

# "On Being Morally Considerable"

Kenneth Goodpaster, *Journal of Philosophy* (June 1978)

**Summary.** Our usual assumptions about moral actors and those who deserve moral consideration from moral actors are straightforward: human beings. But Dr. Goodpaster calls both of these assumptions into question, especially our assumption that only human beings deserve moral consideration from us. He argues that all living things deserve such consideration, and that this has implications for the framework that we bring to environmental ethics. Indeed, it provides the philosophical foundation of care for creation.

- 1) Ethics is about how our consciences guide us in practical decision making. It is born from the **moral insight - the awareness of our need to respect the freedom and well-being of others.**
- 2) Normally, and primarily, we hold individual persons **morally responsible** for their actions, but we can also ask whether more comprehensive entities (**institutions**) can be held responsible.
- 3) Normally, and primarily, our **moral consideration** is given and should be given to one another as brothers and sisters, fellow human beings ("person to person").
- 4) However, just as we can raise questions about who or what can be a moral **AGENT**, that is, **MORALLY RESPONSIBLE**, so too we can raise questions about who or what can be a moral **RECIPIENT** - that is, who or what can be **MORALLY CONSIDERABLE**.
  - The **first** point of the article is that moral considerability is not restricted solely to human beings, even though human beings are the **paradigms** of moral considerability.
  - The **second** point of the article is that the next most natural boundary for moral considerability is **sentience** or the ability to feel pleasure and pain. But this is insufficient.
  - The **third** point of the article is that the most defensible criterion for moral considerability is being a **living** being. Such beings have interests in maintaining their lives.
- 5) Note that attributing **moral considerability** to someone or something does not indicate what we think about the relative **MORAL SIGNIFICANCE** of that someone or something.
- 6) A final question raised by the article: How are we to understand the phrase **BIOTIC COMMUNITY** (as used by Aldo Leopold) in connection with moral recipients?
  - I. Should we think of it as simply the **collection** of all individual living creatures including human persons, animals, and plants?
  - II. Or is it more unified than this? Might it be an organized life system that encompasses all of the living individuals above, but also has a moral identity of its own because it displays the characteristics of **a living thing on a more comprehensive level** (think of individual moral agents and institutional moral agents mentioned at #2 above)?