The Ethics of Killing Zombies

The Problem of Moral Status and the Question of Who Has it?

By
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I've been on a nostalgic B.J. Thomas kick lately. B.J. Thomas's place at the top of the music charts spanned three decades—the 60s, 70s, and 80s—and three genres—country, Christian, and pop rock, with hits like, "Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head," "Hooked on a Feeling," "I Just Can't Help Believing," and, "Another Somebody Done Somebody Wrong Song." He died just a couple of years ago, in 2021, at age 78. A couple of days ago I was listening to an automated mix of his music that led to an album I hadn't heard of, "Song's from the Neighborhood: The Music of Mr. Rogers." Thomas is among several famous artists who perform pop-versions of thirteen songs from the beloved children's television show, including Jon Secada who starts it off with, what else, "Won't You be My Neighbor."

I got a warm, nostalgic feeling hearing it, but, to my surprise, it conjured up sad thoughts and images, rather than pleasant memories of Mr. Rogers singing the iconic melody while changing his sweater and sneakers at the start of the show. Upon hearing, "I have always wanted to have a neighbor just like you. I've always wanted to live in a neighborhood with you," I suddenly thought about those living in The Catalyst, the former Spokane Hotel that was recently transformed into a Homeless shelter, that so happens to be in my neighborhood. I thought about the hostility and fear so many of my neighbors expressed over this addition and of how it must feel to those now living at The Catalyst to know they are unwelcome, feared, and misunderstood by so many, especially at a time when they are in most need of understanding and help. "I have always wanted to have a neighbor just like you. I've always wanted to live in a neighborhood with you:" I wanted to stand outside the shelter and blast that song to everyone inside.

> So, let's make the most of this beautiful day.
> Since we're together, we might as well say,
> Would you be mine? Could you be mine?
> Won't you be my neighbor?

I thought of Vladimir Putin's unprovoked war against Ukraine, and of the heartless destruction of neighborhoods and the killing of neighbors happening there. Such barbarity raging at the very start of another new year instead of living, as we teach our children the world over:

> It's a neighborly day in this beautywood.
> A neighborly day for a beauty.
> Would you be mine?
> Could you be mine?

I thought of all the unnecessary and tragic mass shootings in our country, including the most recent in California, and, of course, I thought of the six officers in Memphis who, only a couple of weeks ago, beat Trye Nichols to death in his own neighborhood.

> Won't you please, won't you please?
> Please, won't you be my neighbor?
>
> Neighbors are people who are close to us
> And friends are people who are close to our hearts
> I like to think of you as my neighbor and my friend.

I thought of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini, the young Iranian woman who was killed in October while in custody of Iran's immoral "morality" police, and I thought of what a sad end to one year and the discouraging beginning of another. In today's small world, Iran is our neighbor, and so was Mahsa Amini. Memphis is our neighbor, and so was Trye Nichols. Los Angeles and Half Moon Bay, California are our neighbors, and so are those who are now not even the most recent victims of mass shootings in our nation. The people of Ukraine are our neighbors, and so are all those who have been killed, injured, and suffered loss because of one madman's lust for power. The people living in Camp Hope, right here in Spokane, are our neighbors, no matter what part of town we live in, and so are those now living in The Catalyst, just a couple of miles down the road.

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> Since we're together, we might as well say,
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> Won't you be my neighbor?
>
> Won't you please, won't you please?
> Please, won't you be my neighbor?

How is it that our species so often engages in the taking of other lives? If I were to answer this question in a sentence, I'd say it's because we don't recognize our relationship to the victims of our homicidal tendencies. And this has been so since Humanity's earliest days on this Earth, at which time we lived, like other apes still do, in small family troops. It is because of this that *kin selection*, as it is referred to by evolutionary psychologists, remains part of our genetic makeup and inherited instinct. Favoring our own kin, those most closely related to us, is an important instinct when it comes to the care for and survival of our children, and perpetually passing along our genetic information, which is our biological purpose. As evolutionary psychologist Robert Wright says in his book, *The Moral Animal*, "The only potentially immortal organic entity is a gene (or, strictly speaking, the pattern of information encoded in the gene, since the physical gene itself will pass away after conveying the pattern through replication).[1]

The genetic instinct to favor those most closely related to ourselves remains present in us today. The theory of *Kin Selection*, coined by biologist William Hamilton in 1963, "holds that individuals of any sexually reproducing species will behave altruistically toward kin in proportion to the number of genes they share. Parents and children, and full brothers and sisters, share 50 percent of their genes, and so will behave more altruistically toward each other than toward first cousins, who share only 25 percent."[2] The fewer genes we have in common with others, including more distant relatives, the less altruistic we are instinctively inclined to feel toward them, and even less toward those we have no direct relationship with at all.

As human societies became larger, first as tribes, then kingdoms, then states, and eventually nations, we had to develop additional, non genetic, reasons to feel related to each other in order to live peacefully together. Identifying strongly as a member of one's tribe, or Kingdom, or state, or nation in which one is born has proven to be a potent substitute, if not hijacker, of our instinct toward kin selection. This is why, in the age of Nationalism it has been acceptable to go to war with those outside our own Nations, including "collateral damage," the unintentional and sometimes intentional indiscriminate killing of civilians, because we don't feel related to outsiders. Today, as the Age of the Nation State wanes and we feel less bound to our national identities, we are returning to smaller tribal groups based upon shared religion, politics, ideology, and personal identities like race, sexuality, and gender.

This has led to a lot more anxiety and conflict in our lives since outsiders are no longer a remote reality beyond the borders of our nations, but can be anyone, anywhere, including our own countrymen, next door neighbors, classmates, coworkers, and so forth. This isn't good given that the fear of differences is about as instinctive in us as is our fondness for kin and kindred spirits. The stories we tell and warnings we still give our children about big bad wolves and not talking to strangers are ancient and are indicative of our biological tendency to avoid anything we are unfamiliar with, anyone we are not familial with—strangers, including their strange beliefs, languages, religions, colors, and cultures.

We instinctively dislike those who are dislike us, which leads to ridiculing and demonizing them, which further leads to dehumanizing them, and then to disregarding their worth and dignity so we can justify oppressing, exploiting, and even killing them without having to acknowledge we are harming real human beings. We call them monsters, traitors, criminals, terrorists, anything to avoid acknowledging their humanity. I recall many years ago seeing President George W. Bush on a stage during which he held out his arm as if he were hugging someone with it and told the audience, "You've got to put your arm around your neighbor and tell 'em you love 'em." Yet only moments earlier, the same President who was already responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of innocent people living in Afghanistan and Iraq, said he was going to "hunt down the terrorists one by one and kill them," no matter how many other outsiders get hurt in the process. It seemed clear to me his definition of who our neighbors are extends no farther than the U.S. borders.

As much as this attitude grieves me, I cannot blame anyone for succumbing to the powerful genetic instincts I've outlined, instincts that once worked well to help the fittest, or maybe fiercest, of our ancestors survive—kin selection and fear of strangers. But we no longer live in their small worlds and no longer face the constant danger of being eaten alive by a predator or overpowered by another unknown band of humans. This is why, during the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods, we developed a better way of getting along with each other, even better than substituting our family bonds with tribal, national, and other identities. We recognized our kinship with all of humanity and, with this, the inherent worth and dignity of every person. This notion, also called

"universalism," with a small "u," when truly believed and cherished, prevents us from hating and harming others, including strangers, as much as if they were considered members of our own family.

Another way to put it is that all persons, because they are human beings, have what philosophers call *moral status*. This is what Immanuel Kant was getting with his Categorial Imperative, "act only according to those rules that you can also will as universal laws,"[3] a rule, in other words, that is applicable in all circumstances. That rule, for Kant and others, is the recognition that all persons have worth and dignity and, therefore, must be treated as such.

In his book, *Reality+*, philosopher David Chalmers has a unique section on moral status, explaining that "A being has moral status when it's an object of moral concern in roughly the way that people are objects of moral concern—that is, it's a being whose welfare we need to take into account in our moral deliberations."[4] Although this definition takes for granted that at least all human being have moral status, Chalmers gives an example suggesting even this much isn't always considered so. "The Black Lives Matter movement is all about moral status," he says. "Black lives matter as much as any human lives do! … In the past, and even today, many people and many social institutions have treated Black lives as if they mattered less than white lives."[5] So even though we say all human beings have moral status and should, thus, be treated with dignity, many in the world are still treated with less moral status than others, and some with little at all.

Given that his book looks at the problems of philosophy through the lens of virtual reality, Chalmers asks us to consider if it is ethical to kill virtual persons, including virtual zombies and other computer-generated human simulations. The ethics of violent games aside, the question Chalmers is asking us to consider is do simulated persons have moral status? Is it unethical for us to kill them in video games? These philosophical zombies are described as "near-duplicates of human beings with no conscious inner life at all. Zombies have no subjective experience."[6] And for Chalmers this is precisely why they don't have moral status. It is why zombie lives don't matter. "My own view," he says, "(shared with many others) is that what bestows moral status is consciousness. If an entity has no capacity for consciousness, and never will have, then it has no moral status. It can be treated as an object."[7]

This phrase, "capacity for consciousness," makes the question of moral status even more complex, because it implies our decisions and actions must also consider the welfare of other creatures too. "If it can experience something," he says, "that should be taken into account in our moral calculations. It's arguable that systems with a minimal degree of consciousness (ants?) have only a minimal degree of moral status and so weigh much less heavily than humans in our moral deliberations. But consciousness at least gets them in the door."[8] Some philosophers and ethicists argue it is enough just to be sentient to deserve moral status, meaning any entity that can "experience positive or negative states."[9] So, it may be necessary to kill a pantry invading ant colony, but it is not ethical to step on an ant, extinguishing its existence, for no good reason.

Someday, perhaps sooner than we imagine, we will create virtual entities that are conscious and have subjective experiences and, by Chalmers definition, should grant them moral status. Chalmers makes a good argument that we ourselves are conscious simulations living in a virtual reality. For an intriguing and fun ride down that road, I suggest you read *Reality+*. But for our purposes, I would say that to a large extent all of us are living in a reality of our own making, or, perhaps, one that has been imposed upon us by others, but doesn't necessarily reflect reality. (I'm reminded of a cartoon someone sent in which a Catholic priest says to a Native American, "If it weren't for us you people would still be worshipping the Sun." The Native American responds, "Dude, the Sun is real!") We all deserve moral status because we do have subjective experiences and because we are conscious, but our grasp of truth and reality is extremely limited and may be more in our heads than anywhere else.

What we consider to be true and real is merely our interpretation of the information we perceive and, today, there is more information bombarding us than ever, much of it false to begin with. At best, in my opinion, we should depend upon empirical evidence and sound reason to interpret the reality around us as best we can, but even this is limited and subject to error. It is also true, as we have seen, that our reality is often shaped by ancient genetic and biological instincts that may no longer serve us. It is these instincts that have too often led our species to limit the boundaries of our worldviews so that the only people we treat as real people are those within our small circles of inclusion and recognition—our own families, our tribes, our identity group, our religion, our political party, our country, or just those living in the few square blocks we consider our neighborhood, those on our side of the tracks. Too many of us treat those outside these small circles as one of Chalmers' philosophical zombies, as if, as he says, "there is arguably no one home to mistreat."[10] They can be mistreated because they live outside our virtual realities and are not considered real people, or are thought of as lesser people underserving of the same level of moral status as ourselves.

The process, again, is simple. Draw a circle around those we most closely identify with, demonize those outside its boundary, then dehumanize them so we can more easily deny their inherent worth and dignity. Chalmers says, "a philosophical zombie isn't the Hollywood version that's risen from the dead. Instead, it's a being that looks and behaves just like an ordinary human being but is not conscious at all. For a philosophical zombie, everything is dark inside."[11] Is this what we convince ourselves is true of those whose lives and welfare and dignity we so easily disregard? That they are "dark inside?" That they are zombies without any real moral status that, like ants, can simply be crushed if they get in our way, if they creep into our pantries, cross our borders, vote against us, move into our neighborhoods?

Although the concept of universal human worth and dignity has been central to global democracies since the French revolution, and since has been embedded into the constitutions of Germany, Italy, Ireland, Japan, Israel, South African, and the United States, and other nations, we have all had a hard time living up to this great aspiration. I am grateful to be part of a liberal religion that considers, at least for the time being, respect for the inherent worth and dignity of

every person its first principle. And it is why I am committed to doing what I can to help our religion survive and thrive so that we can remain that still small voice, that bit of human conscience, that reminds us we must continue to expand our consciousness so that it will grow big enough to include the whole hoop of the world, so that nobody anywhere will ever be treated like an mindless, soulless zombie; so that there will be no more mass shootings, or wars, or young women brutalized by the morality police, our young black men beaten to death by cops, or people living in freezing tents on barren plots of land or under dark overpasses because we're afraid to let them in our neighborhoods. Our liberal religion, our nation, and the whole of Western culture, if not the whole of humanity, aspires to establish the kind of society that is so fundamental to what it means to be good that even a child can comprehend how we ought to treat each other.

Won't you please, won't you please?
Please, won't you be my neighbor?

[1] Wright, Robert, *The Moral Animal*, Vintage Books (Random House Div.), New York, NY, 1994, p. 157.

[2] Fukuyama, Francis. The Origins of Political Order (p. 30). Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Kindle Edition.

[3] Chalmers, David J., *Reality+*, W.W. Norton and Company, New York, NY, 2022, p. 337.

[4] Ibid., p. 339.

[5] Ibid., p. 340.

[6] Ibid., p. 340f.

[7] Ibid., p. 340.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid., p. 342.

[10] Ibid., p. 341.

[11] Ibid., p. 285.