
SENTIENTISM, MOTIVATION, AND PHILOSOPHICAL VULCANS

BY

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Abstract: If moral status depends on the capacity for consciousness, what kind of consciousness matters exactly? Two popular answers are that any kind of consciousness matters (Broad Sentientism), and that what matters is the capacity for pleasure and suffering (Narrow Sentientism). I argue that the broad answer is too broad, while the narrow answer is likely too narrow, as Chalmers has recently argued by appeal to ‘philosophical Vulcans’. I defend a middle position, Motivational Sentientism, on which what matters is motivating consciousness: any kind of consciousness which presents its subject with reasons for action.

Sentientism is the idea that our moral concern should extend to all and only ‘sentient beings’. More precisely, it is the thesis that sentience is necessary and sufficient for what can be called ‘moral status’ – for having interests that moral agents must respect for their own sake. But what kind of ‘sentience’ matters, exactly? Is it any kind of consciousness, or specifically the capacity for pleasure and suffering (‘Narrow Sentientism’)? I consider arguments for both options, particularly a recent argument for Broad Sentientism by Chalmers (2022), using the thought-experiment of an affectless but intelligent ‘philosophical Vulcan’. Both arguments, I claim, depend crucially on whether there is a necessary link between conscious motivation and affective valence: if motivation requires affect, then the Vulcans described by Chalmers are impossible. I argue that the best way to synthesise the intuitions supporting both Broad and Narrow Sentientism is through an intermediate position, which I term ‘Motivational Sentientism’, which can afford to be agnostic about the affect-motivation link. According to Motivational

Sentientism, moral status depends on having motivating consciousness – any form of consciousness whose phenomenal character can provide reasons for action. Pleasure/suffering is one instance of this, but if philosophical Vulcans are possible, then it is not the only one. So if Chalmers’ Vulcan argument succeeds, then Motivational Sentientism differs from Narrow Sentientism; if the argument fails due the impossibility of Vulcans, then Motivational Sentientism is equivalent to Narrow Sentientism. But in either case it preserves what was appealing about Narrow Sentientism while addressing Chalmers’ argument for Broad Sentientism. That appeal stemmed, I argue, from the idea that a being’s interests must have some connection with what could motivate them. This idea not only survives the Vulcan argument, but neatly explains the argument’s force.

Section 1 outlines the dispute between Broad and Narrow Sentientism, and why it matters. Sections 2 and 3 then lay out what seem to me the strongest arguments for each: the Resonance Argument for Narrow Sentientism, and the Vulcan Argument for Broad Sentientism. In Section 4, I explain how the view I call Motivational Sentientism can do justice to what is most plausible in both arguments, while remaining neutral on what divides them.

Finally, Section 5 considers an extension to the Vulcan Argument that Chalmers suggests, involving conscious beings which lack not only affect but any sort of motivation or agency and are thus not much like any *Star Trek* character, or indeed anything that could reasonably be called a ‘character’. I argue, firstly, that Motivational Sentientism probably denies moral status to these beings, and, secondly, that this is probably the right position to take.

1. *What is sentientism?*

The idea I will be calling ‘sentientism’ (roughly, that our moral concern should extend specifically to ‘sentient’ creatures) is often discussed by philosophers as an attractive criterion of moral status.¹ Outside of philosophy, it often seems to be the most commonly endorsed general criterion of moral status, among the minority of people who endorse any general criterion of moral status. The website sentientism.info has a page of ‘suspected sentientists’ (Woodhouse, 2022a): public figures who have publicly expressed sentiments suggestive of the doctrine, full of actors, comedians, historical figures, activists, and others. It has a particularly strong relationship to the animal liberation movement, because it provides a principled

¹Endorsers of some sort of sentientism include Bentham (1996), Regan (1975, 1979, 1983), Singer (1990), Rosati (2009), Schwitzgebel and Garza (2015, 2020), Shepherd (2018), Sebo (2018), Lin (2021); for sometimes critical discussion, see also Mullin (2011), Lee (2014, 2019), Lee (2018), Block (2019), Kriegel (2019), van der Deijl (2021), and Bradford n.d.

basis for treating animals – not plants, but not just humans – as morally important beings.

The most obvious rivals to sentientism are views which restrict moral status to a narrower set of beings, such as specifically humans ('anthropocentrism') or 'rational agents', taken to include adult humans as well as any other beings with the same self-aware reflectiveness (aliens, robots, etc.).² But it also contrasts with views that distribute moral status more broadly, in particular those that attribute status to all living things ('biocentrism') or to holistic assemblages of them ('ecocentrism').³

But how should sentientism be spelled out? Is the morally relevant property the mere fact of being (phenomenally) conscious in some form? Or is it a particular form of consciousness? In particular, many writers characterise sentience in terms of pleasure and suffering, states that feel good or bad. This restriction would imply that if there were a being that was conscious but absolutely incapable of any sort of pleasure or suffering, it would lack moral status just as much as a non-conscious object. This is the conflict between what Chalmers calls Broad Sentientism and Narrow Sentientism:

Broad Sentientism: A being has moral status if and only if it has the capacity for phenomenal consciousness.

Narrow Sentientism: A being has moral status if and only if it has the capacity for affective phenomenal consciousness.⁴

Obviously, it matters a lot what 'affective' means. A variety of definitions can be found in the literature. Shepherd characterises affective experience simply as 'hedonic experiences (involving pleasure and pain) and emotional experiences (involving the emotions, including so-called epistemic and so-called metacognitive emotions)' (2018, pp. 31–35). Smithies and Weiss give a definition that hinges on understanding positive and negative 'valence' broadly enough to include not just emotions but also desires: 'an affective experience is an experience that presents its objects in a positively or negatively valenced way' (2019, p. 28). And Chalmers' definition also appeals to 'valence', but construed more narrowly:

Affective phenomenal consciousness: conscious states with a positive or negative affective valence.

²Confusingly, popular usage sometimes uses the term 'sentient' for this sort of reflective self-awareness; a preferable term also sometimes also used is 'sapient'.

³For discussion of anthropocentrism, sentientism, biocentrism, and ecocentrism in environmental ethics, see Feinberg (1974), Goodpaster (1978), Callicott (1980), Johnson (1981), Varner (1990), Varner (1998), Agar (2001), and Gruen (2017).

⁴Definitions taken from Chalmers (2020a, 2020b). Chalmers includes brackets around 'if and', to let the theses be read either as claiming both necessity and sufficiency, or as only claiming necessity. I am taking them both in the stronger reading, as asserting a necessary and sufficient condition for moral status.

- Positive valence: pleasure, satisfaction, happiness, ...
- Negative valence: pain, frustration, suffering, ... (Chalmers, 2020b, cf. Chalmers, 2022, p. 335).

On this definition, some emotional states which are neither pleasant nor unpleasant (e.g. feeling surprised, calm, alert, or intrigued) would not count as ‘affect’, and nor would desires which present some prospect positively (‘to-be-sought’) or negatively (‘to-be-avoided’), if they did not feel good or bad. The fact that Chalmers describes the P-Vulcans as having desires, and that all of his examples of affective states are hedonic, speaks in favour of this reading. Thus in the sense I will be using it, ‘affect’ covers simply hedonic states: states that in any way consciously feel good or bad for their subjects.

Broad and Narrow Sentientism probably give the same practical verdicts about humans and animals: whichever we are inclined to ascribe consciousness, we are also inclined to ascribe affective (i.e. hedonic) consciousness. But they will diverge on at least two sorts of case. The first is beings like what Chalmers calls ‘Vulcans’: beings that are conscious and intelligent but stipulated to be completely devoid of affect. If such beings are possible, then Narrow Sentientism denies them, and Broad Sentientism ascribes them, moral status. Though they may seem far-fetched at present, we should consider the possibility of 1 day encountering beings like this – or intentionally or unintentionally creating something like them with future advances in AI or bioengineering (cf. Liao, 2020; Schwitzgebel and Garza, 2015, 2020). For understanding our ethical obligations to a strange or alien mind, should our guiding question be about the presence or absence of consciousness *per se*, or specifically the presence or absence of conscious pleasure and suffering?

A second place where Broad and Narrow Sentientism will diverge is over the moral implications of panpsychism and other radical metaphysics of consciousness. Such theories (e.g. Seager, 1995, 2017, Strawson, 2006, Chalmers, 2015, 2017, Goff, 2017) postulate that consciousness in some form is very widespread in nature, or even ubiquitous. If that is true, then Broad Sentientism would seem to require extending our moral concern far more widely than we might have thought, not just to animals and plants but to air and rocks and electrons and photons and spacetime itself. This seems like potentially a *reductio ad absurdum* for either panpsychism or sentientism, because it’s hard to see what it could even mean to treat electrons as having moral status. In light of this, it makes sense for panpsychists attracted to sentientism to prefer Narrow Sentientism, because their theories need not imply the ubiquity of *affective* consciousness: intuitively, one sensible answer to ‘why do cats have moral status but not rocks, if both are conscious?’ is ‘cats can feel good or bad and rocks can’t, and that’s what matters’. Moreover, the Broad/Narrow dispute will be crucial

for how sentientist panpsychism relates to ethical views like biocentrism and ecocentrism, which as noted above are usually viewed as rivals to sentientism but may converge if consciousness is more widespread in nature than usually assumed. At the very least, any attempt to draw out the moral implications of panpsychism will have to confront the Narrow/Broad dispute at some point.

Both Broad and Narrow versions of sentientism are popular, and both have advantages and disadvantages. The next two sections lay out what seem to me the strongest arguments for both, in particular Chalmers' Vulcan argument against narrow sentientism. This paper attempts to respond to this argument, and to offer a more nuanced delimitation of the sort of consciousness that sentientists should take as important. But first, let us consider what might attract us to Narrow Sentientism in the first place.

2. *An argument for narrowing*

Defenders of sentientism often phrase it in ways suggestive of Narrow, rather than Broad, sentientism. Some representative examples include:

- The question is not, Can they reason?, nor Can they talk? but, Can they suffer? (Bentham, 1996, p. 283n)
- Sentience ... [is] a convenient, if not strictly accurate, shorthand for the capacity to suffer or experience enjoyment or happiness (Singer, 1990, pp. 8–9)
- sentientism [says] you have moral status, that is, you are a subject of moral concern, if and only if you are sentient, that is, if and only if you are capable of phenomenally consciously experiencing pleasure or pain. (Sebo, 2018, p. 52)
- Sentient beings are those that can experience – both suffering and flourishing. (Woodhouse, 2022b)
- Sentience is the capacity to have feelings, such as feelings of pain, pleasure, hunger, thirst, warmth, joy, comfort and excitement. (Birch *et al.*, 2021)

To some extent the appeal of Narrow Sentientism may be sheer intuition: the question 'can they suffer?' just seems immediately and decisively relevant for questions of moral status. But I think this intuitive appeal can be backed up by a simple argument, drawing on independently plausible ideas about wellbeing. Call this the Resonance Argument:

- Premise 1: An entity has moral status if and only if it has morally significant interests.
- Premise 2: An entity's interests must be able to motivate it. (Resonance Constraint)
- Premise 3: Phenomenal consciousness is a necessary condition for the sort of motivation involved in having interests. (Basic Sentientist Commitment)
- Premise 4: Affective valence is a necessary condition for phenomenal consciousness to be motivating. (Affect-Motivation Link)
- Conclusion: *Therefore* An entity has moral status if and only if it is capable of undergoing conscious states with affective valence. (Narrow Sentientism)

I think this argument has some force, though I am unsure about the ultimate truth of premise 4. Let me say a bit more about each of its premises.

2.1. MORAL STATUS AND INTERESTS

Premise 1: An entity has moral status if and only if it has morally significant interests.

By 'has interests' I mean that there are ways that things can go better or worse for the entity itself. By calling interests 'morally significant' I mean that others are morally required to take them into account.

I take premise 1 to be virtually definitional. It expresses the idea that 'moral status' is something more than just 'moral value'. Things might have moral value without moral status: most obviously there are morally important things whose value is instrumental, derived from our need for them or how much good they could do. But there may also be sorts of intrinsic, non-instrumental, value that are not moral status. Moral status involves a being having its own interests and welfare: there are things that would count as good or bad *for that being*, and not just good for some other being, or good in a general impersonal way.⁵ It might be that things like cultures, species, or languages have value in and of themselves, not because things can go well or badly for them but because the world is better and richer for containing them. They would then have intrinsic value but not moral status.⁶

⁵For discussions of the notion of moral status, see, for example, Feinberg (1974), Railton (1986), Varner (1994), Warren (1997), Rosati (2009), and Jaworska and Tannenbaum (2021).

⁶I am not treating 'moral status' as a graded notion: in my sense, beings either have it or don't. Intuitively, there are a lot of important moral differences among beings with moral status, which can in practice make a huge difference to how we ought to treat them. But my focus here is not on the full details of a thing's moral standing, just on whether it has morally relevant interests at all.

2.2. INTERESTS AND RESONANCE

Premise 2: An entity's interests must be able to motivate it. (Resonance Constraint)

This is a schematic statement of an idea popular in the literature on theories of welfare, sometimes called 'the resonance constraint' (esp. Lin, 2021, pp. 876–882). This is the idea that a being's interests can only involve things that could appeal to them, or in some way engage their motivations:

- ... what is intrinsically valuable for a person must have a connection with what he would find in some degree compelling or attractive, at least if he were rational and aware. It would be an intolerably alienated conception of someone's good to imagine that it might fail in any such way to engage him. (Railton, 1986, p. 9)
- ... many have thought it is a necessary condition on something being good for someone that she be capable of being motivated by it, or more strongly, that she be capable of caring about it. (Rosati, 2009, p. 227)
- Many philosophers accept [that] whatever is good for someone must resonate with or appeal to this particular person in some way. (Bramble, 2016, p. 106)

Here 'resonating with' someone is glossed in a few different ways – as appealing to them, engaging them, being found compelling or attractive, or being something that they could care about or be motivated by. I will understand this as a modal claim about motivation: X resonates with Y if Y's being motivated by the prospect of X would not require any rational shortcoming (e.g. confusion, ignorance, or processing limitations) or any change of preferences, though it might require epistemic improvements (e.g. to let them understand X, or to remove false beliefs about it).

As I am using it, 'motivation' here does not mean anything merely causal or functional: motivation is a distinctively subjective, mental, process whereby some prospect seems 'attractive', some response 'makes sense', some action seems 'called for' from a subject's perspective. The point is not whether a given sort of conscious state does or does not cause some bodily movement, but whether it presents the subject with a subjective reason for acting.

2.3. RESONANCE AND CONSCIOUSNESS

Premise 3: Phenomenal consciousness is a necessary condition for the sort of motivation involved in having interests. (Basic Sentientist Commitment)

This expresses the thought that consciousness is intimately involved in things mattering from a being's perspective – indeed, in a being *having* the relevant sort of perspective. Together with premises 1 and 2, it entails the sentientist thesis that phenomenal consciousness is a necessary condition for moral status.

But what is phenomenal consciousness? To an extent the answer must be ostensive: it's a property we each know from our own case, and could not convey to one who lacked it. Forms of words that may convey it to a conscious reader are 'experience', 'qualia', 'feeling like something', 'a first-person perspective', or 'something it is like' (see esp. Nagel, 1974, Block, 1995, 2008, Chalmers, 1995; for a prolonged defence of this approach to defining consciousness, see Schwitzgebel, 2016).

The intention of these phrases is to pick out the most general and basic feature of all states that feel some way for their subject, that have a 'what it is like' to be in them. At least *prima facie* this notion does not entail any specific sort of cognition, agency, or complexity: there might be a perfectly simple, unchanging, conscious experience. It might be that in fact consciousness can only exist in combination with certain complex capacities, but that is not built into its definition.

Phenomenal consciousness is primarily a property of occurrent states, states that we are in at a given moment. It can also be ascribed by extension to dispositional states. For instance, if I feel pleasure whenever I eat pasta, we might say that I have a certain ongoing conscious disposition: I like pasta. This state is 'conscious' in that its manifestations are occurrent conscious states. This is distinct from the use of 'conscious' to mark whether a given disposition of mine is known to me: I might be in denial about my feelings for pasta, and even though my liking pasta might then be called 'unconscious', it is still conscious in the sense I am using that term here.

2.4. CONSCIOUSNESS AND AFFECT

Premise 4: Affective valence is a necessary condition for phenomenal consciousness to be motivating. (Affect-Motivation Link)

This premise makes the decisive move away from Broad Sentientism and towards Narrow Sentientism. I think it may well be false (see Section 3, below), but it has some initial plausibility, because it identifies a very direct and clear way for phenomenal character to translate into interests: things can be good or bad for a conscious being because they can be consciously felt as good or bad.

How we define 'affect' will obviously affect how we evaluate this premise, and the conclusion it supports – moreover, to avoid equivocation, we must use the same definition in characterising P-Vulcans as 'affectless'. As noted

above, Chalmers' definition makes 'affective' roughly equivalent to 'hedonic': states which feel pleasant or unpleasant to undergo.⁷ So premise 4 says that it is through states like this that phenomenal consciousness enables the 'resonance' that lets a being have interests.

2.5. REINFORCING THE RESONANCE ARGUMENT

Note some further advantages of Narrow Sentientism that reinforce the Resonance Argument. I see them less as distinct arguments than as ways of drawing out the importance of the considerations that argument rests on. As noted above, I am unsure of the truth of premise 4, the Affect-Motivation link, and thus about the ultimate success of the Resonance Argument. But it is worth dwelling on what is attractive about it, so as to better appreciate the clash between it and Broad Sentientism.

First, Narrow Sentientism directly connects the properties that confer interests with the content of those interests. An animal capable of feeling miserable, for instance, surely has an interest in not feeling miserable; its capacity to feel miserable thus plays a role in determining both what interests it has, and that it has interests we should care about at all. By contrast, Broad Sentientism does not have this appealing feature: there are many sorts of conscious state (sensory, imaginative, cognitive, volitional, etc.), and it is not clear what systematic connection could hold between all of them and the content of our interests.

Second, Narrow Sentientism is well-placed to capture the idea that moral and prudential interests should line up – that what morality tells us to do for others matches what self-interested rationality tells them to do for themselves. It implies that a creature's moral status is directly based in its capacity to subjectively value things – in that creature's evaluative perspective, not ours. To put it somewhat figuratively: Narrow Sentientism lets interest-bearers themselves dictate what their interests are.

Thirdly, this connects to what might variously be called perspective-shifting, sympathetic imagination, or empathy. There seems to be an intimate connection between sympathetic imagination and consciousness: conscious states can only be understood fully 'from the inside'.⁸ And sympathetic imagination is also often taken to be importantly linked to moral motivation and understanding: imagining myself 'in another's shoes' seems related to grasping both how I should treat them, and why it matters that I

⁷Readers who object to this narrow reading of 'affective' need not worry that interesting ideas will be missed; in Section 5, I consider a variation of the Vulcan argument which imagines a being lacking desires as well as hedonic states: the fact that Chalmers describes such beings as lacking two things, both desires and affective consciousness, further supports reading 'affective consciousness' in a narrow way.

⁸Classic arguments with something like this upshot include Nagel (1974) and Jackson (1982); more recent discussions focused specifically on the role of empathy include Steinberg (2014), Smith (2017), Bailey (2020), and Boisserie-Lacroix and Inchingolo (2021).

treat them that way.⁹ We might say that Narrow Sentientism bases the possession of interests on a thing's having the sort of conscious perspective from which, through sympathetic imagining, we can discern its interests. It lets us read the second word 'for' in the definition of interests ('ways for matters to go well or badly *for* an entity') as meaning 'from the perspective of'.

3. *An argument for broadening*

Chalmers argues against Narrow Sentientism by considering what he calls 'philosophical Vulcans', intelligent conscious beings without affect (Chalmers, 2022, pp. 335–337; cf. the 'affective zombie' briefly mentioned in Smithies and Weiss, 2019, p. 30). They are extreme versions of the Vulcans from *Star Trek*, who attempt to systematically suppress and master their emotions. I will formally define philosophical Vulcans as follows:

Philosophical Vulcan = _{def} a conscious intelligent agent who lacks all capacity for positively and negatively valenced affective states, but is otherwise psychologically similar to a human, including having and acting on beliefs and desires.

Chalmers emphasises that Vulcans are not zombies, and are not indifferent or apathetic:

A philosophical Vulcan might still have a rich conscious life, with multimodal sensory experiences and a stream of conscious thought about all sorts of complex issues ... They may want to advance science ... and to help those around them. They might even want to build a family or make money. They experience no pleasure when anticipating or achieving these goals, but they value and pursue the goals all the same. (2022, p. 336)

In Section 5, I will consider the possibility of more extreme beings, who lack both affect and desire but are still conscious and intelligent, but for now let us focus on P-Vulcans as defined here. The 'Vulcan Argument' is that Narrow Sentientism implies that P-Vulcans lack moral status, which seems like the wrong verdict: plausibly they not only have moral status, but are in some important sense our moral equals. More formally:

Premise 1a: Philosophical Vulcans lack affect.

Premise 2a: Philosophical Vulcans have moral status.

⁹This connection is famously made by Hume and Smith (see Sayre-McCord, 1994, 2010, 2013, cf. Gordon, 1995, Nanay, 2010); for more recent critical discussions, see Hoffman (2000), Maibom (2007), Coplan (2010), Prinz (2011a, 2011b), and Passos-Ferreira (2015).

Conclusion: Affect is not a necessary condition for moral status (contra Narrow Sentientism).

Because premise 1a is true by definition, and the conclusion follows validly, the available responses are to deny premise 2a, or claim that P-Vulcans are impossible. The natural way to motivate this second claim is through the Affect-Motivation link, which implies that if a being has desires they must have affect, and if they have no affect they cannot have desires. I will consider these claims in turn: I think the first is implausible, but I remain uncertain whether the second is true or not.

3.1. DO P-VULCANS HAVE MORAL STATUS?

I am inclined to agree with Chalmers that *if* philosophical Vulcans could exist as he describes them, with desires but no affect, it would be monstrous to deny them moral status. Suppose, for instance, that some manner of trolley problem has been concocted (as in Chalmers, 2022, pp. 336–337), where several P-Vulcans are tied to one track, and tied to the other track is, say, a conscious, affect-feeling dog or bird (or even a fish or insect, if one thinks them likely to have affective states). Narrow Sentientism seems to say that even if the fish has, in some sense, less moral status than a human, it still has some and so outweighs the P-Vulcans, who have zero moral status. Even if we still opted to sacrifice the fish to save them, the only justification that Narrow Sentientism can countenance is to appeal to some sort of value other than moral status: we saved the P-Vulcans because they are so instrumentally useful, or we saved them because they are beautiful objects, like great works of art. It cannot make sense of saving them for their own sake, saving them out of respect for their interests, their rights, their autonomy.

Yet this seems to be the wrong judgement. To bring this out, consider the plausible thought that our moral reasons correspond to others' prudential reasons: intuitively it makes sense to ask what P-Vulcans have good reasons to do, and to see them as acting rationally in pursuing their own goals.¹⁰ If P-Vulcans can act in self-interested ways, it seems hard to deny that they have interests, and then it becomes hard to deny that we should take their interests into account.

Moreover, because P-Vulcans are stipulated to have desires, and be otherwise similar to humans, their desire not to die is likely to be one of their strongest. They could articulate this desire to us, and ask us to respect it.

¹⁰This is compatible with thinking that becoming a philosophical Vulcan would be legitimately undesirable for us, that it would be a harm for us to lose all good and bad feeling. This might be so even if our life is so unpleasant that it would be no loss, or even a net gain, in average hedonic level. In general, for two very different beings, it could be legitimately undesirable for either that they be turned into the other.

To be sure, they do not feel distress, but something is about to happen that they want more than anything to prevent, and there's no reason why they would not appeal to you to help them. Wouldn't you want to be saved in their place?, they ask. Can't you extend empathy, even recognising that their desires differ from yours in lacking affective accompaniment, and see their desires as equally significant to your own?

3.2. VULCANS VERSUS ZOMBIES

In this paper, I am assuming, with Chalmers, that if P-zombies (beings that behave just like us without phenomenal consciousness) are possible, they lack moral status. It might still be bad to destroy them, because it may be bad to destroy any complex and beautiful structure, but not in virtue of violating their interests. I share Chalmers' intuition that this is, on reflection, plausible. Moreover, any form of sentientism will imply this, and my interest is in a debate among sentientists, not with criticising or defending sentientism itself.

It is worth noting that the empathy asked for by P-Vulcans is very different from the empathy that might be 'asked for' by P-zombies. Empathy with zombies is entirely possible, but it is by definition mistaken. We could ask a zombie what they care about, and get a sensible-sounding verbal response. And we could, based on that response or on observing the zombie's behaviour, try to sympathetically imagine the zombie's perspective, and perhaps feel empathic motivation to help them. But by definition, the zombie's response is misleading, because zombies claim to feel things they do not feel, and our imagining is inaccurate, because we must imagine them by drawing on our own experiences, which differ categorically from any state of a zombie.¹¹

By contrast, if P-Vulcans are coherent, then it seems that they could articulate their needs to us, and appeal to our empathy, without any need for a mistake at any point. Whereas P-zombies by definition claim to have conscious experiences but lack them, P-Vulcans may be perfectly self-aware about what sort of states they do and don't have, and express this awareness sincerely and honestly, with the conscious intention that we understand them. They may recognise that we and they have quite different conscious lives, foresee the ways we are likely to misunderstand

¹¹It is worth stressing that none of this would be knowable from the situation of a moral agent encountering the zombie: we only know that their empathy is misplaced because we have stipulative, 'word of God' knowledge that the zombie lacks consciousness. So it should not be surprising if our intuitions here feel conflicted and hesitant: in judging that it is right to sacrifice the zombies, we judge that the right action is one which, if performed by any actual agent in that situation, would be wrong as far as they know. The right thing to do could not be righteously done, yielding something like a Moorean contradiction. See Lee (2014, 2019), Block (2019), Chalmers (2022, pp. 269–287), and Bradford n.d., for discussion of whether physicalists need to countenance the prospect of encountering real such situations, and whether that prospect undermines either physicalism or sentientism.

them, and try to forestall such misunderstandings. And they may succeed, so that we understand them accurately, recognising our differences but also our similarities and empathising anyway. Our relationship to a P-Vulcan is thus very different from the systematic illusion involved in any relationship with a P-zombie, and so while it makes sense to systematically mistrust any moral intuitions we might experience in the latter case, it does not make sense to extend the same mistrust to the former case.¹²

3.3. ARE P-VULCANS REALLY POSSIBLE?

Of course this all assumes that P-Vulcans are possible, and if the Affect-Motivation link holds then they are not. But conversely, considering the P-Vulcan thought-experiment may be a useful way to evaluate that link. It is far from trivial to work out which human states have to be subtracted in imagining a being with no affect at all, and we don't understand very well how the different ingredients of human agency interrelate – how desire, emotion, pleasure, intention, and so on work together. So it's not trivial to work out what knock-on changes would follow from removing all and only the affective states.¹³

After all, it is very hard for us to imagine conscious beings who form goals without being driven by anything feeling good or bad, and pursue these goals despite feeling no pleasure at their contemplation or fulfillment, and no frustration or disappointment if they fail. For us, the idea of desiring something naturally brings with it the potential for feelings of frustration, satisfaction, and so on. Perhaps the difficulty of imagining being such an agent is an indication of some sort of conceptual problem with the idea. Perhaps it is not really possible for a creature to be a conscious agent without affect. Perhaps if we fully understood how conscious agency works, we

¹²A referee wonders: could there be a zombie-like being which makes no false claims about having experiences? Perhaps, but it's hard to know how such a being would behave or talk. For example, P-zombies are usually described as responding negatively to tissue damage or deprivation, and justifying their responses by reference to how it feels for them, while feeling nothing. Should the 'truthful zombie' be imagined as behaving differently, justifying their responses differently, or being unable to offer any justification? Unfortunately exploration of such questions would go beyond the scope of this paper.

¹³Chalmers (2020a, 2020b) that the apparent dissociability of separate brain circuits for 'wanting' and 'liking' is at least some evidence that desire and pleasure are not inseparable (see, e.g. Berridge and Robinson, 1998, Nguyen *et al.*, 2021). But it is unclear how much this separability can prove, because it is typically regarded as inherently pathological – a breakdown in the relationship that *ought* to obtain between affect and motivation, typically due to the action of drugs which, so to speak, 'trick the brain' into rating them desirable as though they had proved pleasurable, independently of how much pleasure they actually provide. If P-Vulcans were possible only through a thorough-going irrationality in which they delusively and compulsively pursued the mirage of pleasure that they never felt, that would underline rather than undermine the importance of affective consciousness.

would see that it depends constitutively on the presence of affect, perhaps of a slight or subtle kind.¹⁴

There are a number of ways to theoretically spell out the sort of necessary connection between affect and desire that would render P-Vulcans impossible. Most obviously, we might appeal to psychological hedonism, the doctrine that we necessarily only desire pleasure and the absence of pain: any p-Vulcan, lacking the capacity for pleasure or displeasure, would have nothing to desire (see, e.g. Bramble, 2016).

A different approach would be to say that without at least a disposition to affect, no state would count as a desire, or that without an inbuilt desire, no state would count as affective. Both of these claims have been defended: for instance, Fehige defines someone's wanting *p* in part as 'if she fully represented *p* to herself, she'd be pleased' (2001, p. 50), and Sidgwick defines pleasure in part as 'feeling, apprehended as desirable by the sentient individual at the time of feeling it' (1907, p. 129). Or one might argue, as Smithies and Weiss (2019) do, that desire is itself a species of affective experience – or, more precisely, that desire and pleasure are two species within a single unified genus. They define this broader genus, which they call 'affective experience', as 'experience that presents its objects in a positively or negatively valenced way' (Smithies and Weiss, 2019, p. 28), and claim that in this sense both feeling attracted to a future prospect and enjoying a present sensation are forms of affective experience.

Because these claims are neither obviously correct nor obviously false, I am unsure whether P-Vulcans are possible. Thus while I cannot fully endorse the Vulcan argument, I cannot dismiss it either. Because I also feel the pull of the Resonance Argument, I am torn between Narrow and Broad sentientism.

4. *A medium-breadth sentientism*

Although we now have two somewhat plausible arguments for opposite conclusions, I think there is a fair degree of agreement in the underlying intuitions involved. For me at least, the force of the Vulcan argument comes from

¹⁴The relative ease with which viewers have understood actual *Star Trek* Vulcans is not necessarily relevant here. Vulcans in *Star Trek* are very calm, and to that extent 'unemotional', but they seem to feel various sorts of quiet satisfaction at success or disappointment at failure. Indeed, it may be a mistake to interpret their endeavour to control 'emotion' in terms of affective *valence*: neutrally valenced states of high arousal, like excitement or surprise would not qualify as affective, despite arguably being paradigmatic 'emotions'. (Conversely, the sedate pleasure of successfully solving a logic problem, or the frustration of failing to do so, are not obviously 'emotional'.) So P-Vulcans, despite lacking affect, might be far more 'emotional' than *Star Trek* Vulcans, if they freely indulge these affectively neutral states – they might, indeed, be extremely flighty, impulsive, and inconstant. And because they are not unfailingly calm and collected, like *Star Trek* Vulcans, the ones tied to the trolley tracks in a thought-experiment are probably best imagined as yelling to us, pleading with us to save them.

seeing the P-Vulcans as agents like me, striving to pursue their interests, able to ask for, receive, and extend empathy. They have conscious perspectives and value things from within those perspectives. But the intuitions being harnessed here are the very same intuitions that drive the Resonance argument, or at least that drive its first three premises. That is, there is no conflict between premises 1–3 and the thought that P-Vulcans, if they are possible, would have moral status. The conflict revolves entirely around premise 4, the Affect-Motivation link: this premise both completes the argument for Narrow Sentientism, and defeats the argument for Broad Sentientism by ruling P-Vulcans impossible. If the Affect-Motivation link holds, then Narrow Sentientism is well-supported and Broad Sentientism is not, while if it does not, then Broad Sentientism is well-supported and Narrow Sentientism is not. But, I have suggested, it is not obvious whether this link does hold.

We might be interested, then, in a version of sentientism that can do justice to the shared intuitions while being flexible enough to handle either view of the Affect-Motivation link. I think such a position is available; indeed it is already briefly considered by Chalmers (2020b):

Motivational sentientism: A creature has moral status if and only if it has motivating consciousness.

Chalmers glosses ‘motivating consciousness’ as ‘including affective conscious states but also (non-affective) conscious desires and judgments about value’ (Chalmers, 2020b). That is, it covers both affective consciousness, in which things feel nice or nasty, and also the sort of dispassionate motivating states that move P-Vulcans.¹⁵ Motivational Sentientism does not ascribe moral status to P-zombies, but does ascribe moral status to P-Vulcans, to affect-driven creatures like us, and to everything in between. But it denies moral status to conscious beings whose consciousness is not motivating, including perhaps the faintly conscious electrons postulated by panpsychists, and certain sorts of ‘extreme Vulcans’ that I discuss in the next section. I think this version of sentientism is superior to both Narrow and Broad versions, and in this section I will try to explain and defend it.

4.1. WHAT IS ‘MOTIVATING CONSCIOUSNESS’?

Four important remarks are needed to clarify how I intend the term ‘motivating consciousness’. Firstly, as noted in Section 2.2, the relevant sense of

¹⁵Motivational Sentientism is not unprecedented; for instance, Feinberg seems to say that ‘interests must be compounded somehow out of conations’; at first he seems to include under ‘conations’ both ‘conscious wishes, desires, and hopes; or urges and impulses’ and also ‘unconscious drives, aims, and goals; or latent tendencies, direction of growth, and natural fulfillments.’ (1974, pp. 49–50), but shortly after he says that plants ‘are not the sorts of beings who have their “own sakes,” despite the fact that they have biological propensities. Having no conscious wants or goals, of their own, trees cannot know satisfaction or frustration, pleasure or pain’ (1974, p. 52). Cf. Varner (1994) and Sebo (2017).

'motivate' cannot be captured simply in causal terms: it refers to something distinctively subjective.

Second, 'conscious state' here includes states defined in part by dispositions to appear in consciousness. This lets me treat 'desire' as a type of conscious state. This need not mean simply the occurrent experiences that we would call 'feelings of desire' – as when we acutely feel our longing, drive, attraction or aversion. It can also cover our many ongoing dispositional desires, which can influence and explain our thoughts and behaviour in many ways, as long as they are disposed to manifest as these occurrent experiences of desire. This way of defining 'desire', as including a disposition to certain conscious states, is not universal but has significant precedent (e.g. Smithies and Weiss, 2019, cf. Fehige, 2001, Sinhababu, 2017). It contrasts with a purely functional definition of 'desire', on which even P-zombies can have desires.¹⁶ So by understanding 'desire' as a type of dispositional state, one of whose defining dispositions is to produce conscious 'feelings of desire' under the right circumstances, I can include desires as a type of motivating consciousness.

Third, motivation typically involves the interplay of two sorts of state – belief and desire, cognition and conation, how things are and how things ought to be. Although the former sort of state (e.g. beliefs) play a key role in motivation, they would not normally be called 'motivating', and are not covered by my definition of 'motivating consciousness'. Motivating consciousness refers specifically to conscious states which participate on the conative side, by making some option, outcome, or action appear good or attractive. If there are conscious beliefs that can play this role, for example, moral beliefs, then they count as motivating consciousness, but conscious beliefs with non-evaluative content (e.g. means-end beliefs that tell me how to achieve my independent goals) do not.

Finally, motivating consciousness should be suitable to motivate, but need not actually motivate. A desire that I never get the chance to act on is still a desire, and likewise a pain I cannot do anything about. In the extreme, this means that a being who felt pleasure and displeasure but had no capacity to act in any way (like the 'Weather Watchers' described by Strawson, 1994, p. 251 ff) would count as having motivating consciousness, and thus moral status.

It is unclear how much unity there is to the category of motivating consciousness. If the Affect-Motivation link holds, then the only sort of consciousness that motivates is pleasure and displeasure, and Motivational Sentientism turns out to be equivalent to Narrow Sentientism. But even if

¹⁶The relationship between Motivational Sentientism and desire-satisfaction views of wellbeing or moral status will turn on this terminological question. If P-zombies, who have states that play the functional role of desire but no disposition to any phenomenology, are counted as having 'desires', then Motivational Sentientism conflicts with a 'desire-satisfaction' view so-defined, because it denies them moral status.

that link is denied, there might be other links among different sorts of motivating consciousness, such that if we really understood them, we would realise that they are all different sides of the same, perhaps many-sided, coin. For example, if Smithies and Weiss are right to claim that desire and (dis)pleasure are two species of the same broadly ‘affective’ genus, that might let Motivational Sentientists identify that genus as the sole morally significant sort of consciousness. Similarly, if desires constitutively involve a disposition to feel pleasure at their satisfaction, or if pleasure constitutively involves a desire for its own continuation, then desire and pleasure are intimately and organically linked, and it should not seem strange that they share moral significance.¹⁷

4.2. THE AMENDED RESONANCE ARGUMENT

The basic argument for Motivational Sentientism is that if a being has conscious states that motivate its actions, then it voluntarily acts for reasons provided by those states. This means it has reasons to act: subjective reasons, reasons as they appear from its perspective, and reasons which we as moral agents can take on vicariously as reasons for altruistic actions. Indeed, any being that is motivated to act could, it seems, sincerely appeal to us to help it: whatever it is motivated to do or bring about, it seems to make sense for us to empathise with that motivating conscious state, and for the being to ask us to do so if it understands this. We can articulate this through an amended version of the Resonance Argument:

Premise 1: An entity has moral status if and only if it has morally significant interests.

Premise 2: An entity’s interests must be able to motivate it. (Resonance Constraint)

Premise 3: Phenomenal consciousness is a necessary condition for the sort of motivation involved in having interests. (Basic Sentientist Commitment)

Conclusion: *Therefore* An entity has moral status if and only if it is capable of undergoing motivating conscious states. (Motivational Sentientism)

Because this argument leaves open whether or not the Affect-Motivation link holds, Motivational Sentientism has an interesting relationship to Narrow Sentientism: the two views are equivalent *if* motivation requires affect –

¹⁷Of course, to cover motivation by evaluative beliefs, this sort of approach would have to be combined with some version of ‘Humeanism’, the view that all motivation involves desire, either because all motivating states ultimately derive from desires, or because all motivating states simply count as desires, so that moral beliefs, intentions, etc. must be or include desires (see, e.g. Smith, 1987; for a recent defence, see Sinhababu, 2017; cf. Vadas, 1984).

in which case P-Vulcans are impossible, and the argument against Narrow Sentientism fails. But they are distinct views if P-Vulcans are possible and the argument succeeds: then Narrow Sentientism is false, because its view of who has moral status is too narrow. In that sense, Motivational Sentientism can be seen as a ‘friendly amendment’ to Narrow Sentientism, a less committal position that has the flexibility to address the Vulcan argument without committing to a controversial necessity claim.

5. *Extreme vulcans and weather-watchers*

Finally, consider a further thought experiment that Chalmers briefly discusses, a ‘more extreme Vulcan ... who has no affective conscious states and is also indifferent to continuing to live or dying’. Chalmers suggests that ‘it would also be monstrous to kill this Vulcan’, which he takes to ‘suggest that more than affective consciousness and desire satisfaction matter’ (2022, p. 337). It is unclear what to say about this more extreme being, in part because it is unclear how best to imagine it. If it was indifferent to living or dying but had desires about other things, then it is not profoundly different from the P-Vulcan: it is simply a P-Vulcan who has come to not care about its own life, rather like there can be humans who, for various reasons, come to not care about their own lives. In such cases the moral question is clearly not about whether they have moral status, but about how to relate to this particular kind of indifference – that is, about the ethics of suicide prevention and euthanasia. Because this raises a different sort of issue, let us set it aside.

The more relevant sort of extreme P-Vulcan would be one who is indifferent in general: who lacks any sort of preference, desire, or any other conscious state that speaks for or against any action. In short, this extreme P-Vulcan has no subjective reasons, and so cannot act for a reason, which is to say it cannot really act at all. Such a being won’t, strictly speaking, *do* anything, including communicate with us or tell us about its (lack of) preferences. It might lie completely still and inert, or constantly move at random. Or it might move around in systematic and stable ways that are disconnected from its experiences and driven by purely unconscious forces: like a P-zombie’s actions, these movements are, I maintain, not really actions and not attributable to the extreme P-Vulcan as an agent. It is simply an inert passenger being carried around by an unconscious and uncontrolled mobile system.

I think there is a very real sense in which such a being will never be present to anyone else, never available for any sort of interaction or engagement. It would not be something we could relate to. Chalmers recognises this (2020b), comparing it to the immobile ‘Weather Watchers’ described by Strawson (1994), p. 251 ff, cf. Smith, 1998), in that it has no capacity to act, nor even a tendency or impetus in that direction. But it is even more

radically alien to us than the Weather Watcher, because they are described as having desires and affective states directed at the weather: they want it to change in certain ways, but have no sense that they themselves could do anything to bring that about. Thus Weather Watchers have moral status under Motivational Sentientism, because their consciousness, by presenting some prospects as better or worse, is suitable to motivate actions even if it in fact never does.

If the extreme P-Vulcan really lacks agency, then it also lacks internal, mental agency, and in that sense does not actively think or reason about anything, nor focus, question, or imagine. Nevertheless it might have a stream of cognitive or perceptual experiences, perhaps complex and in some sense beautiful. And perhaps these experiences could involve a sort of epistemic value: it might perceive its surroundings accurately, or run compulsively through advanced mathematical proofs, or endlessly tell and retell stories illustrating deep and profound truths about life. But even to put this in terms of ‘telling’ and ‘running through’ is perhaps to impute too much agency: perhaps it would be better to say simply that thoughts with content stream through this being, with its mind serving as a sort of receptacle for truths it cannot actively enjoy or appreciate.

Or maybe even this is still anthropomorphising the extreme P-Vulcan; maybe perception, belief, and so on are so entangled with agency that when agency is taken away, what is left is no longer recognisable. We might worry that it is constitutive of states like perception that they have a ‘direction of fit’, ‘constitutive aim’, or some other built-in orientation towards truth, accuracy, reality, or similar, and that this orientation-towards is already a kind of protodesire, a primitive reaching of the will from one condition towards another. We might think that a stream of sensory or cognitive phenomenology would not be sensory or cognitive unless it involved a goal-directed process of attending, engaging, recognising, and organising – a process which (a philosopher might claim) goes on so constantly and automatically in our everyday experience that we are at risk of not noticing its fundamentally conative character.¹⁸ If that were the case, then the extreme P-Vulcan would have virtually nothing in common with us mentally, and would be far more different from us, and from the regular P-Vulgans, than any of us agents are from one another. And it would be very unclear, at that point, why we should feel driven to ascribe them moral status. After all, these deeply alien beings have no subjective sense of better or worse, nor any of the structure that, in us, interfaces with our subjective sense of better or worse, and so it doesn’t seem unreasonable to think that even if their existence has value, it does not have value *for them*.

In sum: it is hard to really imagine non-agential existence, and harder still to evaluate what sort of moral claim it makes on us. My inclination is to

¹⁸It is worth noting that Strawson argues against similar claims, about action rather than motivation, in defending the coherence of his Weather Watchers (1994, p. 258 ff).

think that because there are no reasons here from the being's own perspective, there are likewise no reasons from anyone else's perspective. Destroying an extreme P-Vulcan might still be wrong, but in the way that it is often considered wrong to destroy an intricate and complex thing of beauty. There are no moral reasons based in *its interests*, no way for things to go better or worse for the being itself.¹⁹ And so I am inclined to think that the fact that Motivational Sentientism does not attribute them moral status is not an objection to it.²⁰

6. Conclusions

Intelligent conscious agents without pleasure or suffering are *prima facie* coherent, and that poses a *prima facie* problem for Narrow Sentientism, a moral doctrine framed around pleasure and suffering. But there are good reasons to be attracted to something close to Narrow Sentientism – some version of the idea that consciousness matters because a conscious being has its own evaluative perspective, from which things can be good or bad *for it*, and that consequently the consciousness that matters is the sort that involves subjective goodness and badness. The problem is that it's not simple or obvious what sorts of consciousness do that, and whether labels like 'affective' cover them all. Motivational Sentientism is an attempt to recognise this uncertainty: maybe pleasure and suffering are the only sorts of consciousness that can motivate, but maybe not, and if not, then we should ascribe moral status to beings capable of the other sorts too, even if they cannot suffer or feel pleasure.

¹⁹This connects to a worry about identity: a key feature of moral status is that it seems to belong to distinct, non-fungible individuals, such that the wrong of harming or destroying one cannot be directly compensated for by benefitting or creating another. It seems at least somewhat intuitive to me that if extreme P-Vulgans have moral value, it might well be fungible, that is, there might be value in some number of these 'receptacles for truths' existing, but a value that survives if some are destroyed and replaced with others. Indeed, they are likely to be harder to psychologically individuate than agents, because they have no desires that can clash, nor distinct practical perspectives from which they act.

²⁰There may be a way for Motivational Sentientism to ascribe moral status to these extreme P-Vulgans, drawing on an argument made by Richard Yetter Chappell (2020), who responds to Chalmers' argument by saying that although ultimately affective consciousness is all that matters, P-Vulgans have moral status because they have the *theoretical capacity* for affect, just through being conscious, intelligent agents. If some technology could produce affect in their brains, that affect could be appropriately said to be *theirs*. By contrast, if we alter part of a rock, say, so as to generate pleasant experiences, arguably we have created a new conscious subject who feels that pleasure, not conferred pleasure on a pre-existing being, the rock itself. Thus the rock is not capable of affect in the way that P-Vulgans are. That holds even if the rock is, as some panpsychists might think, phenomenally conscious in some unimaginably simple fashion, because it lacks 'psychological complexity sufficient to ground continuity with a future being that could potentially have affective states' (Chappell, personal correspondence). A Motivational Sentientist could use a parallel argument, with the necessary commitments about identity over time, and willingness to read 'capacity for' in a very expansive way, to argue that the more extreme P-Vulcan, if it has sufficient psychological complexity, has moral status because it is the right kind of thing to become consciously motivated while remaining itself.

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