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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The In(significance) of Sentience

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Abstract

This paper challenges the sentientist view, as advanced by the 2024 New York Declaration on Animal Consciousness, that consciousness is the primary ground for moral standing. Drawing on interdisciplinary insights from animal cognition, plant intelligence, artificial intelligence (AI), and Jain ethics, I argue that intelligence, defined as problem-solving and goal-directed behavior, provides a broader and more measurable basis for moral standing across biological and artificial entities. While the Declaration emphasizes sentience for moral consideration, I propose that entities like plants and AI, which may lack consciousness but exhibit goal-directed intelligence, also warrant moral inclusion. Plants demonstrate intelligence through survival-oriented behaviors (e.g., root tropism, chemical defenses), and AI shows comparable capacities via benchmarks like ARC-AGI-2. Engaging with Indian philosophical perspectives from the 2024 AAR meeting, including Jainism's graded moral framework based on senses, I advocate an approach where intelligence grounds moral standing, and capacities like sentience or rationality grade moral status. This framework offers a unified ethical model for diverse entities, from microbes to machines.

Keywords New York Declaration on Animal Consciousness · Animal consciousness · Plant consciousness · AI consciousness · Moral standing · Intelligence · Moral grading · Jainism · Moral ground

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Introduction: the Moral Implications of Consciousness

On April 19, 2024, NYU's Center for Animal Ethics held a visionary workshop on consciousness in non-human animals. They also announced the New York Declaration on Animal Consciousness (the Declaration) (Andrews et al., 2024).

> Which animals have the capacity for conscious experience? While much uncertainty remains, some points of wide agreement have emerged.
>
> First, there is strong scientific support for attributions of conscious experience to other mammals and to birds.
>
> Second, the empirical evidence indicates at least a realistic possibility of conscious experience in all vertebrates (including reptiles, amphibians, and fishes) and many invertebrates (including, at minimum, cephalopod mollusks, decapod crustaceans, and insects).
>
> Third, when there is a realistic possibility of conscious experience in an animal, it is irresponsible to ignore that possibility in decisions affecting that animal. We should consider welfare risks and use the evidence to inform our responses to these risks.

Overall, the Declaration was well received. *The Times* (Whipple, 2024), *The Hill* (Elbein, 2024), *Quanta Magazine* (Falk, 2024), *NBC News* (Bush, 2024) and *Nature* (Lenharo, 2024), to name just a few, discussed the potential inner lives of non-human animals, including exploring the moral implications of ignoring the potential consciousness of non-human animals. Inquiring into the nature of consciousness: what it is, where it is present, how and why it arises, is a leading question of our time. It is perhaps one of the greatest questions of all time.

In 2020, I asked in *The Conversation*: Given the continued rapid advances in the field of artificial intelligence, why is it the case that consciousness of any kind is necessary for moral consideration? Why can't entities without consciousness be in the moral sphere? (Vaidya, 2020)

While the Declaration suggests there is a good chance that many animals are conscious and therefore deserve moral standing, the prospects for AI consciousness are less clear, I advocate here a graded position: conscious things may matter more, but non-conscious entities also have moral standing.

As I further detail (Vaidya, in press) it is not sentience but preferentially tied computational intelligence (PTCI) that grounds moral standing in biological or artificial systems. Capacities like sentience or rationality may grade moral status. Drawing on the Declaration, studies of animals, plants, AI, and Jain ethics, I propose a framework inclusive of non-conscious entities. Section "Defining Moral Standing: Intelligence Over Sentience" defines moral standing and argues for intelligence as its ground; Section "Engaging Indian Philosophy and AI Perspectives" engages perspectives from the *Indian Philosophy and AI* session in the American Academy of Religion's

(AAR, 2025) annual meeting held November 2024; Section "Conclusion" concludes with a unified framework.

Defining Moral Standing: Intelligence Over Sentience

Moral Grounding vs. Moral Grading

To explore the capacity for consciousness and its relationship to moral standing, I distinguish two questions:

1. *Moral Grounding Question*: what features are necessary and sufficient for being a member of the moral sphere, deserving consideration for welfare risks?
2. *Moral Grading Question*: if *x* and *y* are both members of the moral sphere, what features give *x* or *y* has greater moral standing?

The Declaration's *sentientism* argues:

1. Entities deserve moral considerations with respect to welfare risks if there is a realistic chance that they are conscious.
2. Many non-human animals, vertebrates (including reptiles, amphibians, and fish) and many invertebrates (including, at a minimum, cephalopod mollusks, decapod crustaceans, and insects) have a realistic chance of having conscious experience.
3. So, these creatures deserve moral consideration with respect to their welfare risks.

There are at least two accounts of sentientism based on two distinct accounts of consciousness:

- In his *Animal Liberation* Peter Singer defends the view that if x has the capacity for affective consciousness, then that is sufficient for *x* to have moral standing (Singer, 1975/2023). Affective consciousness has to do with states of consciousness that involve hedonic tone either positive or negative. An account of sentience in terms of affective consciousness requires that the sentient being have the capacity for states of consciousness that are either pleasurable or painful to some degree.
- In his *Reality+: Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy*, David Chalmers favors an account of sentientism grounded in phenomenal consciousness, where phenomenal consciousness has to do with the what-it-is-like aspect of subjective first-person experience (Chalmers, 2022). On Chalmers' account of phenomenal consciousness, it is possible for a subject to be phenomenally conscious without being affectively conscious, it has the what-it-is-like aspect to experience but no hedonic tone, positive or negative, a creature akin to Star Trek's Spock, who can be coherently conceived and is therefore metaphysically possible. A Vulcan has phenomenal consciousness but lacks hedonic tone, positive or negative.

Using the distinction between affective and phenomenal consciousness, there are two notions of sentientism as it relates to the moral grounding question implicit in the Declaration:

1. *Narrow sentientism* holds that affective consciousness (pleasure, pain) is sufficient for moral standing.
2. *Broad sentientism* holds that phenomenal consciousness ("what-it-is-like" experience) is sufficient for moral standing; entities that are phenomenally conscious (with or without affective consciousness) have moral standing.

The Declaration offers sentience (whether narrowly or broadly defined) as the answer to what grounds moral standing. Indeed, many global traditions have long advocated for versions of the view. The Indian tradition of Jainism, for example, extends some moral standing even beyond invertebrates to plants (Webb, n.d.).

To the moral grading question however, the Declaration is silent. Some philosophers even hold that degrees of moral status make no sense. In his *Life Without Degrees of Moral Status: Implications for Rabbits*, *Robots*, *and the Rest of Us*, Wendler (2023) argues that to say that two things have moral standing, belong in the moral sphere, but one has greater moral standing than the other is indefensible. A counterargument is offered in *How to Count Animals: More or Less*, where Kagan (2019) offers an account where some things have greater moral standing than others.

I acknowledge the debate over whether degrees of moral status as important. However, my view is that whether narrow or broad, sentientism will involve a notion of moral grading. For example, while insects are worthy of moral considerations, they may not have equal moral consideration to that of octopi or orangutans or humans.

While the legal vs. moral implications fall outside the scope of this paper, I maintain that there are many ways to build in degrees of moral standing depending on how one conceives of the metaphysics of morality and its relation to legal standing. Conceivably, even if two things have equal moral standing, they might not have equal legal standing.

The Declaration's sentientism ties moral standing to consciousness, but I will argue this excludes entities like plants and AI, which may lack consciousness yet exhibit morally relevant capacities. Intelligence, as a broader and measurable property, better serves as the ground for moral standing, with sentience grading moral status.

Non-Human Animals, AI and Moral Standing

Globally, several questions have been raised regarding what belongs in the moral sphere: Should rights be extended to orangutans, such as in Argentina (Roman, 2015)? To rivers, such as for the Māori people with respect to the Whanganui river (Roy, 2017)? To robots, such as to Sophia in Saudi Arabia (British Council, n.d.)? All of these were eventually answered in the affirmative.

In "Is it time to start considering personhood rights for chatbots?" published in the *Los Angeles Times*, Eric Schwitzgebel and Henry Shevlin ask if it is time to start considering personhood rights for AI Chatbots. It should come as no surprise given our

discussion thus far that Schwitzgebel and Shevlin motivate their inquiry into personhood rights by appealing to the issue of whether AI chatbots are conscious. Although they don't defend the view that AI chatbots are conscious, they use the controversy over whether they are and what other mental states they might have, such as emotions, to motivate the moral question:

> Even a couple of years ago, the idea that artificial intelligence might be conscious and capable of subjective experience seemed like pure science fiction. But in recent months, we've witnessed a dizzying flurry of developments in AI, including language models like ChatGPT and Bing Chat with remarkable skill at seemingly human conversation.
>
> Given these rapid shifts and the flood of money and talent devoted to developing ever smarter, more humanlike systems, it will become increasingly plausible that AI systems could exhibit something like consciousness. But if we find ourselves seriously questioning whether they are capable of real emotions and suffering, we face a potentially catastrophic moral dilemma: either give those systems rights, or don't (Schwitzgebel &Shevlin, 2023).

In their 2023 Psyche piece "What has Feelings", Kristin Andrews and Jonathan Birch argue that to understand sentience in AI we need to study animal minds. To justify whether a non-human animal is sentient, they favor using both biological markers and behavioral evidence; while vertebrates and humans share common neurological structures, invertebrates have "brains" that are designed differently, making behavioral evidence relevant. They point out that the phenomenon of pain can be analyzed in terms of common neurological correlates for pain or in terms of common pain behavior such as wound tending.

When extending the discussion from animals to AI, they discuss the gaming problem:

> 'Gaming' is a word for the phenomenon of non-sentient systems using human-generated training data to mimic human behaviors likely to persuade human users of their sentience. There doesn't have to be any intention to deceive for gaming to occur. But when it does occur, it means the behavior can no longer be interpreted as evidence of sentience (Andrews & Birch, 2023).

The problem is that given the AI has almost certainly been trained on data that includes discussions of consciousness, it will be able to output strings of words that suggest it is conscious. For an AI chatbot to be successful, it must respond as if it were conscious.

In *Artificial You: AI and the Future of Your Mind*, Susan Schneider discusses the gaming problem in the context of requiring that an AI be "boxed in" when asked questions like (Schneider, 2019):

- Could you survive the permanent deletion of your program? What if you learned this would occur?

- What is it like to be you now?
- You learn that you will be turned off for 300 years, beginning in an hour. Would you prefer this scenario to one in which you had been turned off in the past for the same length of time? Why or why not?
- Could you or your inner processes be in a separate location from the computer? From any computer? Why or why not?

An AI is "boxed in" for Schneider only when it is not exposed in its training stage to any data concerning consciousness.

Ultimately, Andrews and Birch conclude the following:

> In sum, we need better tests for AI sentience, tests that are not wrecked by the gaming problem. To get there, we need gaming-proof markers based on a secure understanding of what is really indispensable for sentience, and why. The most realistic path to these gaming-proof markers involves more research into animal cognition and behavior, to uncover as many independently evolved instances of sentience as we possibly can. We can discover what is essential to a natural phenomenon only if we examine many different instances. Accordingly, the science of consciousness needs to move beyond research with monkeys and rats toward studies of octopuses, bees, crabs, starfish, and even the nematode worm (Andrews & Birch, 2023).

My view is that there remains a role for sentience, not as moral grounding property, but instead as grading property. In contrast to Andrews and Birch, who focus on non-human animals, I think the route to understanding moral standing in AI is by considering what is going on in plants with respect to their moral standing.

Aliens and Moral Standing

Kagan offers an account where "agency" is what is necessary for moral standing and offers a thought experiment to motivate it:

Gruen-Alien-Thought Experiment Imagine you have been kidnapped by aliens from another planet, who –let us suppose –plan to keep you in their intergalactic zoo, or perhaps to experiment on you, or worse. Suppose that you are able to communicate with them,…, and you are trying to persuade them that keeping you would be wrong, that they should let you go back to your life on Earth. What might you say? [In *Ethics and Animals*, Gruen says]

> you might express your desire to be held captive, that being held against your will is wrong, and that it prevents you from doing not just the things you want to be doing at home, but the things you are supposed to be doing. The aliens are frustrating your desires and preventing you from fulfilling your obligations to others. You might explain that you are a rational and sensitive individual who has immediate desires and long-term plans that you hope to satisfy. You don't think you should be treated as a means to some alien ends. You might try

> to bargain with them, telling them you will do something for them if they do something for you. You have relationships to others that you want to continue to pursue, and you would be willing to develop a relationship with them if they respect you. You value your freedom and your ability to make choices. You need to be with your friends, family, and others of your kind. If you are forced to stay with the aliens, you will become bored, frustrated, lonely, angry, and depressed. You may even die. Holding you captive, against your will, harms you in many ways. (Kagan, 2019: 16)

Based on the thought experiment, Kagan argues as follows.

1. The plea does not appeal to phenomenal consciousness to be persuasive, even though it mentions that you are a rational and sensitive being (Kagan, 2019, p. 17).
2. What this does depend on is that you are the kind of being with its own desires and plans concerning how your life should go. You possess a will that is opposed to what is now being done to you by the aliens (Kagan, 2019, p. 17).
3. If the plea is persuasive to the aliens in the case of you as a human, the plea is persuasive to humans in the case of non-human animals.
4. It is persuasive in the case of human to alien interaction (Kagan, 2019, p. 16).
5. So, it is persuasive in the non-human animal to human animal interaction.

I agree with Kagan when he says:

> [W]hat I particularly want to draw your attention to is just how little of this imaginary speech to the aliens has anything much to do with the fact that you are *sentient* –where we continue to mean by that term the fact that you are capable of having conscious experience, with a qualitative aspect. (Kagan, 2019: 17).

Kagan refers to his view as the *agency view* on which we take as central the fact that you have desires and plans concerning how your life goes and what you want to do with it (Kagan, 2019: 17) He admits that his use of "agency" isn't ideal because he is using it such that desires and plans and acting on them is sufficient for agency, while others would say that freewill is also required (Kagan, 2019: 18).

In Kagan's view, even though consciousness is not what bestows moral standing, he is primarily concerned with non-human animals for which there is considerable evidence that they are conscious.

My own view is close to Kagan's, but I prefer to use the concept of intelligence, as opposed to Kagan's agency, will and desire for the ground of moral standing. In contrast to Kagan, my view applies to things that are less likely to be conscious, including non-biological entities or plants.

Plants and Moral Standing

That plants should be included in the moral sphere because they have some degree of sentience has long been advocated for.

In the Western tradition, consider the work of the German philosopher and physicist Gustav Theodor Fechner that drew on historical figures like Aristotle, Leibniz and Schelling and the botanical experiments of scientists of his time to argue in his 1848 work, *Nanna*, *or On the Soul-Life of Plants* that plants possess a form of mind or "soul" (which could not exist independently of the body) that included first-person subjective consciousness and volition. Fechner countered objections that plants lack nervous or locomotion by suggesting that plant fibers could serve sensory functions and that their subtle movements reflect intentionality, using analogies like musical instruments to argue that nature may produce sensation through diverse means (Fechner, 1848/2012).

Later, in 1973, Peter Tomkins and Christopher Bird argued in *The Secret Life of Plants* that plants have the capacity for consciousness and emotional response. Like Fechner, Tomkins and Bird drew on philosophical perspectives from figures like Aristotle, Goethe and George Washington Carver and also experiments, notably Cleve Backster's polygraphy tests which suggested plants exhibit electrical reactions to human emotions, and the early experiments on plant stimuli responses by the physicist Jagdish Chandra Bose (Tomkins & Bird, 1973). Even more recently, scientists have presented research into the neurobiology of plants, where research is ongoing (Brenner et al., 2006). In *Aeon* in 2024, Rachel Petersen presented a historical account of the topic from a Western perspective in "Do Plants Have Minds?" (Petersen, 2024).

While I am in strong agreement with the claim that plants have minds, I am not as attracted to the Jain idea that they have a soul (*jīva*) (Webb, n.d.), or the joint idea shared with Fechner that they have subjective first-person experience (what is known in the philosophical literature as phenomenal consciousness). There is far more evidence (Matthen, 2024) to believe that plants have goal-directed intelligence, rather than phenomenal or affective consciousness. Plants use their intelligence to pursue survival in at least three ways:

(a) Nutritive – Plants intelligently adapt to environments where their nutrient needs are met, e.g., through root tropism.
(b) Temperate – Plants intelligently respond to environments with suitable temperatures for thriving, e.g., via leaf orientation.
(c) Predatorial – Plants intelligently adjust to environments where predation levels support survival, e.g., through chemical defenses.

Thus, plants deploy their capacity for goal-directed intelligence to achieve survival-oriented goals. Their intelligence has a purpose: they are sensing creatures with systems that respond to their environment to promote survival, with or without subjective first-person experience.

Using plants as an illustrative example, my view is that what grounds membership in the moral sphere is intelligence, not consciousness. This reorientation toward intelligence over consciousness, allows for the inclusion of machines with goal-directed intelligence to be included in the moral sphere. I will thus next offer an account of what I mean by "intelligence".

Intelligence, AI and Moral Standing

In their *What Is Intelligent Life*? Abigail Desmond and Michael Haslam argue that what we attribute intelligence to is in many ways shaped by human interests. Against this tendency, they urge us to be more pluralistic about intelligence:

> Eventually, instead of talking about how machines, animal collectives, or individual birds and bugs exhibit intelligence, we should be better prepared to investigate how they evolved or iterated those actions in their own evolutionary spaces, unshackled from human-shaped standards. For those seeking a middle ground, we might be tempted to say that each species has its own intelligence, but that claim carries too much baggage at this point. A planet full of problem-solving life exists apart from humans, and none of it is obligated to fit neatly into our subjective, self-serving mindset. We need to avoid the real risk that we will miss animal or machine (or plant, fungal, bacterial, or even extraterrestrial) ways of succeeding just because they are fundamentally alien to our conceptual toolkit.
>
> Like gazing through a stained-glass window at a vibrantly colored, snow-covered landscape, intelligence isn't just what we're looking *for*, it's what we are looking *through.* Humans value intelligence, and that is not about to change. What *may* change is our capacity to appreciate other kinds of life on their own terms, divorced from anthropocentric box-checking (Desmond & Haslam, 2024).

I agree with the Desmond and Haslam that it is useful to be pluralistic when thinking about the nature of intelligence. Note that the pluralism about intelligence advocated above can also be made for consciousness, such as one finds in the work of Freya Matthews' *For a Love of Matter: A Contemporary Panpsychism* (Matthews, 2003).

I prefer pluralism about intelligence rather than about consciousness, because pluralism about intelligence rests on common kind, viz. problem solving tied to the entity's goals and relative to its environment. We have a necessary and sufficient condition for intelligence that drops the human-centric point of view as the arbiter of what is intelligent and transfers it over to the entity by examining how it solves problems in its typical environment to achieve its goals. Pluralism about consciousness tends to devolve into different kinds of consciousness with no common kind across the various types, representing at best a family resemblance. Intelligence can be observed and measured as an ability to solve problems within a typical environment to achieve goals. This then raises the question as to a threshold condition for intelligence.

In that context, I will next bring up proposed benchmarks for AI, the most famous of which is the Turing Test. Although I have long maintained that the Turing Test is not really a good test for intelligence, it has in any case long been achieved and deprecated in the case of AI. Several new benchmarks have since been proposed (and defeated in turn). The newest benchmarks for intelligence include "Humanity's Last Exam" (HLE) (Phan et al., 2025) and "ARC-AGI-2" (Chollet et al., 2025). The

ultimate test for AGI (or artificial general intelligence) however may be "watch and learn" AGI-embedded robots that can be taught to perform tasks just like a human can. Evidence (Kedia & Choudhury, 2025) suggests that such robots might soon be here.

Given that AI Chatbots have passed the Turing Test and other benchmarks, we have some *prima facie* evidence for thinking that they are intelligent. Note that the intelligence we are attributing to them is not the intelligence of novelty, although that is what generative AI aims at. The kind of intelligence that is at play here is best understood in terms of the skill vs. originality distinction. AI is intelligent in the way that a concert pianist who can compose derivative versions of the highly complex work of other composers but who does not compose entirely novel pieces; they exercise intelligent skill without producing anything truly original. For chatbots and AI in general, my position is that originality is not necessarily required to say they are intelligent.

Preferences, AI and Moral Standing

Given how AIs are trained on data, the next question that might arise is whether AI Chatbots can be said to have goals. Specifically, do they have goals that are not functions of programming or training that can be argued to be in some sense not "real" goals in the way humans, for example, have goals based on the exercise of their will.

A form of goal-directed behavior can be described by "preferences". Preferences are goals in the sense that goal-directed behavior favors one thing over the other thing given a choice. Consider the analogy of the preferences of human infants and non-human animals as a function of two factors: nature and nurture. AIs have a similar structure in terms of the division between their hardware/software (nature) in contrast to the data they are trained over (nurture). Adult humans have a desire for food as a basic preference (nature), but their specific preference for Indian over Italian food is a function of environment (nurture). Just as we can question whether AI Chatbots have any real preferences, we can also inquire into the reality of our own preferences. AI Chatbots might be said to have preferences more like plants than like non-human animals or humans do, in that their preferences are more closely tied to their nature and design than to their nurture.

The Significance of Sentience

The significance of sentience is not as a binary (yes/no) ground for moral standing, but in imparting graded degrees of moral standing based on the type of consciousness (as in the Jain tradition as I explore in a subsequent section). Further, given there are different kinds of intelligences atop both phenomenal and affective consciousness, these differences could further grade moral standing for entities with phenomenal and affective consciousness.

AI Chatbots are part of the moral sphere *if and only if* they are intelligent (that align with to-be-determined benchmarks for intelligence) and have goal-directed behavior (like plants have goal-directed behavior). The point is that the moral ground is not consciousness, affective or phenomenological, but intelligence. Note that this

would also place plants into the moral sphere (which as per the earlier discussion is already a part of many traditions).

Conclusion

My view is that what grounds membership in the moral sphere is intelligence, not consciousness, defined as the capacity for problem-solving and goal-directed behavior, implemented through biological or artificial systems. Using plants as an illustrative example, I drew on research showing their goal-directed intelligence in survival-oriented behaviors: (a) nutritive (e.g., root tropism for nutrient acquisition), (b) temperate (e.g., leaf orientation for suitable temperatures), and (c) predatorial (e.g., chemical defenses against predation) (Matthen, 2024). Plants deploy intelligence to respond to their environment, promoting survival without requiring subjective first-person experience. Historical perspectives, like Gustav Theodor Fechner's Nanna (1848/2012) and Tomkins and Bird's The Secret Life of Plants (1973), suggest plants have a form of mind, but I find their goal-directed intelligence more compelling than claims of phenomenal or affective consciousness.

This reorientation toward intelligence allows for the inclusion of machines with goal-directed intelligence, such as AI passing benchmarks like ARC-AGI-2 (Chollet et al., 2025). In *What Is Intelligent Life?* Desmond and Haslam (2024) advocate a pluralistic view of intelligence, unshackled from human-centric standards, emphasizing problem-solving relative to an entity's environment and goals. I adopt this pluralism, arguing that intelligence, unlike consciousness, provides a common, observable criterion across entities. For AI, the "gaming problem" (Andrews & Birch, 2023; Schneider, 2019) complicates sentience attribution, as AI may mimic conscious behavior without experiencing it. However, intelligence, as demonstrated by benchmarks like ARC-AGI-2 or "watch and learn" robots (Kedia & Choudhury, 2025), is measurable and does not require consciousness.

I align with Kagan's agency view, which uses the Gruen-Alien thought experiment to argue that moral standing stems from desires and plans, not consciousness (Kagan, 2019). However, I prefer "intelligence" over "agency" to include entities like plants and AI, which may lack desires but exhibit goal-directed behavior. For example, AI chatbots, trained on vast datasets, display preferences akin to plants' nature-driven responses, shaped by design (nature) and training (nurture).

Intelligence (problem-solving and goal-directed behavior) tied to preferences in biological or artificial systems grounds moral standing. Plants and AI, despite lacking consciousness, exhibit intelligence, warranting their inclusion in the moral sphere, with sentience potentially grading their moral status.

Engaging Indian Philosophy and AI Perspectives

The Indian Philosophy and AI session in the American Academy of Religion's (AAR) annual meeting offers perspectives on sentience and intelligence, which I critique to support my intelligence-based framework. Without access to full papers, I engage the summarized arguments, connecting them to broader debates.

Sentience and Moral Standing in Dharma Traditions

Jeffery Long's *On Jīvas*, *Artificial Life Forms*, *and Inanimate Objects: Commander Data*, *Marie Kondo*, *and the Dharma Traditions* (Long, 2023) asks whether AI, like Star Trek's Commander Data, could possess a jīva (soul) in Dharma traditions (Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism). He explores the question of whether an artificial intelligence could be possessed of *jīva*, the soul or the essential life force of a living being. He examined various permutations and perspectives from different Dharma traditions, including the Buddhist conception of 'self' as a process, and the Jain and Hindu concepts of *jīva* to ask whether Commander Data from Star Trek could be sentient, and what moral status could be afforded him. The question of whether AI can have moral standing based on a "self" or "soul" could suggest even inanimate objects might qualify.

Loriliai Biernacki's *Mind*, *Mental Causation*, *and Yogic Siddhi* draws a connection between Integrated Information Theory and Abhinavagupta and invokes Somānanda and Viśuddhananda's panpsychism where all entities contain the essence of others, implying rocks may have sentience:

> According to Somānanda all entities consist of everything, since everything is the nature of everything. Everything exists here as everything by having the nature and form of [all] the various entities. The [cay] pot has my nature, and I have that of the pot.
>
> Viśuddhananda offers a congruent explanation telling us, "within each category of things in the world, the full compass of all categories of matter is present. Each and everything contains within it the essence of every other thing (Biernacki, 2023).

My understanding is that the Dharma Traditions offer this argument:

1. X has moral standing only if X has sentience, self or the soul.
2. AI lacks these.
3. So, AI lacks moral standing.

This view is too restrictive. Panpsychism risks diluting sentience's specificity, as attributing consciousness to rocks lacks empirical support (unlike plant intelligence, per Matthen, 2024). If suffering correlates with unmet goals in intelligent systems, AI can "suffer" without phenomenal consciousness, warranting moral standing. Long's openness to inanimate objects aligns with my view but overcomplicates the grounding property; intelligence is simpler and measurable.

Dharma traditions' focus on sentience or souls excludes AI unless we redefine moral standing via intelligence, which better accommodates diverse entities.

Intelligence in AI and Post-Human Contexts

Jonathan Edelman's *The Absence of Intelligence in AI Systems* argues AI lacks intelligence due to missing spontaneous will, self-directedness, present in bio-

logical life from microbes to humans, nor does it have the interiority that defines human life:

> The simplest forms of biological life, like micro-organisms found in a pond [up to] human beings and higher primates, all make choices that enable them to achieve goals such as survival or reproduction, and in the case of higher organisms, a personal sense of well-being and flourishing. Biological organisms are self-directed toward certain goals, whether it be building a nest or hive, getting a cup of tea, or starting a new country. From the moment of birth, a human baby, for instance, seeks nourishment and comfort by making choices, and no one must tell them or program them to do that. AI exhibits none of these features. AI systems cannot do anything they are not programmed to do and no AI system has ever exhibited anything like a spontaneous choice, e.g. a preference for one possible action over another. Moreover, while I am aware of the basic problems of making inferences about the subjective states of other beings, the "problem of other minds," I think it is doubtful that AI systems have any comprehension of what they are doing, e.g. in appreciating and taking satisfaction in their production, whether art or text (Edelman, 2023).

Edelman's argument looks like this:

1. X is intelligent only if X has spontaneous will, self-directedness, interiority, or understanding.
2. AI lacks these.
3. So, AI is not intelligent.

Debashish Banerji's *Post-humanism*, *Dharma*, *and Yoga: Setting New Goals of Becoming* claims AI lacks human intelligence, unable to perceive wholes before parts (per Heidegger, Bergson):

> It may be (and has been) argued that artificial intelligence is not human intelligence and certainly not human cognition or understanding; humans arrive at understanding through processes that cannot be reduced to operations of symbolic logic aided by calculation. Phenomenologists such as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty and Gestalt psychologists such as Fritz Perls have pointed out that we perceive and cognize wholes and contexts prior to and immanent in parts and textual units. Philosophers of memory such as Henri Bergson have highlighted the function of memory and differences of kind in memory access not possible to computational memory (Banerji, 2023).

His argument is:

1. Artificial systems lack human intelligence because they lack the capacity to understand wholes prior to the parts they are immanent in.
2. Artificial systems are intelligent only if they have human intelligence.
3. So, artificial systems are not intelligent.

I'll note here that it is not clear to me that Banerji wants to say (2) as many non-human animals are intelligent, but they are not intelligent like humans. Octopi, for example, are not intelligent like us, but they are demonstrably intelligent*.

I counter Edelman and Banerji with a pluralistic view of intelligence. They are correct that artificial systems are not intelligent in the sense they've defined above. However, one cannot infer from this that AIs are not intelligent* where intelligent* refers to a notion within a more broadly construed range that includes the intelligence he attributes to biological entities but also other kinds.

One can refer to the kinds of alien-life that scientists have posited, including for example, city-sized floaters in the atmosphere of gas giants, as posited by Carl Sagan and Edwin Salpeter in their 1976 *"Particles*, *Environments*, *and Possible Ecologies in the Jovian Atmosphere"* (Sagan & Salpeter, 1976*)* for ideas on what alien life might look like. We might, for example, observe aliens moving with purpose in their environment, perhaps building structures and participating in some kind of societal hierarchy. Whether they have an "interiority" or any kind of consciousness at all, we would at best only be able to speculate. Indeed, we might say the aliens are intelligent* in the sense they exhibit goal-directed behavior, but not necessarily bestow them with the capacity for intelligence as defined by Edelman.

Alien intelligence is not the same as artificial intelligence. However, even if we further posit that these exotic "life forms" were in fact designed and created by an advanced intelligence, we will likely still grant them some gradation of moral standing. My point here is that it is conceivable that X can have a form of created alien, non-human intelligence, that is constructed.

Additionally, constructed does not necessarily imply artificial. If it did, all intelligence is artificial, since it always factors to a learning component over and above the non-learned component.

The easiest property to attribute to life from amoeba to humans, or to entities ranging from carbon- to silicon-based systems, would be intelligence. We can define intelligence and set benchmarks against which we can measure it by. Demonstrable and observable, intelligence allows us to consider a wider spectrum of cases for moral standing, than does sentience, self, or soul.

However, it isn't clear that any biological creature other than humans satisfies the criteria listed above for intelligence: spontaneous will, self-directedness, interiority, and understanding. Other living creatures are demonstrably intelligent*, however. Likewise, with the correct benchmarks in place, artificial minds can be demonstrably intelligent* but not intelligent like we are. The question then becomes why it must be that only the narrowly defined intelligence as in the human sense (rather than the more broadly construed intelligence that includes intelligence*) matters for moral standing. Edelman and Banerji's human-centric criteria limits moral standing.

The boundary problem for cyborgs/post-humans illustrates this.

Boundary Problem Version 1
1. Some argue X (human) has standing, Y (tool) doesn't, due to sentience, self, interiority.
2. In cyborgs and post-humans, X and Y are inseparable, forming a sentient entity.
3. Thus, cyborgs and post-humans have standing via sentience.

The argument above has Buddhist overtones because it is relationalist. However, by placing human sentience at the center of moral standing, it is not post-human.

Boundary Problem Version 2
1. Some argue X (human) has standing, Y (tool) doesn't, due to sentience, self, interiority.
2. In cyborgs and post-humans, X and Y are inseparable, forming an intelligent entity.
3. Thus, cyborgs and post-humans have standing via intelligence, not sentience.

In the second version, if the cyborg or post-human exhibits intelligence, rather than the capacity for human-like sentience, it has moral standing:

Intelligence*, not human-specific cognition, grounds moral standing, including AI and post-humans, aligning with functionalist principles over anthropocentric biases.

Jainism: Umāsvāti on Grounding and Grading

In Jainism, living beings (jīvas) are classified based on the number of senses they possess, reflecting their level of consciousness and spiritual capacity. The hierarchy ranges from one-sensed to five-sensed beings, with each additional sense indicating greater awareness and potential for knowledge (jñāna). This classification is tied to the principle of ahimsa (non-violence), as harming beings with more senses is considered a greater ethical violation due to their higher consciousness (Gorisse, 2023).

- One-sensed beings (touch): Plants (considered to have a soul).
- Two-sensed beings (touch and taste): oysters, snails, certain shellfish, certain insects.
- Three-sensed beings (touch, taste and smell): certain insects like white ants, moths, centipedes.
- Four-sensed beings (touch, taste, smell, sight): certain insects like spiders, beetles, bees.
- Five-sensed beings (touch, taste, smell, sight, hearing): birds, reptiles, mammals, fish.

Note that the five-sensed beings are further subdivided into those with a developed mind capable of attaining spiritual enlightenment versus those without a developed mind.

The doctrine of ahiṃsā states that with intent and action one should always aim to produce the.

least amount of harm that they can produce. For example, given that there are many types of sensed creatures, and 1 sensed creatures suffer less than higher sensed creatures, in any situation where one can consume 1 sensed creatures over higher sensed creatures, they ought to do so.

To summarize, Jainism classifies jīvas by senses (one-sensed plants to five-sensed mammals), tying moral standing to consciousness and ahimsa (non-violence). Harming higher-sensed beings is a greater ethical violation (Gorisse, 2023). I adapt this:

- Accept graded moral standing based on capacities.
- Replace affective consciousness with intelligence, as plants and microbes likely lack consciousness but exhibit intelligence (Matthen, 2024).
- Plants and AI have lower grade standing due to simpler intelligence; mammals have higher-grade standing due to complex cognition.

Jainism's graded approach supports my framework, providing a model for moral gradation without requiring consciousness, applicable to AI and plants.

Conclusion

The NYU Declaration highlights consciousness as a moral grounding property, but I argue intelligence, not sentience, offers a better ground for moral standing across biological and artificial systems. Plants exhibit intelligence via chemical signaling (Matthen, 2024), animals via neural processing (LeDoux, 2012), and AI via learning (Kedia & Choudhury, 2025). Jain ethics' graded framework shows how capacities like sentience or rationality can grade moral status, forming a spectrum. Unlike other works focusing narrowly on animals or AI, this paper uniquely integrates plant intelligence and Jainism, broadening the moral sphere. Further research into intelligence benchmarks (e.g., ARC-AGI-2) will refine this framework, challenging anthropocentric ethical biases.

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