

Locating Consciousness in Moral Agency

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Abstract:

The standard view of moral agency holds that (phenomenal) consciousness is a necessary condition of moral agency. This paper argues against the standard view.

The claim that consciousness is necessary for moral agency can be cashed out in two ways. First, consciousness might be indirectly necessary for moral agency; that is, consciousness might be necessary for the instantiation of other capacities that are necessary for moral agency. I argue that consciousness is not necessary for four candidate necessary conditions of moral agency: action, moral concept possession, reasons-responsiveness, and moral understanding. Second, consciousness might be directly necessary for moral agency; that is, consciousness might play a direct contributory role in moral agency. I argue that consciousness need not play such a role in the form of moral motivation or a moral compass.

Given that consciousness, therefore, isn't necessary for moral agency, the question arises of what role consciousness plays in moral life. I posit that consciousness offers a pathway to moral agency, serves as a reliability mechanism, allows for some forms of responsibility, and enables certain relationships within the moral community. I then discuss broader implications of my argument, especially on the possibility of artificial moral agency.