised that post-persons, after many generations of genetic enhancement, are so superior to persons in their cognitive and moral capacities that they find it natural to perceive a difference in kind between them and unenhanced humanity. Here their perceptions are similar to those of persons who perceive themselves as different in kind from (many if not all) non-human animals. Agar expresses uncertainty as to whether post-persons actually *would* perceive themselves as different in kind from us. But I'm not making a counterfactual claim as to what such beings would actually think; I'm building into the thought-experiment the stipulation that they would have this perception. And I argue that this perception would not be unreasonable, based on the differences between post-persons and persons. Because these differences are so great, they are not comparable to the alleged differences in moral capacity between Agar, on the one hand, and Singer and Kravinsky, on the other. The latter differences are much too small to mark out any difference in kind in moral agency. So I don't see that Agar has cast significant doubt on my arguments.

James Wilson's commentary opens with these words: 'DeGrazia argues that all sentient creatures have the same moral status...'. This, strictly speaking, is true, but it is also misleading. My main assertion was conditional: if we have sufficient reason to assert that persons have higher moral status than sentient non-persons, then the imaginary post-persons would have about as much reason to assert that they have higher moral status than persons. Only very tentatively did I argue in favour of the interests model of moral status, according to which all beings with moral status have it equally. I was, and am, uncertain about the matter.

Wilson goes on to defend what Rawls calls the two moral powers—the capacities for a sense of justice and for a conception of the good—as the basis for full moral status, much as Buchanan defended accountability for reasons as the basis. Like Buchanan, Wilson faces the charge of an arbitrary, ad hoc account of moral status. More importantly for the present discussion, post-persons could reasonably emphasise persons' remarkable deficiencies

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in moral agency and assert that the true criterion for full moral status, which only post-persons satisfy, is the sort of moral agency whose possessors consistently act justly. We human persons would fall far short. Moreover, to flag another issue confronting Wilson, Buchanan, and other proponents of the respect model, many human beings do *not* meet the threshold these theorists suggest as the basis for moral status, yet it seems problematic to regard these human beings as lacking moral status. This well-known problem of non-paradigm humans should not be ignored.

Wilson advances the interesting thesis that, because the interests model of moral status acknowledges some morally important differences between human persons and non-human animals, this model may not require better treatment of animals than the respect model would. Douglas makes the same suggestion. But both authors underestimate the significance of the requirement of the interests model that all beings with moral status are to receive equal moral consideration. That means that their comparable interests (eg, avoiding suffering, freedom of movement) are to be accorded equal moral weight, even if tradeoffs between the interests of different individuals are permitted in consequentialist fashion. The crucial point is that equal consideration, although permitting some tradeoffs, is an extremely equalising moral principle. Very little animal research, for example, could meet this stringent moral standard. By contrast, the respect model, which attributes higher moral status to persons than to sentient non-persons, would accord the latter's interests less moral weight and would therefore justify considerably more use of non-persons for the common good.

The difference between the two models of moral status is also significant in considering the moral relationship between persons and post-persons. This brings us to Douglas' commentary. According to Douglas, even if we reject the respect model—a model that apparently implies that post-persons would have higher moral status than persons—the interests model would similarly allow some differences in treatment between post-persons and persons, to the disadvantage of persons. I agree, but the differences would be much smaller than those justified by the respect model, because the differences in treatment justified by the interests model would have to be consistent with equal consideration: the according of equal moral weight to everyone's comparable interests. From the standpoint of human self-interest, actions and policies that are consistent with the interests model would be preferable to actions and policies consistent with the respect model. For the latter would incorporate a higher plane of moral status for post-persons. Thus their interests would receive greater moral weight than our comparable interests, justifying more sacrifice of our interests for the common good than the interests model would permit.

Douglas goes on, however, to press a distinct and very important issue. Even if it would be disadvantageous for us unenhanced persons if post-persons embraced and acted on the respect model, is that a reason to think this model incorrect? Not exactly. We might find it *counterintuitive* that we could have lower moral status than any other beings and take this judgement as reason to reject the respect model—which generates the counterintuitive implication. But, as

Douglas reminds us, we have to be on the lookout for self-serving moral intuitions, which may masquerade as moral insight while really just reflecting unjustified prejudices. For all I have argued, the respect model may be correct. That it may be disadvantageous to us in certain hypothetical or future scenarios has no bearing on whether it accurately characterises the structure of morality. My argument in favour of the interests model was highly tentative and essentially left the competition between the two models of moral status wide open. My main point was that we should either (1) accept the interests model with its fairly radical moral implications for our treatment of animals or (2) embrace the respect model while acknowledging the implication that there can be beings with higher moral status than persons. We human persons can't have moral status that is both superior and unsurpassable.

Competing interests None.

Provenance and peer review Commissioned; internally peer reviewed.

Accepted 17 November 2011

J Med Ethics 2011; **26**:1–2.
doi:10.1136/medethics-2011-100388

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J Med Ethics published online December 17, 2011
doi: 10.1136/medethics-2011-100388

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