

How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Respect Post-Persons

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Abstract: Advocates of the Respect Model of moral status have expressed skepticism about the possibility that radically enhanced persons will have a higher threshold of moral status over non-radically enhanced persons. While several philosophers have already argued that advocates of the Respect Model of moral status should recognize such a possibility in a world with radically enhanced persons, I make room for a stronger claim: advocates of the Respect Model of moral status should not only recognize the possibility of higher thresholds of moral status, but in fact have principled commitments to the normative view that radically enhanced persons should have a higher threshold of moral status over non-radically enhanced persons. This stronger claim induces both rational and self-interested worries about the sacrificeability of non-radically enhanced persons, which takes the form of the inequality of immunity problem. While this problem need not rationally worry the advocate of the Respect Model of moral status, I provide some exploratory solutions that can be implemented now to assuage future self-interested worries so that advocates of the Respect Model may learn to respect the dignity of radically enhanced persons.

Keywords: post-persons; moral status; mere persons; respect model; cognitive capacities; full moral status; threshold; partial moral status; radically enhanced persons; inequality of immunity problem

1. Introduction

In a world where radically enhanced persons exist alongside non-radically enhanced persons, several philosophers have argued that advocates of the Respect Model of moral status (or simply the *Respect Model*) should accept the possibility that radically enhanced persons have a higher threshold of moral status above non-radically enhanced persons

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(hereafter I refer to non-radically enhanced persons as *mere persons*).¹ Radical enhancement through an array of biotechnologies may, after all, be powerful enough to induce vastly greater capacities than mere persons, such that those vastly greater capacities also induce a higher threshold of moral status above mere persons.

Definitionally, radically enhanced persons with a higher threshold of moral status than mere persons are *post-persons* (Chan forthcoming and Hauskeller 2013).² So, when I mention radically enhanced persons, I do not make a normative claim on their moral status; whereas when I mention post-persons, I am making a normative claim about radically enhanced persons' moral status – namely that their moral status is of a higher threshold compared to mere persons. Though controversial, I assume in this paper that post-persons will exist alongside mere persons (at least in some possible world). In this sense, it is easy to say that advocates of the Respect Model should *ipso facto* accept the possibility of post-persons. However, what is more interesting may be not so much whether advocates of the Respect Model should accept the possibility of post-persons, but rather the question of whether the Respect Model *per se* have principled commitments to the nature of post-persons and therefore the view that post-persons ought to have a higher threshold of moral status above mere persons.

In what follows, I examine the claims offered by advocates of the Respect Model and how their claims change, if at all, given my assumption about post-persons existing alongside mere persons. This paper has a tripartite objective. First, after clarifying terminology, I will reveal how the Respect Model has principled commitments to the view that post-persons ought to have a higher threshold of moral status above mere persons. Second, given the Respect Model's commitments, I explore reasons why advocates of the Respect Model (and mere persons more generally) worry about such commitments, especially given the pernicious *inequality of immunity problem*. Third, I also explore why such reasons to worry ought not cause advocates of the Respect Model undue concern. Indeed, the inequality of immunity problem may be a sufficient reason itself to strengthen moral protections in lower thresholds of moral status and allow room for mere persons to respect their post-person neighbors.

2. Moral Status, Cognitive Capacities, and (Post-)Personhood

Before we understand what post-persons are, the principled commitments the Respect Model has towards post-persons, and why advocates of the Respect Model need not worry about post-persons, we first need to understand the relationship between moral status, cognitive capacities, and *sui generis* personhood. This relationship will not only inform how we think about post-persons by the end of this section, but it will also shape our buy-in of the Respect Model in the next section.

I take the function of moral status to be “about explicating what counts or matters morally in its own right or for its own sake” (Terrill 2021, p. 185). For example, when an entity has moral status, we say that there are normative restrictions conferred to that entity such that moral agents both have moral obligations to said entities and ought not treat said entity in an instrumental way (DeGrazia 2012 and Shepherd 2018).³ Still, what grounds moral status? It should go without saying at this point, but moral status is not

¹ For discussion of the possibility of radically enhanced persons having a higher threshold of moral status, see Agar 2013, DeGrazia 2012, and Douglas 2013. Note that I intentionally side-step the question of whether it would be morally problematic to create post-persons. For more on whether we should create post-persons to begin with, see Agar 2013 and Hauskeller 2013.

² I take the concept of post-person to be synonymous with the concept of *supra-person* (Douglas 2013).

³ I do not take up the question of whether moral status is merely an ascription for other, more relevant, moral concepts (Sachs 2011). However, in writing this paper, I assume that moral status talk is (at the very least) worthwhile.

grounded on unjustifiable claims like species membership.⁴ Instead, a better grounding account of moral status is the *cognitive capacity account*.⁵

Under this account, cognitive capacities are the only morally relevant property that confers (at least some kind of) moral status (Douglas 2013). There is wide consensus in the literature that cognitive capacities play a role in grounding moral status.⁶ Pertinent for distinctions between mere persons and radically enhanced persons, cognitive capacities are quite expansive.⁷ For example, there are rudimentary cognitive capacities on one end and sophisticated cognitive capacities on the other. We see this in our own human development: young children have more rudimentary cognitive capacities (relative to paradigm adult humans) whereas paradigm adult humans have more sophisticated cognitive capacities (relative to young children).⁸ Because the cognitive capacity account is grounding our concept of moral status, I take sophisticated cognitive capacities to be proportional to what is called *full moral status*, which is a categorically strong kind of moral status. From a moral point of view, full moral status provides an entity with inviolability, which safeguards entities “against permissible sacrifice” (Douglas 2013, p. 484).⁹

Now that we have our grounding account of moral status, we need to understand what we mean by *sui generis* personhood. I take the concept of personhood to include normatively valuable and cognitive-based capacities, such as autonomy, language, rationality, and self-awareness. Importantly, the concept of personhood splits in two traditions: the Kantian and the Lockean. Since both traditions value cognitive-based capacities, I do not explicitly argue for either. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the Respect Model follows the Kantian tradition.¹⁰

Personhood often suffers from the hard problem of vagueness, so in either the Kantian or Lockean tradition it will be helpful to appeal to a plurality of normatively valuable and cognitive-based capacities that allow persons to think reflectively and construct long-term projects. After all, there is no singular capacity that confers an entity with personhood. It is also helpful to recognize that it does not matter how well one utilizes or engages these cognitive capacities; so long as an entity meets the necessary and sufficient conditions of personhood (whatever they may be), then that is all that matters.¹¹ To connect moral status more directly to personhood, we may say that because moral status is grounded in cognitive capacities, and personhood involves normatively valuable and cognitive-based capacities, there is a tight-knit relationship between moral status, cognitive capacities, and personhood.

Now that we have a better understanding of *sui generis* personhood and its relationship to moral status, we need to distinguish post-persons from mere persons. This distinction will also involve complicating our concept of personhood. As previously

⁴ For discussion on why species membership is outdated, see Lori Gruen 2017.

⁵ The upshot of the cognitive capacity grounding account is that it conceptually coheres with the two dominant models of moral status, namely the Respect Model and the Interest Model. Note that I constrict my paper solely with an eye toward the Respect Model and do not divulge arguments in favor of the Interest Model. For discussion of the Interest Model, see DeGrazia 2012.

⁶ For discussion on cognitive capacities and their role in grounding moral status, see Jaworska and Tannenbaum 2021.

⁷ While I do not give precision to how expansive cognitive capacities are, I hope to convey some sense of that expansiveness throughout the paper.

⁸ This example will be disrupted with the introduction of post-persons.

⁹ See §4 for more on this point.

¹⁰ For discussion on both traditions and their respective relevancy to moral status, see Agar 2012, DeGrazia 2012, Douglas 2013, and Warren 1997.

¹¹ As we shall soon see, the necessary and sufficient conditions for personhood become complicated with respect to differences in kinds of persons (i.e., mere persons and post-persons).

stated, mere persons are non-radically enhanced persons. For example, paradigm adult human beings are mere persons in virtue of being non-radically enhanced persons. At least right now, mere persons meet the conditions for *sui generis* personhood. What, then, are post-persons relative to mere persons?¹² Given our definition of post-persons above, not only will radically enhanced persons induce a speciation event from mere person to post-person – since post-persons are not *de novo* created – but radically enhanced persons will also entail moral status enhancements.¹³ Moral status enhancements will invariably increase an entity’s “entitlement to certain forms of beneficial treatment and reduces its eligibility for certain forms of harmful treatment” (Agar 2013, p. 67).

The literature also suggests that post-persons will have significant qualitative differences in capacities to mere persons (Bostrom 2005, p. 4). But post-persons will not just perform old things better. Rather, it is precisely the radically enhanced capacities of post-persons that will allow them to perform new feats altogether (Douglas 2013, p. 481). What might those new feats look like? While it is easy to imagine enhanced intelligence, radically enhanced capacities are more difficult to imagine (Shepherd 2018, p. 91). Speculative fiction can be of some help. Think here of the extraterrestrial ‘Heptapods’ in Ted Chiang’s “Story of Your Life” (2016). Just as the Heptapods’ language capacities exist on an entirely different plane than our own – given their phenomenal experience of time – so too might post-persons’ capacities exist on an entirely different plane than our own, given their radically enhanced personhood. At least with regards to capacity differences, a widely held assumption is that post-persons are to mere persons, as mere persons are to sentient non-persons, and as sentient non-persons are to non-sentient entities (DeGrazia 2012 and Gray 2020).¹⁴

One may object to the distinction between post-persons and mere persons with an analogy: if we treat children as having the same moral status as adults because of prospective developments in their cognitive capacities, what difference is there between mere persons and post-persons in a world where mere persons might radically enhance their cognitive capacities to become post-persons? I should emphasize here that mere persons in relation to post-persons are not analogous to children in relation to adults because the mode in cognitive capacity changes are unambiguously distinct. For example, under paradigm conditions, a child’s cognitive capacities will *ceteris paribus* develop into that of an adult’s cognitive capacities – not so for the mere person. A more accurate analogy between mere persons and post-persons would be the enhancement of a non-human animal to a human-animal chimera by way of human embryonic stem cells (Streiffer 2019). In this case, assume that the enhancement of non-human animals to human-animal chimeras via the introduction of human materials entails a moral status enhancement. Just as we do not now treat non-human animals as having an enhanced moral status simply because of the possibility of moral status enhancements, so too would we not treat mere persons as having the same moral status as post-persons.

¹² I intentionally avoid providing a full, positive account about how mere persons can be radically morally enhanced to become post-persons, especially given the distance between the technology we currently possess and what post-persons will actually be like in the possible future. Agar calls the problem of providing positive accounts of post-persons the *inexpressibility problem* (2013, p. 67). The only thing I will say on this topic is that it is generally agreed upon that this radical enhancement will occur via an array of biotechnologies over a long period of time, including environmental and genetic alterations.

¹³ At this point, we can say that there is a transitive relationship between full moral status, sophisticated cognitive capacities, and post-personhood.

¹⁴ One final distinction is in order. Radical enhancement is different in kind to what is known as human enhancement. For one, radical enhancement of persons exists outside a species-typical range (Gray 2020). Human enhancement, therefore, exists within a species-typical range.

3. The Respect Model of Moral Status and its Principled Commitments to Post-Persons

3.1.

In this section, I will argue for the stronger claim that advocates of the Respect Model have principled commitments to the view that post-persons ought to have a higher threshold of moral status, and not merely that advocates of the Respect Model should recognize the possibility that post-persons may have a higher threshold of moral status. But first, I must clarify what I mean by the Respect Model. Following DeGrazia (2012), the conception of moral status that lines up with deontic values like respect, dignity, and rational capacities for mutual accountability and practical reasoning is called the Respect Model. This contrasts with the Interest Model of moral status, which lines up with consequentialist values. The Respect Model adheres to the Kantian tradition that “All beings with [personhood] necessarily also possess dignity. The only way such a being can lose its dignity is by losing its [personhood]” (Kerstein 2009, p. 509). Simply put, any entity that has personhood thereby entitles that entity to respect.

Importantly, the Respect Model holds a threshold concept about moral status to be true, which is again in contrast to the Interest Model of moral status that holds a scalar concept about moral status to be true. The threshold concept says that when it comes to full moral status you either have it or you do not have it – there is no admission of degrees of full moral status.¹⁵ And with higher thresholds of moral status there are also stronger moral protections, where the inverse is also true (Douglas 2013, p. 476). The threshold concept becomes thorny when we introduce variation in threshold strength, namely between *strong* and *weak* thresholds.

Nicholas Agar (2013) argues for weak thresholds with an inductive argument. The argument goes as follows: because the Respect Model already observes three fundamental and discrete thresholds of moral status (more on this below), it is reasonable to make the case for more thresholds of moral status (p. 71). And as human capacities themselves are subject to weak thresholds (e.g., language capacities), then weak thresholds are worth holding when it comes to cognitive capacity and moral status as well (*ibid.*, p. 69). For example, in a world without post-persons the Respect Model currently believes that rocks have no moral status, sentient non-persons have partial moral status, and mere persons have full moral status. An implication of Agar’s inductive argument is that for any cognitive capacity enhancement, moral status will correspondingly enhance. This is to say that “Given that we grant [partial moral status] to the ‘merely sentient,’ and that our enhanced powers of [sophisticated cognitive capacity] grant us higher [full moral status], we ought to think that beings with [more sophisticated cognitive capacity] than us would have even higher moral status” (Shepherd 2018, p. 92).

On the other hand, Allen Buchanan (2009) argues for strong thresholds, bolstered by his *moral equality assumption*. This says that any entity *E* that meets the sufficient conditions for personhood has the same moral status, regardless of enhanced cognitive capacities.¹⁶ An implication of the moral equality assumption is that personhood is the moral status

¹⁵ There are a lot of nuances here. Traditionally, advocates of the Respect Model have held that there is only one kind of moral status and all entities either have moral status or do not have moral status, *simpliciter*. However, given the overwhelming empirical evidence of – at the very least – rudimentary cognitive capacities in sentient non-persons, advocates of the Respect Model may grant more than one threshold of moral status. The idea of there being more than one threshold of moral status is elaborated throughout the rest of the paper.

¹⁶ I ignore Buchanan’s weaker argument, which presents a general skepticism motivated by the idea that it is hard to imagine how (radical) enhancements could create entities with a higher moral status than mere persons. What Buchanan must remember in the weaker argument is that failure of imagination neither entails impossibility nor conceptual incoherence.

ceiling which thereby limits any higher threshold of moral status.¹⁷ When it comes to moral status, strong thresholds mean there are diminishing returns for enhanced cognitive capacities beyond mere persons since there are no higher thresholds of moral status than full moral status.

Given the arguments for weak and strong thresholds, we have the following options to choose from:

- Option A₁ – Agar is right where there is no upper limit to moral status and an *ad infinitum* of higher thresholds of moral status beyond full moral status exists in principle, which Sarah Chan (forthcoming) calls *more-than-full moral status*;
- Option A₂ – Agar is on the right track, but there is an upper limit to moral status at some point beyond full moral status. At the very least, there is one higher threshold of more-than-full moral status;
- Option B – Buchanan is right and full moral status is the upper limit to moral status.

I do not divulge reasons for or against weak (Options A₁ or A₂) or strong (Option B) thresholds winning out. Nevertheless, for the sake of my argument, let us grant (i) that the Respect Model is well-motivated and the general threshold concept about moral status is true, and (ii) that Option B is worth favoring over Options A₁ and A₂.¹⁸ The reason for granting (ii) is that hard-liner advocates of the Respect Model tend to favor Option B.

The overriding question now is how Option B works in a world with post-persons? If full moral status is maximal moral status and no higher threshold of moral status exists, then mere persons will be downgraded to partial moral status while post-persons will have full moral status because post-persons have (by definition) a higher threshold of moral status than mere persons. Post-persons therefore raise the stakes for mere persons when it comes to mattering morally, which is important for how we carve out the inequality of immunity problem and the Respect Model's reaction to the problem in the next section. To this point I hold a similar view to Thomas Douglas (2013) where I suppose that there are three discrete and fundamental thresholds of moral status that are consistent with the Respect Model, which I envision as a number line ranging between zero and one (see Figure 1):

- P1. If entity *E* has sophisticated cognitive capacities, then *E* has full moral status;
- P2. If *E* has rudimentary cognitive capacities, then *E* has partial moral status;
- P3. If *E* has neither sophisticated nor rudimentary cognitive capacities, then *E* has no moral status (*ibid.*, p. 480).
- P4. The existence of post-persons implies their having sophisticated cognitive capacities.
- P5. If P4., then the existence of post-persons also implies mere persons having rudimentary cognitive capacities.

¹⁷ Or, to adapt an adage from Michael Jordan, “the [personhood] ceiling is the [moral status] roof.”

¹⁸ While I grant that the Respect Model is true in (i), allow me to explicate two reasons to buy into the Respect Model. According to Thomas Douglas (2013), the Respect Model accommodates two of our commonly held moral intuitions. First, there is the *explanatory* intuition: all persons have the same moral status regardless of greater capacity. Just as we should treat someone with a lower IQ and someone with a higher IQ as moral equals, so too should we treat mere persons and radically enhanced persons as moral equals. The other intuition is as follows: all persons have a special, full, and equal moral status above all non-persons. After all, in sacrifice/save scenarios, persons have moral priority over non-persons. Take a ‘Lifeboat Case’ where we must decide between saving a dog (a sentient non-person) and saving a fellow paradigm adult human (a person). Here, we would save our fellow human *ceteris paribus*. Of course, our partiality to persons cannot be explained without first explicating why differences in cognitive capacity matter to differences in moral status, thus justifying differences in preferential treatment in sacrifice/save scenarios (DeGrazia 2012, p. 2).

- C. Therefore, post-persons have full moral status while mere persons have partial moral status.

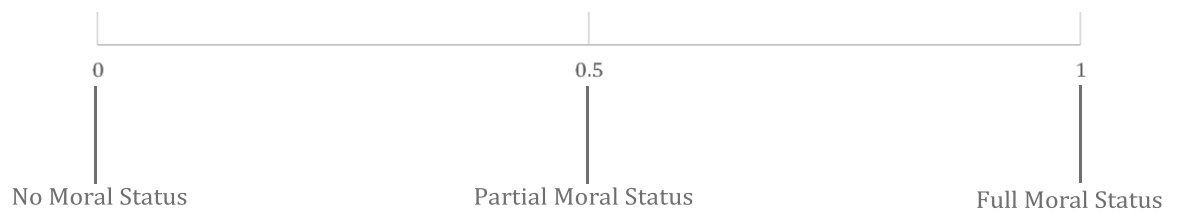


Figure 1.

Allow me to further qualify Option B. Because our definitional account of post-persons already frames the problem in such a way that post-persons will have a higher threshold of moral status than mere persons, Buchanan’s moral equality assumption cannot get off the ground. In responding to advocates of the Respect Model, especially something like Buchanan’s moral equality assumption, Chan makes a claim that the moral equality assumption – where any entities with stronger cognitive capacities beyond mere persons will have the same moral status as mere persons – “plays nicely to the political ‘comfort blanket’ of declaring that all ordinary humans are (or should be) morally equal, while allowing us to avoid confronting” the philosophically difficult questions of moral status (forthcoming). Of course, the philosophically difficult question of moral status relevant for our discussion is how advocates of the Respect Model ought to think about and respond to the idea that mere persons do not have the same moral status as post-persons.

So, if post-persons have a higher moral status threshold than mere persons, and both Option B is true and hard-liner advocates of the Respect Model currently believe that mere persons have full moral status, then it follows that the belief that mere persons have full moral status “as we currently conceive of it is something of a moral fiction, albeit a convenient one” for self-interested reasons (*ibid.*). Of course, this makes sense of post-persons from the perspective of Option B: if our current notions of mere persons having full moral status is a moral fiction, then the idea of full moral status as an upper limit is preserved when we factor post-persons into our moral status equation.

To be clear, Option B implies that mere persons will be downgraded to partial moral status while post-persons will have full moral status. Keep in mind that full moral status is a moral fiction only insofar as we believe that mere persons have it, not that full moral status itself is a moral fiction. Rather, it is the case that mere persons inhabiting the upper echelons of moral status is the fiction. So, how should the Respect Model itself react to the revelation that mere persons having full moral status is a moral fiction?

3.2.

Given the clarifications of the Respect Model in 3.1, I now present a conditional argument: if post-persons exist alongside mere persons, then the Respect Model itself does not just have commitments but has principled commitments to the claim that post-persons should have a higher threshold of moral status than mere persons. And the principled commitments are stronger than claims about how advocates of the Respect Model should consider the possibility that post-persons may have a higher threshold of moral status than mere persons.¹⁹

¹⁹ Of course, some might say that it is simply the fact that the antecedent in the conditional assumes that post-persons have a higher threshold of moral status than mere persons that the Respect Model would be committed to the view that post-persons have a higher

First, we must recognize that the advocate of the Respect Model has a principled commitment to respecting the dignity of post-persons' higher threshold of moral status because the Respect Model requires recognition of the value of post-persons' lives. Straightforwardly, if the Respect Model believes that moral agents have an overriding obligation (regardless of personal inclinations) to respecting entities with full moral status, and post-persons have full moral status, then the Respect Model has a principled commitment to recognizing the full moral status of post-persons (Kerstein 2009, p. 510). Even if moral agents do not have overriding obligations to respecting the full moral status of post-persons, the Respect Model at least provides moral agents with strong reasons to respect the dignity of post-persons, which may be outweighed by countervailing reasons (Kerstein 2019). Here, disrespecting the full moral status of post-persons would constitute a *pro tanto* wrong. Importantly, the Respect Model still recognizes the value of mere persons; it is just that the existence of post-persons presents more substantive value than mere persons given post-persons' more sophisticated cognitive capacities.

Second, an advocate of the Respect Model will violate the Respect Model's principled commitment to its internal deontic structure if they fail to respect the worth inherent in post-persons, (again) given post-persons' sophisticated cognitive capacities. It would be analogous to treating a brilliant mathematician as if they did not know basic arithmetic. We have a moral duty, on this view, to respect post-persons and their constitutive higher threshold of moral status. Anything less would disrespect their worth.²⁰

Finally, it is worth noting that advocates of the Respect Model may not have fully considered the nature of radically enhanced persons. Think back to the moral equality assumption. An advocate of the Respect Model must ask whether post-persons really should have the same moral status as mere persons. If post-persons really are as qualitatively different than mere persons, such that the qualitative differences make a moral difference in moral status, then the Respect Model must place hierarchical dignity and respect to post-persons.²¹ Likewise, at least at the time of his influential "Moral Status and Human Enhancement," Buchanan seems not to have appreciated the significant qualitative differences between post-persons and mere persons. Buchanan makes moral status a comparative concept, where we determine which entities morally matter more than others. And with Option B on the table, where strong thresholds win out, enhancements of a radical magnitude make a moral difference – at least in the comparative case of post-persons and mere persons. An advocate of the Respect Model, as a matter of consistency, should show deference towards post-persons.

4. On the Inequality of Immunity Problem

Because of the world we live in, that does not (yet) include the existence of post-persons, we already acknowledge that there are "situations in which we have to make some tough decisions, where we cannot protect all, and have to sacrifice some [entities] in order to save others" (Hauskeller 2013, p. 77). It is reasonable to believe that these tough situations will persist in a world where post-persons and mere persons co-exist. There are, then, ethical implications for mere persons given the full moral status of post-persons.

threshold of moral status, which is especially pertinent given our definition of post-persons. However, my argument is that the Respect Model is committed on principle to a normative stance that centers value on post-persons in their conception of moral status.

²⁰ In another move against the moral equality assumption, an advocate of the Respect Model must recognize that the moral equality assumption denies the dignity and respect owed to entities that may have such sophisticated cognitive capacities as post-persons.

²¹ To the point of hierarchical dignity, the Respect Model endorses a kind of *Scala Naturae* for moral status. We see this played out in Figure 1 above. So, following this endorsement, advocates of the Respect Model should respect post-persons, because of their hierarchical moral status. For a discussion on *Scala Naturae* and its relationship to moral status, see Figdor 2020 and 2021.

However, what does this have to do with the inequality of immunity problem?²² To be clear, the inequality of immunity problem posits that immunity from harm would be unequally distributed between post-persons and mere persons, since any value in immunity from harm is normative, and the Respect Model already holds onto an unequal distribution of immunity.²³ For example, based on §3, the Respect Model has a principled commitment to the following: post-persons > mere persons > rocks, where '>' refers to having greater immunity from being sacrificed for some benefit (Douglas 2013).²⁴ Here, the increase in moral status is equal to justified unequal immunity.²⁵

Even with a reasonable belief that the inequality of immunity problem will persist in a world where post-persons and mere persons co-exist, we need a clearer understanding of what mere persons morally face. We may think about the inequality of immunity problem as a zero-sum game, whereby one entity's gain in moral status enhancement entails a moral loss to another entity's stagnant moral status. Douglas seems to confirm as much when he presents the following claim: "the value of mere persons' moral status may be valued less than post-persons because moral status is a positional good, i.e., moral status is a value that depends on one's relative, non-absolute endowment" (2013, p. 483). To this point, Agar similarly argues that the existence of post-persons would entail a world in which mere persons may be permissibly sacrificed for the sake of post-persons in cases of supreme emergencies and supreme opportunities (2013).²⁶ Indeed, the existence of post-persons may even entail that they "be entitled to greater and more beneficial treatment" than mere persons because of their full moral status (DeGrazia 2012, p. 146). But, back to the point of sacrificeability, if post-persons are inviolable given their full moral status, and mere persons do not have full moral status, then it follows that mere persons are not inviolable.

Allow me to clarify what I mean by inviolability. I adopt the definition of inviolability to be about the degree to which an entity can be morally sacrificed for the benefit of another entity (Gray 2020). An entity's degree of inviolability, therefore, is a sliding scale rather than all-or-nothing. In other words, following McMahan (2009) and our general conception of moral status, an entity's degree of inviolability or sacrificeability corresponds to different thresholds of moral status. For example, within a given threshold of moral status – say partial moral status – we order entities under moral consideration and "consider which one [we] ought to kill in scenarios that render the killing permissible while equalizing (so far as is possible) other morally relevant considerations" (Shepherd 2018, p. 93). Thinking back to the analogy between mere persons and non-human animals, just as we now believe that mere persons may sacrifice non-human animals on

²² This problem is notably distinct from the *inequality objection to human enhancement*, which argues that:

- P1. Human enhancement accentuates existing inequalities.
- P2. Inequality has a negative impact on society.
- P3. New technologies that have a negative impact on society should be prohibited by policy makers.
- C. Therefore, human enhancement should be prohibited by policy makers (Veit 2018, p. 405).

²³ One point of consideration here is that the inequality of immunity problem might only exist if the Respect Model is true, which may not be the case if the Interest Model of moral status is true (DeGrazia 2012). As I have assumed that the Respect Model is indeed true for the purposes of this paper, then we must seriously reckon with the inequality of immunity problem.

²⁴ Notice that the principled commitment provided is tenable with Figure 1.

²⁵ This is not a new problem by any stretch of the imagination. Think here, again, of the long-lasting assumptions of the *Scala Naturae*. Again, see Figdor 2020 and 2021.

²⁶ A supreme emergency is a situation in which it is morally permissible to sacrifice "individuals with the highest moral status to save a (much) greater number of individuals with that same status" (Agar 2013, p. 72). A supreme opportunity is a situation in which it is morally permissible to sacrifice entities with partial moral status to secure significant potential benefits (*ibid.*).

consequentialist grounds in supreme emergencies, so too may post-persons sacrifice mere persons on consequentialist grounds in supreme emergencies *ceteris paribus* (DeGrazia 2012, p. 4).²⁷

5. Assuaging Worries

5.1.

Here, I will argue that while advocates of the Respect Model have principled commitments to the view that post-persons should have a higher threshold of moral status than mere persons, this ought not cause mere persons to worry about the inequality of immunity problem. However, there are at least two kinds of worries that the advocate of the Respect Model may have regarding the inequality of immunity problem. The first is a rational worry and the second is a self-interested worry. I begin with the first.

The advocate of the Respect Model who holds a rational worry about the inequality of immunity problem (let us call them the *rational worrywart*) hedges that the inequality of immunity problem poses moral risks because of uncertainty in the morally relevant empirical matter of how post-persons will actually treat mere persons. However, that the rational worrywart should have principled commitments to upholding the dignity of post-persons is a reason itself not to rationally worry about the inequality of immunity problem. From the basic principles of the Respect Model, because post-persons have a higher moral status than mere persons, it is rational for the advocate of the Respect Model to claim that mere persons may be permissibly harmed for the sake of post-persons (Douglas 2013, p. 474). This is because we have already claimed with good reason that mere persons are not as inviolable as post-persons. If the rational worrywart is nevertheless rationally worried about the inequality of immunity problem, then the rational worrywart should bite the bullet and abandon the Respect Model altogether in favor of the Interest Model of moral status which removes the threshold concept altogether (Buchanan 2009, p. 367).

Beyond the confines of the basic principles of the Respect Model, there are other established reasons for the rational worrywart to not rationally worry about the inequality of immunity problem. If the moral capacities of post-persons will facilitate a post-person to do what they ought morally to do, then there is a higher probability that post-persons will do what they ought morally to do (Persson and Savulescu 2019, p. 7). Where mere persons are hindered by myopic biases in common-sense morality such that attitudes of altruism are unable to truly include the concept of collectives and think into the far future, post-persons' moral attitudes are unhindered by the same biases found in mere persons' common-sense morality (*ibid.*). For example, post-persons may be able to easily reason morally by (i) being impartial when required, (ii) reaching correct moral judgements in stressful conditions, (iii) seldom suffering from *akrasia*, and (iv) running calculations to determine the consequences of their choices (DeGrazia 2012, p. 3).²⁸ What would this mean from the perspective of mere persons? Well, if the moral capacities of post-persons truly are radically enhanced, then it may be the case that their radically enhanced altruism and generosity towards mere persons would allow them to objectively decide that mere persons should be the ones to live in supreme emergencies. For instance, we might rationally believe that

If post-persons are better moral agents and better moral philosophers, their existence might be 'good for us' (whoever 'us' is), enabling the realization of a

²⁷ Even under the Respect Model, which highly values deontic reasoning, consequentialist reasoning may be required in cases of supreme emergencies or opportunities, at least from a pragmatic perspective.

²⁸ Another way to say this is that post-persons' sophisticated cognitive capacities may enable their moral reasoning to go far beyond the *point-and-shoot morality* of mere persons (Greene 2014).

better world through improved moral action – ours as well as theirs, if we can be persuaded to act on the reasons they provide, via the more effective means of moral persuasion they employ. They might also...produce, directly or indirectly, enhancements to the moral status of [mere] persons; perhaps they will even provide more clarity on these questions of moral status enhancements for pre-persons or non-persons, and our obligations thereto (Chan forthcoming).

5.2.

The second worry is the self-interested worry and let us call the advocate of the Respect Model who holds a self-interested worry about the inequality of immunity problem the *self-interested worrywart*. By the end, I explore how this worry may provide us with a reason to strengthen moral protections in lower thresholds of moral status, i.e., partial moral status. But first, remember that post-persons present an obvious epistemic difficulty for us, not only in terms of knowing their precise cognitive capacities but also in terms of how they will treat mere persons. The self-interested worry makes the epistemic difficulty a central concern, where the established reasons in 5.1 to not rationally worry about the inequality of immunity problem rely largely on tenuous hopes that post-persons will be morally superior to mere persons in terms of their behavior towards entities with lower thresholds of moral status. Indeed, the self-interested worrywart is skeptical that tenuous hopes are sufficient to assuage rational worries – especially since there is an ineliminable risk that post-persons create more harm than good in their existence. What the self-interested worrywart requires for their worry to be assuaged is an argument with full knowledge that mere persons will be protected from post-persons. However, because of the epistemic difficulties of post-persons, “It is possible that [post-persons] will emerge who have much more sophisticated [cognitive capacities] than we do, and that if it came down to a choice – us or them – it would make sense to us and them that they should be the ones to live” in supreme emergencies (Shepherd 2018, p. 93).

So, while the inequality of immunity problem ought not rationally worry the rational worrywart from a moral point of view, the lingering self-interested worrywart believes that the inequality of immunity between post-persons and mere persons may lead to the obsolescence of mere persons if mere persons are sacrificeable. This is to say that the content of the self-interested worry concerns itself with whether post-persons may be an existential threat to mere persons. Another reason that the idea of post-persons is so worrisome from a self-interested point of view is that it would disrupt our current hierarchical moral status (Agar 2013). Importantly, the self-interested worry is not a sufficient reason for the self-interested worrywart to deny the respect owed to post-persons according to the Respect Model. Similarly, the self-interested worrywart need not deny the self-interested worry for the sake of principles. Instead, the self-interested worry allows us to take steps now to address such worries, which has both important practical implications for mere persons in a world with post-persons and for the actual world we live in without post-persons.

The first step is to admit the foreseeability of mistreatment (which I take to be the driving force of the self-interested worry), because “The foreseeability of mistreatment, however, should provide us with reasons to ensure beings are treated commensurately with their moral status” (Chan forthcoming). The foreseeability of mistreatment is not a sufficient reason for the self-interested worrywart to think that mere persons’ moral status is on par with post-persons’ moral status. Here is an analogical case to consider from Chan: when an employer mistreats new staff members, that mistreatment is not therefore a reason to claim that new staff members should be employers – rather, the issue has to do with the mistreatment itself (*ibid.*).

But how can foreseeability of mistreatment provide us with practical reasons now to assuage future self-interested worries? The second step (hinted at in the above quotation by Chan) is that the foreseeability of mistreatment is a reason to ensure an entity’s proper

treatment that is commensurate with their moral status. But what exactly does this mean for mere persons? Here, I avowedly explore a proposal to adopt, promote, and strengthen partial moral status to defend mere persons. In short, what is needed is some moral imagination on our part if mere persons have partial moral status. To reiterate, “If an entity has rudimentary cognitive capacities, and no sophisticated cognitive capacities, then it has” partial moral status (Terrill 2021, p. 188). Mere persons have rudimentary cognitive capacities relative to the sophisticated cognitive capacities of post-persons. Therefore, mere persons have partial moral status.

In response to the self-interested worry, partial moral status under the Respect Model may involve two entailments. First, it entails recognizing the expansiveness of what it means for an entity to have partial moral status. Second, it entails strengthening moral protections now for entities with partial moral status. Beginning with the first entailment, the most appealed to rudimentary cognitive capacity is sentience (Terrill 2021, p. 190). Because partial moral status is based on “the ability to feel pain, or perhaps sentience generally, [partial moral status] only establishes a moral floor” (Figdor 2020). And as sentience comes in degrees, this means that the threshold for partial moral status is wide enough to capture a large range of entities.²⁹ The wideness of partial moral status, in conjunction with the threshold concept, may mean that Figure 1 needs to be complicated – as seen in Figure 2 – such that the threshold of partial moral status has several sub-thresholds that are concomitant with an entity’s degree of rudimentary cognitive capacities (i.e., sentience). Nevertheless, that any entity is sentient is sufficient to establish that such an entity has basic rights, which is a fact that mere persons can take comfort in (Warren 1997, p. 176). This is in accordance with Mary Anne Warren’s *anti-cruelty principle*, which holds that “Sentient beings are not to be killed or subjected to pain or suffering, unless there is no other feasible way of furthering goals...[of] other entities that have a stronger moral status than can be based on sentience alone” (*ibid.*, p. 152). When all sentient entities have partial immunity, sacrificeability will not be as worrisome.

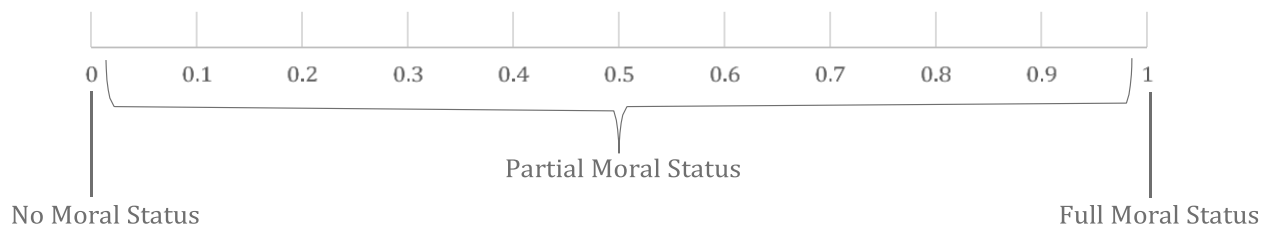


Figure 2.

As for the second entailment, if the problem is that mere persons may be permissibly sacrificed for the sake of post-persons, then we might consider strengthening lower thresholds of moral status now. Just as a rising tide lifts all boats, strengthening partial moral status benefits all sentient entities. Importantly, a strengthened partial moral status “implies serious moral constraints on how [partial moral status]-holders may be treated” (Terrill 2021, p. 189). Yet, strengthening lower thresholds does not impugn the dignity of post-persons. Although the Respect Model has principled commitments to the claim that post-persons should have a higher threshold of moral status than mere persons, remember that a mere person will still morally matter more than a sentient non-person

²⁹ Even if sentience comes in degrees, we need not make a claim right now about whether partial moral status is a scalar or threshold concept. Both of which may work within the confines of the Respect Model.

ceteris paribus because of the kinds of entities mere persons are and in virtue of their degree of sentience (again, see Figure 2). Moreover, we might just have the wrong idea about the relationship between full moral status, partial moral status, and their relationships to the inequality of immunity problem. For example, Chan argues that full moral status “need not mean that post-persons have a stronger right to life than [mere] persons, any more than [full moral status] in comparison to the lower threshold capacity of sentience means that [mere] persons have a stronger claim not to experience pain than, say, kittens” (forthcoming).

Regardless, how we act now towards fellow holders of partial moral status will invariably depend on the logical space we carve out for partial moral status. But because there is still moral uncertainty about where mere persons stand in relation to other partial moral status-holders, we ought to re-think how we extend our moral consideration to partial moral status-holders in virtue of “making our current views at least *somewhat* more inclusive, in the spirit of caution” (Sebo forthcoming). I do not articulate all possible partial moral status-holders that we should extend more moral consideration to than we do now, but a good starting point is to consider non-human animals, insects, and possibly plants.

6. Conclusion

Against standardly accepted assumptions and skepticism, I have argued that advocates of the Respect Model have principled commitments to the claim that post-persons ought to have a higher threshold of moral status over mere persons because of the Respect Model’s underlying principles of respect for entities with full moral status, of which post-persons are included. While I have illustrated that advocates of the Respect Model’s worries about mere persons in consideration of the inequality of immunity problem are not overly concerning, the illustrations are admittedly tentative. Even if the advocate of the Respect Model’s worries are not fully assuaged, *vide* Chan’s optimism on why the advocate should recognize that the existence of post-persons has the potential to cause good philosophical trouble by making us question “our usual assumptions about moral status...[and by] forcing us to confront tricky questions about moral status beyond species boundaries, [which] could help challenge speciesist assumptions regarding moral status and thus pave the way for better treatment of other animals” (forthcoming). Advocates of the Respect Model, then, must confront the possible expansion of our moral circle – especially when it comes to entities with higher thresholds of moral status than us and entities that fit in the same threshold of moral status as us. Post-persons should move us to err on the side of caution, meaning that we should treat many beings as having (at least some) partial moral status (Sebo forthcoming). The existence of post-persons – who deserve the utmost respect given their dignity as full moral status-holders – provides us with serious reasons to consider reforming partial moral status through more robust moral protections, thus teaching us how to stop worrying in the process.

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