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Virtue Ethics and the Treatment of Animals

Rosalind Hursthouse

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Abstract and Keywords

This article considers a theory that most philosophers view as deriving historically from the work of the ancient Athenian-Macedonian philosopher Aristotle. It shows how virtue ethics promotes the paradigm that we should think about moral rights and wrongs in our treatment of animals in terms of virtues and vices rather than in terms of consequences or rights and duties. The article argues that two leaders in the field of ethics and animals, Peter Singer and Tom Regan, each implicitly picks out one virtue, but one virtue only—a too concentrated focus that renders their moral theories unsatisfactory. This discussion holds that we ought to be thinking in terms of all of the virtues and vices pertinent to the moral problems that arise in human uses of nonhuman animals. It suggests that many theories have made this path difficult because of an undue focus on the concept of moral status.

Keywords: Aristotle, virtue ethics, moral right, animal treatment, Peter Singer, Tom Regan, moral status

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VIRTUE ethics directs us to think about the rights and wrongs of our treatment of nonhuman animals in terms of virtues and vices rather than in terms of consequences, or rights and duties. From its perspective, the two main contenders in the field, Peter Singer and Tom Regan, each implicitly picks up on one of the virtues. However, each picks up on one virtue only, and this concentrated focus is in part why their approaches are unsatisfactory.¹

It is clear from Amazon.com reviews of Singer's *Animal Liberation*² that its unique contribution to converting people to the animal liberation cause is largely due to the way it calls forth its readers' virtue of compassion. Many reviewers are aghast at how much animal suffering is caused by commercial farming and scientific experimentation and shocked to discover what is involved in the testing of something as trivial as cosmetics on animals. They write such things as "After reading *Animal Liberation* I was appalled. I really had no idea the situation was this bad," "I never knew how horrible the factory farm conditions were," and "This book made me a vegetarian because it made me aware of all the cruelty that is imposed on animals." However, it is equally clear that many of Singer's non-philosophical readers are not thinking of the moral significance of animal suffering in his utilitarian terms. It is common to find them roughly summarizing *his* view as, "denying that animals have rights is no different from racism," although this statement better describes Regan's explicitly anti-utilitarian rights-based theory.

(p. 120) It is not surprising that so many of them think Singer is defending animal rights, because the powerful analogy drawn between speciesism on the one hand and racism and sexism on the other immediately calls on the widespread—if unarticulated—idea of the virtue of respect or justice. The moral significance many of Singer's readers attach to the causing of the animal suffering they deplore is the disrespectful attitude they see manifested in it. They take it to be the same arrogantly assumed superiority and dominance manifested in racism and sexism. They also deplore the exploitation of animals, or the view of them as objects there for us to use as we choose.

From the perspective of virtue ethics, they are right to do so. From its perspective, we can identify in our current practices both forms of wrong, as so many of Singer's non-philosophical readers do, without insisting that one is more fundamental than the other. In many instances, the actions are both cruel and disrespectful. We can, as some of these non-philosophical readers do, go further and identify other forms of wrongdoing beyond those two. Quite a few, for example, speak of our selfishness, while others say it is irresponsible of us not to be aware of how our dinner gets on our plate. Others, responding to reviewers hostile to *Animal Liberation*'s message, note the dishonesty inherent in evading the issue of animal suffering by focusing exclusively on purely theoretical issues in philosophy.

According to the perspective of virtue ethics, this is just what we ought to be doing, namely, thinking about our treatment of nonhuman animals in terms of any of the virtues and vices that can appropriately be applied to it. However, for readers more philosophically sophisticated than most of those writing reviews on Amazon.com, thinking

this way is surprisingly difficult to do. Both the utilitarian and deontological approaches to the issue share a structural reliance on the concept of moral status. When that is what one is familiar with, it is natural to assume that virtue ethics too must begin by saying something about the moral status of animals, only to find it impossible to work out what this could be. I shall argue, however, that virtue ethics has no need for the concept of moral status and that this is a strong point in its favor. “Moral status” is a concept that moral philosophy is better off without.

The Concept of Moral Status as Superfluous

Let us consider what the concept of moral status is supposed to do in animal ethics literature. It is supposed to divide everything into two classes: things that have moral status and are within “the circle of our moral concern” and things that do not, which are outside the circle. Things within the circle matter morally; they are the entities our moral principles apply *to*. Things outside the circle do not matter morally at all in themselves, though sometimes they may matter incidentally, through some relation to something that does have moral status. Almost anything can come to matter (p. 121) morally in this incidental way. For example, some object that is worthless in itself may be of great sentimental value to you and therefore become an object of moral concern for me, as your friend.

So which things are within “the circle of our moral concern”? It is assumed that all decent people think that their fellow human beings have moral status. We all, at least at first glance, think it wrong to kill our fellow human beings, exploit them for our own ends, or not consider their interests when we are thinking about the consequences of our actions. So, human beings have moral status; our moral principles govern our treatment of them. But, it is argued, restricting the application of these principles to our fellow human beings is speciesism, which is akin to racism and sexism. There is no special feature that all and only human beings have which could justify such a restriction. Therefore, we should expand our circle of concern, recognizing that there are some other things with moral status because they have some feature that they share with us, such as the capacity to suffer or being an experiencing subject of a life. Having thus established that all sentient animals, not just humans, have moral status, the utilitarian and deontological “animal liberationists” are able to apply their moral principles to our treatment of the nonhuman sentient animals.

Mary Midgley, a contributor to animal ethics literature who is neither a utilitarian nor a deontologist and who eschews any use of the concept of moral status, pinpointed early on what is wrong with the attractively simple picture of “the expanding circle of concern”³: it drastically underestimates the range of features that may, in context, be morally relevant in decision making. When two beings within our circle of moral concern make competing claims on us, we are not always flummoxed. It may well be the case that one

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has a feature other than sentience that makes giving it priority justifiable or, indeed, compelling.

Even Singer and Regan found it necessary to draw a distinction within the class of things that had moral status, namely between those sentient animals that had the further feature of being persons and those that did not. This distinction allowed them to maintain the attractive view that in the lifeboat cases any of their readers, who are bound to be persons, could toss the dog overboard to preserve their own lives. It also allowed them to maintain their anti-speciesist position. They could say that any human in the lifeboat who was not a person, such as a baby or an adult with the same level of psychological capacities, would be equally up for sacrifice.

Many people flinch from this latter conclusion but cannot bring themselves to reject it outright, so powerful has the analogy between racism and speciesism proved to be. Nevertheless, Midgley also pinpoints the flaw in this analogy. "The term 'racism,'" she says, "combines unthinkingly three quite distinct ideas—the triviality of the distinction drawn, group selfishness, and the perpetuation of an existing power hierarchy In the case of species the first element does not apply at all. The distinction drawn is not trivial; it is real and crucial."⁴

I have elsewhere⁵ argued that speciesism is like familyism.

(p. 122) Speciesism involves:

- (a) drawing a distinction between members of one's own species and others; and
- (b) sometimes, in some ways, giving preference to the interests of members of one's own species.

Similarly, familyism involves:

- (a) drawing a distinction between members of one's own family and others; and
- (b) sometimes, in some ways, giving preference to the interests of members of one's own family.

Familyism is, obviously, sometimes wrong and sometimes right. In some circumstances, benefiting my own child rather than another's would be nepotism and therefore unjust; or callous, if the neighbor's child were alone and in distress; or dishonest, if I were to cover up my own child's wrongdoing instead of apologizing for it and making amends. But I have special responsibilities for my own children, and in some circumstances it would be irresponsible, unloving, or even cruel not to benefit my own child rather than another's. For example, I give my own child a birthday party and help my own child with her homework, not the neighbor's.

The distinction between members of my own family and others is not trivial. Nor, as Midgley notes, are the distinctions of age and sex within the class of human beings. "Serious injustice can be done to women or the old by insisting on giving them exactly the same treatment as men or the young,"⁶ she argues. Neither is the distinction between

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humans and the other sentient animals trivial. In none of these cases does employing the distinction need to form part of “group selfishness” or “the perpetuation of an existing power hierarchy,” though we know it can. In all of these cases, a real feature is highlighted that *in certain circumstances* will be relevant and crucial to making the correct moral decision about what to do. So, on the analogy with familism, speciesism—giving preference to the interests of members of one’s own species—is sometimes wrong but sometimes right. This is why I emphasize the qualification “in certain circumstances.” Leaving a dog in a burning building to rescue a baby is one thing. Leaving it to avoid hurting someone’s feelings by missing a birthday party is quite different.

Midgley’s view is that moral claims can certainly be made on behalf of sentient nonhuman animals, and she contrasts this position with what she calls “absolute dismissal,” or the view that animals don’t matter at all and that “animal claims are just nonsensical, like claims on behalf of stones.”⁷ However, she sticks to expressing her position as the straightforward denial of the “absolute dismissal” position rather than in terms of moral status because she believes the set of moral claims is ineliminably complex. For example, even within the class of humans we will, in some circumstances, find it necessary to distinguish, as a relevant moral feature, those that are persons from those that are not. However, we need not agree with Singer and Regan that the former always have the strongest moral claims. Sometimes they do—when, for example, we have to respect their autonomy. Sometimes they do not—when, for [\(p. 123\)](#) example, the nonpersons need special care and protection: in the overburdened lifeboat scenario, we keep the baby on board and the persons have to draw straws, whether they want to draw them or not.

To Midgley, it seems obvious that there are many circumstances in which nonperson nonhumans may also need special care and protection, even if this thwarts the exercise of some persons’ autonomy. Moreover, it seems just as obvious that this need may well not be limited to the sentient.

It is probably no accident that Midgley both rejects the concept of moral status and has been a notable contributor to both the animal and the environmental ethics literature.⁸ She is rare on both counts. Most of the prevailing utilitarian and deontological literature on animal ethics still proceeds as though the issues with which environmental ethics is concerned form no part of animal ethics, despite the fact that environmentalists pointed out the lack as far back as 1980.⁹ This is probably connected to their adherence to the concept of moral status.

It is, I believe, generally unrecognized what a devastating effect the upsurge of environmental ethics has had on the concept of moral status. Once we move beyond focusing exclusively on the particular “animal liberation” issues of commercial farming and experimentation to the more environmental issues, we find it necessary to draw many more distinctions. The class of sentient animals contains not only humans, some laboratory animals, some livestock, and pets, but also the urban feral, the wild, the introduced and indigenous, and the rare and all-too-numerous.¹⁰ Any of these may be a

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feature we want to cite as a morally relevant and perhaps decisive reason for why I may, or may not, or ought to, do something with respect to a member of the class of sentient animals which has it, but not the others.

From the perspective of anti-anthropocentric environmental ethics, not only the other sentient animals, but also the members of the millions of species of non-sentient animals, and of plants, ecosystems, and the like, all matter morally as well. The feature conferring moral status that all these groups have in common has to be something extremely broad—being alive, having a good of its own, being an integral part of an ecosystem, or being part of nature—and thereby introduces countless conflicting claims. Unsurprisingly, it is increasingly common for environmental philosophers to abandon the concept, following the example of two of the most famous environmentalists (Aldo Leopold and Arne Naess) who never used it.

One way to do without the concept of “moral status” is to use the concept of “intrinsic value” instead. Given the close connection between attributing moral status and attributing intrinsic value, it is occasionally possible to read environmental ethics literature couched in terms of the latter as though it were using the former. However, such an interpretation is difficult to maintain when one finds an author such as Holmes Rolston III maintaining the plausible thesis that there are different sorts of incommensurable intrinsic value to be found among natural things, that different things have intrinsic value for different reasons, and finally that some sorts of things may have different intrinsic value in different contexts.

Relying on different sorts of incommensurable intrinsic value is not the only way to go. We can also go Midgley's way. Looking at the various criteria for moral [\(p. 124\)](#) status that have been offered, we can see each as highlighting a “real and crucial” feature, one that can indeed be put forward as a moral reason, and, in certain circumstances, a decisive moral reason, for acting or refraining from acting in a particular way. “She (he, it) is a fellow human being, fully rational, a moral agent, sentient, alive ...”—any of these might be supportive or decisive in relation to moral decision. But sometimes they will not be, and then, without undermining their significance, one can acknowledge with Midgley that a large number of further features can play the same role.

Either way, the approach is pluralistic, context sensitive, and open ended, rejecting the idea that there is just one monolithic set of principles concerning just one form of value that can be fruitfully used to address the great variety of moral issues we encounter when we extend our moral concern beyond ourselves. Its proponents also tend to acknowledge the impossibility of providing decisive arguments for one right solution rather than another in many cases, preferring to recognize that neither is one that it is easy to accept, but stressing the need—especially given the looming environmental crisis—for urgent action. This pluralism should come as no surprise, because a similar approach has come to seem obviously necessary in the comparatively limited area of medical ethics. There, too, reaching a decision about a real case is often a matter of balancing a range of

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considerations in the light of principles or norms that can be applied to cases in different ways, and recognizing that an equally good case could be made for deciding one way or another.

Closely allied to Midgley's approach is applied virtue ethics, which, as I noted at the outset, basically amounts to thinking about what to do in terms of the virtues and vices.¹¹ Long before any philosopher invented the notion of moral status, Hindus, Buddhists, and some of the ancient Greeks deplored cruelty to animals and espoused vegetarianism simply on the grounds that it was required by the virtue of compassion or love.¹² The anti-anthropocentric literature which calls for us to make a radical change in our attitudes to the living world characteristically deplores our greed, self-indulgence, materialism, insensitivity, short-sightedness, wantonness, cruelty, pride, vanity, self-deception, arrogance, and lack of wisdom.¹³

Virtue ethics has never needed the concept of moral status. Its principles are the “v-rules,” that is, “virtue- and vice-rules” such as “Do what is compassionate, do not do what is cruel,” and the answer to the question of what groups these apply to is given by the meaning of the terms. No group of beings has to be rubber-stamped as belonging “within the circle of our moral concern” before we know whether our v-rules apply to its members; we know that if we know how to use the terms. Doing what is just or unjust, if we choose to be really strict about the notion of rights, applies only to actions involving human persons, with forgiving being similarly restricted, but any of the vices listed above and the virtues opposed to them may be manifested in relation to our treatment of and attitudes to sentient animals—as Singer's non-philosophical readers readily recognize. So the concept of moral status is superfluous, and, as I shall eventually argue, when moral philosophers insist on using it, it can be dangerously divisive.

(p. 125) **What Is Virtue Ethics?**

If we are going to think about the rights and wrongs of our treatment of nonhuman animals in terms of the virtues and vices, we have to be clear about these moral notions. Although I have implied above that some of Singer's readers have an intuitive grasp of compassion and respect as virtues, and of cruelty, irresponsibility, selfishness, and dishonesty as vices, understanding of these and other concepts in modern virtue ethics merits careful discussion. So we must spend some time on the details.

Virtue and vice words can be used to assess both people and actions, and although the words “virtue” and “vice” are no longer common in ordinary conversation, we still employ a large and rich vocabulary of virtue and vice words. For example, we praise and admire people for being benevolent or altruistic, unselfish, fair, responsible, respectful, caring, courageous, honest, just, honorable, and the like. Similarly, we condemn, despise, or criticize people for being malevolent, selfish, callous, unfair, irresponsible, uncaring, cowardly, reckless, cruel, unjust, dishonorable, and the like. Neither list is even close to

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complete, and some people will not agree with every example, but it gives the general idea of the language of virtue and vice. Applying these words to actions is often a fairly straightforward business. Applying them, especially the virtue words, to people in exactly the way virtue ethics does—as ascribing a virtue to them—calls for a bit of philosophical expertise.

In moral philosophy, we think of a virtue as a morally good, admirable, or praiseworthy character trait, the sort of thing that is cited in a character reference. Conversely, a vice or defect is a morally bad, despicable, or regrettable character trait, the sort of thing we condemn, despise, or deplore people for having. Another way to think of the virtues is as the ways we aspire to be or hope we are if we want to be a morally good person, or as what we try to instill in our children when we are giving them a moral education.

One can see immediately that few, if any, of the virtue words always operate as virtue terms in ordinary language. That is, they do not always function as terms that refer to morally good character traits. This is one of the main reasons why the intuitive grasp of virtue terms needs to be sharpened. Possession of the virtues is what makes an agent a morally good person, or someone who reliably and consistently does what is right; they enable their possessor to act well. However, many of the virtue words just listed can be used in ordinary language to pick out a character trait that actually enables or prompts its possessor to act wrongly.

Suppose I am the boss of a protection racket, looking to replace my right-hand man. I certainly do not want someone who is compassionate, caring, or honest. Nevertheless, I might well say that I do need someone who is responsible rather than irresponsible, industrious rather than lazy, and, most especially, courageous rather than cowardly or timid or reckless. This example might lead one to think twice before admitting “responsible” and “industrious” as virtue words, but it seems beyond dispute that “courage” is one, and equally indisputable that a character trait (p. 126) that enables someone to face danger without giving in to fear will be what enables a member of a protection racket to act wrongly. So when, engaged in moral philosophy, we explicitly use “courage” as a virtue term, we need to restrict its application to facing danger *for a worthwhile end*. We may then say that those involved in protection rackets and other desperados may be daring, but do not possess the virtue of courage. Alternatively, we could say, as some philosophers do, that they do not have “virtuous courage.”

However, this is not the only sort of case in which the ordinary use of virtue words does not pick out virtues. It is natural to say, for example, that some people who possess compassion could too easily be prevented by it from doing what they should. Might they not, for instance, find themselves unable to kill the bird their cat has mauled? Or might not their kindness prompt them to allow their dog too many treats, making him unhealthily fat? They are, we might say, “too compassionate, too kind, too virtuous.”

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We seem to have got into a muddle. Do we think that compassion can sometimes be a virtue and sometimes a fault, so that someone can be a compassionate person but thereby not be a morally good, admirable person? Or do we think that, if they are compassionate, of course they must be morally good, but that morally good people may be prompted by what makes them morally good to act wrongly?

We can get clear of this muddle by recalling that “virtue” is but one translation of the ancient Greek word *arête*. The other, more accurate, translation is “excellence,” and the virtues are not just morally good character traits but *excellent* character traits. Here is how the “excellence” translation makes a difference: something that is excellent is as good of its kind as it could be reasonably expected to be, and we do not say that anything is “too excellent.” However, someone whom we initially describe as “too compassionate or kind, too virtuous” is not as good as anyone could be. He would be better if he were the sort of person who could quickly wring the bird's neck or put his dog on a diet when he ought to. That is, he would be better if he had the *excellences* of compassion and kindness. Though he is, it seems, well on the way to being excellent in these ways, with his heart in the right place, we can readily imagine people who are compassionate without being squeamish or kind without being over-indulgent, and he is not as good as they are. So we should think of a virtue as an excellent moral character trait and, rather than describing someone as too compassionate, honest, or the like, find longer but more accurate descriptions. We now turn to considering what is involved in a virtue being a character trait.

An excellent character trait is a strongly entrenched dispositional state of a person or a certain sort of way they are all the way down, and the disposition is of a complex sort. It is, for a start, a disposition to act in certain ways, that is, in accordance with the virtue in question. As we noted above, the virtue terms are used to assess not only people but also actions, and people who can rightly be described as benevolent, honest, just, and so on consistently and reliably perform actions that can also rightly be described by those words. The benevolent consistently do what is benevolent, the honest consistently do what is honest, the just consistently do (p. 127) what is just, and so on. In general terms, someone with a particular virtue, V, consistently and reliably does what is V.

In looking to virtue ethics for action guidance, we can often simply employ the v-rules. What it is right to do is what a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances, and the virtuous agent typically does what falls under a virtue-rule and abstains from doing what falls under a vice-rule. Nevertheless, the connection between being virtuous and doing an action that can be correctly described by a virtue word is not entirely straightforward, because life presents us with moral dilemmas, that is, forced choices between actions such that no virtuous agent would willingly do either.

This “conflict problem” is one that all normative ethical theories, barring the simplest forms of act utilitarianism, face. All the theories employ basically the same strategy to deal with moral dilemmas, namely give an account of how they can be resolved correctly. A discriminating understanding of the virtues or moral principles in question, possessed

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only by those with practical wisdom or provided by moral philosophers, will perceive that there is at least one feature of the situation that justifies doing one thing rather than the other. (If there are any irresolvable dilemmas, proponents of any normative approach may point out reasonably that it could only be a mistake to offer a resolution of what is, *ex hypothesi*, irresolvable.¹⁴) So, having resolved a dilemma correctly, a virtuous agent may well do something that in different circumstances would fall under the prohibition of a vice-rule, or that, in the very circumstances in which she does it, may appear to the naïve to do so, as a child may be shocked by my apparent callousness when I wring the wounded bird's neck.

Returning to the straightforward cases, people with the virtues or excellences of character not only typically do the V things, or act in virtuous ways, but also do so for the right reasons. They do not do what is compassionate merely on emotional impulse, nor do they do what is benevolent or honest for ulterior reasons. Thereby, they contrast with Kant's famous tradesman who does what is honest because it's to his advantage. Virtuous people do what is honest or benevolent because, in some sense, they think that the action is right, or worth doing for its own sake.

I say "in some sense" because of two points. One is that, notoriously, we do not think much of the agent who visits a friend in hospital for the avowed reason that she thinks it is right to do so. We think she should have gone because she thought her friend might like some company, might need cheering up, or just because he *is* a friend; these are what count as "right reasons" in this sort of case, and they show why the agent thinks the action is worth doing.

The second, less familiar point, is that in some *other* sense it is obvious that nice, well-brought-up children may typically do what is kind or honest and sincerely give as their reason for doing so, "Because it was right." Yet, when nice children do this they do not have, and act for, that reason in exactly the same way as virtuous adult rational moral agents have and act on it. If we rely on Aristotle, we can use his technical term *prohairesis*, usually translated as "rational choice," note that children do not "rationally choose" their actions because they have not yet reached the age of (p. 128) reason, and stipulate that the virtuous agent rationally chooses her virtuous actions and rationally chooses them for their own sake. However, we do not want to go into Aristotelian technicalities here. What we can say instead is that adults' reasons manifest *their* values or *their* views on what is worth having and pursuing, protecting and preserving, avoiding and doing, and that these are views for which they can be held morally responsible, whereas the values children manifest in the reasons they have and give, though they may become their own, are not yet so.

The fact that an agent who is V consistently and reliably does what is V for the right reasons brings out two things. The first is that the values manifested in the right reasons will be manifested in other ways too, not exclusively in the doing of V actions. So, for example, someone who has the virtue of compassion is someone who thinks that alleviating suffering is something worth doing. Her circumstances may be such that few

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occasions arise in which she can actually do this herself, but she contributes to effective organizations dedicated to alleviating suffering. So a virtue, *V*, is not only a disposition to act in *V* ways for right reasons, but also to act in various *other* ways, for related reasons. The second is that virtuous activity is rational activity, specifically the activity of practical rather than theoretical reason. The virtuous agent is ipso facto a rational agent, an agent in whom reason rules and rules well.

To those trained in modern Anglo-American philosophy of mind, this second claim will sound Kantian and anti-Humean. Does it not simply amount to the claim that the morally good person acts from reason, not from passion or desire? The answer is no, it does not. Modern virtue ethics has largely taken over Aristotle's moral psychology, and this is significantly different from either Kant's or Hume's, particularly with respect to the distinction between emotion (or "passion") and reason.

The Aristotelian idea is that in humans, because of our rationality, our desires in general and our emotions in particular, become something different from what they are in nonhuman animals. In us, they are shaped or informed by the reason of adults when we are young and, as we grow older, they become informed by our own reason, for good or ill. If we have, for example, been brought up to act and feel emotions well in relation to the family animals, we can make the reasons for so acting and feeling our own and, by reflecting on them or relating them to things we have read, come to act and feel in new ways. For instance, we may become vegetarian even if not brought up to be so, like so many of Singer's readers.

In the preface to the first edition of *Animal Liberation*, Singer describes someone he met at a tea party to which he had been invited because his hostess had heard that he was planning to write a book on animals. The other guest had already written a book on animals and while, as Singer notes, chomping on a ham sandwich, told him how much she loved them. In thus pillorying her, Singer may have done her an injustice, for who knows but that all she needed to become vegetarian was to have her eyes opened to the realities of commercial farming. Be that as it may, his point is well taken. To be a *virtuous* emotion, the makings of the character trait of compassion that enables its possessor to act well, the emotion of compassion or love must be informed and shaped by reason.

(p. 129) The above sketch of modern virtue ethics may seem a little abstract. For some people, it is only when they see virtue ethics illustrated that they see the point of some of the abstract account. So I turn now to applying it to some areas of our treatment of nonhuman animals, beginning with the familiar example of vegetarianism.

Vegetarianism

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People sometimes suppose that virtue ethicists would say that vegetarianism is a virtue. Of course it isn't, because virtues are character traits and vegetarianism is not a character trait. It is a practice. So would they, perhaps, say that it is a virtuous practice? If we take that as meaning that those who practice it manifest virtue, then obviously not. One can be a vegetarian for a variety of reasons, not necessarily moral ones. However, if we take it as meaning that it is a practice that the virtuous, as such, tend to go in for, then the answer is yes, for the sorts of reasons that I noted Singer's non-philosophical readers tended to give.

Anyone who is reading this book knows, as I do, that in regularly eating commercially farmed meat we are being party to a huge amount of animal suffering, and it would be dishonest and hypocritical to pretend otherwise. Some people may not know this fact, but unless they are very young or mentally incapacitated, this is culpable ignorance; it is irresponsible not to think about how your dinner got onto your plate. Knowing that, we know that shrugging off such suffering as something that doesn't matter is callous. Knowing that our use of animals for food is not only unnecessary but positively wasteful, can we deny that our commercial farming practices are cruel? No, we cannot. So we should not be party to them.

Note that this apparently simple move, from "the practices are cruel and cause unnecessary suffering" to "we should not be party to them"—is not one that the act, or "direct," utilitarianism Singer espoused in the first edition of *Practical Ethics* allows him to make, though he made it. It needs the rule, or "indirect," utilitarianism he added in the second edition.¹⁵ However, within virtue ethics, given that a virtue is a disposition of a very complex sort that is expressed in a variety of sorts of actions, it is a simple move. The compassionate are not willingly party to cruelty any more than the just are willingly party to injustice or the honest to chicanery.

I want now to introduce a virtue the ancient Greeks made much of, *sophrosyne*, for which the usual translation is, unfortunately, "temperance." It is unfortunate because someone who possesses this virtue and thereby characteristically does what is temperate is unlikely to abstain totally from alcohol. Nor, though "moderation" is another possible translation, is it quite right to say that the temperate pursue the pleasures of food, drink, and sex "in moderation." Some people might do so solely because they thought it was healthy and would enable them to live longer, but still behave selfishly. Rather, the temperate characteristically pursue these physical pleasures in (p. 130) accordance with reason, which in this context entails not only in such a way as to maintain their health, but also in ways that are consistent with all the other virtues.

If the virtue is fully developed, the temperate characteristically abstain from such pleasure when they have reason to with no inner conflict, having brought their desires for food, drink, and sex into harmony with their reason. In this respect, temperance is the paradigm illustration of the Aristotelian point that our desires, even our most "animal" desires, are shaped and informed by our reason, for good or ill. Many people who convert to vegetarianism as adults are familiar with this phenomenon. Some find it remarkably

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easy, but for others, at first, it is really hard; one's mouth waters at the thought of bacon or a juicy hamburger, and one eats one's tofu without enthusiasm. Gradually, however, the desires come into line.

Part of what goes into bringing such desires into line is coming to see them and their satisfaction in a different light. Midgley says, strikingly, "To himself, the meat-eater seems to be eating life. To the vegetarian, he seems to be eating death."¹⁶ I have not yet managed to get myself that far, but I can at least now see my desires for meat as simply greedy and self-indulgent. "Self-indulgence" is a fortunate translation of the ancient Greek word for the vice opposed to temperance. I suspect it may be what those of Singer's readers who spoke of our selfishness in eating meat actually had in mind, for indulgence of one's own desires to the exclusion of regard for others' suffering is certainly a form of selfishness. Nonetheless, regard for others' suffering, though often the most relevant reason for restraining one's desires for certain foods, is not the only reason. We know that bottom trawling for fish is hugely destructive; we know that trawling in general is hugely wasteful because so much of the catch is thrown away. Should we not regard satisfying our desire for affordable fresh fish as self-indulgent when we have such good reason to boycott those practices, regardless of whether fish can feel pain?

Do the preceding paragraphs imply that, from the perspective of virtue ethics, one should never eat meat or fish? Consult your own grasp of the virtue and vice terms and you will surely find that the answer is no. After all, what would you think of someone who, accidentally stranded in the Australian outback without food, killed a rabbit and ate it rather than sitting down and waiting to die of starvation? Would you take it that they must be deficient in compassion? Callous? Self-indulgent? No. Of course, they might have all those vices, but their action, in *those* circumstances, gives us no reason to suppose that they have. When we try to imagine what a virtuous person, even an ideally virtuous person, would do in those circumstances, we do not usually imagine that she just resigns herself to death.

Although it has become common to say that one has a right to kill "innocent threats," the willingness to lay down one's life for other human beings in certain circumstances has always been a paradigmatic virtuous act. The deontological category of the supererogatory is, in virtue ethics, the category of actions in which, because of the particular circumstances, virtue is, in Foot's words, "severely tested" and comes through.¹⁷ If we fail the test, we may nevertheless be fairly virtuous, but we should be humbly aware of the fact that better people than ourselves would have passed it, rather than self-righteously thinking of ourselves as "within our rights."

(p. 131) Nothing in our concepts of the individual virtues rules out our taking on board the idea that there may well be circumstances in which an ideally virtuous agent *would* lay down her life for a nonhuman animal. The concept of courage is just waiting for us to recognize the saving of a nonhuman animal as, sometimes, a worthwhile end, and that will enable us to say that that is what the ideally virtuous agent would do. As it is, there

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are some circumstances in which people at least *risk* their lives to save animal lives or rescue them from suffering, and we think they are compassionate and courageous to do so, not just cranks. As I write, those who are running interference on the Japanese whalers in the southern ocean are doing just that.

Comparing oneself unfavorably with the ideally virtuous agent is one thing; comparing others is quite different. In this connection, I should mention what Lisa Tessman has identified as one form of “moral trouble spawned by oppressive conditions,” namely the form in which agents are “morally damaged [and] prevented from ... exercising some of the virtues.”¹⁸ For millions of people, the business of getting hold of enough food to feed themselves and their children is a continual struggle. Whether they are getting it by killing for “bushmeat,” scavenging in the rubbish of the wealthy, buying the cheapest of the limited range on offer, or surviving on the handouts of NGOs, they are in no position to pick and choose what they eat or give to their children and in no position to do much in the way of exercising compassion.

The above collection of examples is intended to illustrate the point that an action such as eating meat, which is exactly what a virtuous agent characteristically refrains from doing in many circumstances, may nevertheless be something that, in other circumstances, a virtuous agent does do. Hence, virtue ethics shares much of act utilitarianism's flexibility when applied to particular practical issues. However, “circumstances” are not just the same as “consequences.” Whether my eating meat is compassionate or cruel or neither, temperate or self-indulgent or neither, is bound to depend on the circumstances in which I do it, and often (though not always) on my reasons, but only sometimes on its consequences.

Some Other Examples

I now turn to considering some less familiar examples of actions that involve nonhuman animals to illustrate how virtue ethics engages with them. I begin by introducing a further virtue, namely love.

The virtue of compassion is a particular form or aspect of the virtue of love (which also gets called “benevolence” or “charity”) because that virtue concerns itself with the good or well-being of others, and freedom from suffering, the concern of compassion, is part of the well-being of any sentient creature. As such it is, as noted above, the virtue called forth by Singer's utilitarian approach and supports the usual objections to commercial farming. But, remembering Regan, we should (p. 132) note Kant's sapient observation that the virtue of love needs to be tempered with the virtue of respect.¹⁹

In the Kantian context, limited to our relations with our fellow autonomous agents, love thus tempered—respectful love²⁰—is mindful of others' right to make their own choices, to live or die the way they want to, even if, in our view, they thereby jeopardize their own

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well-being. It is thus a corrective to the arrogance of paternalism, an undue even if well-intentioned assumption of authority or knowledge. Contrary to Kant, we may say that love, or benevolence, as a virtue is not limited in its concern to our fellow human beings, autonomous or otherwise. We may think of it, for example, as also governing our treatment of pets and other animals, such as horses, that we personally love. There is no doubt that many people love their cats, dogs, and horses, delighting in their company, mourning their deaths, and willingly, on occasion, going to considerable trouble on their behalf. However, following Kant, we may also say that, as a virtue, love has to be respectful love; our love for our pets should be shaped and informed by our recognition of the ways in which their needs and their lives are their *own*, peculiar to the sorts of animals they are.

Conscientious veterinarians frequently lament the fact that many pet-lovers have a view of their animal's good which, far from being informed and shaped by reason in this way, is largely informed by anthropomorphism or, worse, their own desires. It leads them, for example, to expend their resources on expensive food or treatment that their pet would be better off without, and even if their ignorance is not the result of arrogance or selfishness, it is culpable ignorance nonetheless. It is a form of folly, stupidity, or thoughtlessness, which leads them, unwittingly, to perform actions that are cruel, inconsiderate, and disrespectful.

Veterinarians also lament, rightly, the inbreeding of cats and dogs that produces animals which win "best in breed" at shows but have been bred to have traits that give them congenital health problems. No one with the virtue of respectful love or benevolence would be party to such a practice; buying such animals is vain and self-glorifying.

From the perspective of the major non-anthropocentric environmentalists, such as Aldo Leopold and Arne Naess, respectful love is something that should extend well beyond the limits of our fellow autonomous agents and sentient others to any living thing, because they all have a good of their own. In this context, respectful love loses any connection with rights, though it is still the corrective to our arrogant assumption not only of authority but also of superiority. Arrogance is not only displayed by riding roughshod over others' rights. We are not *the* beauty of the world, nor the paragon of animals. Our sublime rationality should enable us, especially now that we know as much as we do, to recognize that the living world contains a myriad of wonders that should make us humble as well as be a source of delight.

This anti-anthropocentric, "biocentric" claim, that *any* living thing is an appropriate object of respectful love, is more familiar in Eastern than in Western philosophy and one that we may find very hard to take on board. I do, but I can certainly find much that is true in it. One obvious point the claim is making is that "being alive" is a standing reason for not killing the thing in question that has to be overridden by (p. 133) another reason, and that the killing should never be done triumphantly or with glee or pride. This rules out all killing for sport as well as idly swatting flies or mindlessly slashing at plants as you walk through the countryside. Like the appeal to compassion, this claim supports the

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usual objections to commercial farming. Less obviously, with the emphasis on the “respectful,” it correctly identifies what is wrong with the idea that we might, ingeniously, produce genetically engineered versions of the familiar farm animals that were non-sentient, thereby allowing ourselves to have our compassionate cake and eat it too. Or, to take, alas, a real-life example, it correctly identifies what is wrong with the creation, as a work of art, of a transgenic rabbit that glows green in the dark.²¹

Creating non-sentient animals for no better reason than to give ourselves guilt-free meat is, at the very least, arrogant and self-indulgent, as is the creation of the transgenic rabbit, though in neither of these cases could it be said that any animal's right has been violated. (No normal rabbit has had its putative right to enjoy a good rabbit life violated by the production of a non-sentient or glowing green rabbit.)

The virtue of respectful love may also help us on at least one issue concerning wild animals, namely what, if anything, we should do about the suffering that carnivores inflict in the wild. This is rarely discussed in the animal ethics literature. When it is, some theory-driven philosophers argue that we should interfere with the lives of wild animals to prevent the pain they inflict on other animals. This is sometimes given as a justification for keeping wild animals in zoos, sometimes proposed as part of a very-long-term project: “[T]he gradual supplanting of the natural by the just.”²² However, from the perspective of environmental ethics, the latter is yet another manifestation of anthropocentric arrogance. Respectful love of wild animals wishes them the good that really is their *own*, just as respectful love of our pets does. The difference is that the lives of most wild animals are red in tooth and claw, unlike those of our pets, but respect still entails leaving them to live their own form of life, not one that we, playing God, create for them.²³

Wild animals cannot live their forms of life if we destroy their habitats, but discussing that issue would take us squarely out of animal ethics into environmental ethics. I will say a little more about the connection between the two fields below, but for the moment let us consider some of the animals that are neither what is called “wild” nor “domestic,” for example, urban and suburban feral cats and dogs, rats, foxes, rabbits, and raccoons. One salient feature these animals have in common is that they live alongside human beings, dependent on us for food and sometimes for shelter, though all are capable of surviving in the wild. Another salient feature, not one always shared for instance by commensal animals such as some birds, is that they are often, to some degree, a nuisance to us. The virtue of respectful love rules out taking *any* degree of nuisance to be a good enough reason to kill them, and similarly forbids killing them in such a way that they suffer unnecessarily, or mindlessly condemning them all as “dirty,” or killing them with triumphant glee. But does it give us any more guidance?

Our concept of a virtuous agent is one of a human being with many virtues, perhaps even all the virtues, leading a human life into which many concerns must (p. 134) be fitted. Consult your own concept again, and ask yourself how you think a virtuous agent would treat such animals if she were aware of the fact that they were living alongside her. The

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answer I expect you to come up with is that there is no telling, because it would depend so much on her circumstances, and that is the right answer from a virtue ethics perspective.

Living in a rat-infested apartment block where your neighbors fear for their children's safety is one sort of circumstance; living on the edge of a suburb where you can often catch the rats and return them to the wild is quite different. Again, you might live in such a place and be busy with other concerns, and that is different from living a life in which concern for animals is fairly central. Although a virtuous agent must have many virtues, that is not to deny that two equally virtuous agents might lead very different lives wherein the exercise of one virtue might leave less room for the exercise of another. In otherwise similar situations they may, consistently with their virtue, decide to do different things. A civil rights lawyer, fighting vigorously for justice, may rarely exercise kindness or compassion on a personal level, and someone who runs a cat sanctuary may seldom have occasion to exercise justice. If both are virtuous, each must surely be glad to know that someone is doing what the other is doing, and, if an occasion offers, be willing to do something similar. The lawyer can find a moment to ring a suitable local organization about the stray cat raiding her rubbish bins, and the cat carer to sign a petition about civil rights, but human life is short. Even the most idealized, unrealistic concept of "a virtuous life" would still have to allow many different versions of it. So, the answer to what one ought to do with respect to this class of animals is "It all depends."

Experimentation

Much experimentation on nonhuman animals can be straightforwardly condemned as cruel. Some authors²⁴ in animal ethics take the strange view that the act of inflicting unnecessary suffering on the sentient is cruel only if the agent feels about it in a certain way. That is, if the agent enjoys or is indifferent to the animal's suffering, then it is cruel, but if he feels neither, it is not. Perhaps these authors have been misled by the ambiguity of the phrase “an act of cruelty.” It can indeed mean an act from the character trait of cruelty, or a characteristic act of a cruel person, and a cruel person is indeed someone who takes pleasure in or is indifferent to inflicting suffering on others. However, it can also mean “a cruel act,” and a cruel act is nothing but the infliction of unnecessary suffering.

“Unnecessary” means “not necessary to secure some good which is worth the cost of, or suitably proportionate to, the suffering or evil involved,” and hence much experimentation fails on at least one of four different counts. The first three of these are familiar in the animal ethics literature. The first is that what the suffering secures is not a good at all. The painful testing of new cosmetics on animals is the obvious (p. 135) example; new cosmetics are not a good, something worth pursuing or having. The old ones with new packaging will do just as well, as Singer noted decades ago. The second is that it has little or no chance of securing the good which is supposed to justify it. Closely related to this is the third—that we can, or are more likely to, secure the good in other, better ways, such as avoiding duplication of the same experiments in different institutions and pooling any knowledge gained, or by using computer modeling of human organs. The fourth count is that the good in question, even when all other criteria are satisfied, is not suitably proportionate to the suffering or evil involved.

Much experimentation on animals is cruel and thereby, in virtue ethics terms, wrong, to be condemned, and not to be done. Thinking in virtue ethics terms makes us notice something about how the issues of animal experimentation and vegetarianism differ. Concluding that eating meat is, in many circumstances, not what a virtuous agent would do because she is not willingly party to cruelty, does not do what is self-indulgent, and so on, gives one clear guidance. However, the same is not true when we conclude that most animal experimentation is cruel. The question of abstaining from experimentation does not arise for most of us, and what counts as not being a party to this often cruel practice is somewhat obscure. It rules out buying cosmetics that have been tested on animals, and it could indicate that one should refuse to save or prolong one's life by accepting an organ transplant from a nonhuman animal as one should refuse to accept a kidney commercially obtained from someone in a developing country. But this is not an issue that commonly arises. Short of refraining from any of the benefits modern medicine offers, there does not seem to be anything that most of us could do that would count as “refraining from being party to the practice.”

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The lack of action guidance in this case is not peculiar to virtue ethics; proponents of the other approaches, having concluded that at least much of the experimentation on animals is wrong, leave it at that. But this is unsatisfactory, because normative ethics is supposed to provide action guidance; its point is to be practical.

So we should think about the question, what would a virtuous person do when he has recognized that most animal experimentation is cruel and therefore wrong? Given that he is conscientious and responsible, he thinks about what he could do to prevent it, but he immediately encounters a problem. Animal experimentation is a practice entrenched in powerful, well-established institutions, including medical schools, medical research centers, corporate research centers and laboratories aiming for profit, and universities training students to work in such institutions. The existence of this set of interlocked institutions is something that no one person has the power to change, not even heads of state.

Does the virtuous agent therefore give up in despair? Not if she has fortitude, or even just the commonsense that is part of practical wisdom. We know that people have been similarly situated, living in a society engaged in a wrong practice that they are quite powerless, individually, to change, and we know that the good ones haven't just given up in despair. They have looked around to see what individually insignificant but collectively influential contribution they could make to bring about change. (p. 136) One may be so situated that there is very little one can do as an individual, as was the case for many white people in the 1960s who deplored racism. Still, good people opposed to institutionalized racism did what they could, unremarkable as it was; they signed petitions, joined pressure groups, voted for politicians who spoke against racism, and any of us can do at least the first two to combat cruel animal experimentation.

Some people are in a position to do more. A growing number of science students refuse to experiment on or dissect animals, and in some universities, the system has been changed so that they are no longer required to do so. Many universities and corporations now have ethics committees that regulate the use of animals in research, and a significant number of experiments that are done in institutions that do not have such committees are no longer done in those that do. So some of us can join an ethics committee. However, there is no point in doing so determined to argue against every proposed experiment that uses animals; we will just be thrown off it and achieve nothing. Might it be said that that is what a truly virtuous agent would do? If you let some of the experiments through without protest, wouldn't this be hypocritical and lacking in integrity? No. Consult, again, your own understanding of the virtue and vice terms and think of Schindler, who consorted with the Nazis and "allowed" many Jews to go to the death camps without protest while he schemed to get some into the protection of his factory.²⁵ Far from condemning him for being hypocritical or lacking integrity, we regard him as admirable and his actions as exceptionally virtuous. Situated as he was, what could possibly count as acting better than he did? How could he have shown more virtue? By not saving anyone and getting himself killed?

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More to the point, we can reflect on the career of Henry Spira,²⁶ one of the most effective animal rights activists of the twentieth century. His effectiveness is an excellent example of the practical wisdom that, according to Aristotle, is inseparable from the possession of any virtue in its perfected form. People with practical wisdom get things right in action, not only because they are virtuous and hence try to do what is right, but also because they are excellent at practical reasoning, at finding really good means to their virtuous ends. “Really good” in this context does not connote “especially virtuous,” though given that practical wisdom is inseparable from virtue, it does connote “not vicious.” “Really good” means are really *effective* means, the ones that secure one's end in the most efficient (but non-vicious) way.

Full possession of practical wisdom, and hence perfected virtue and always getting things right in action, is no doubt an unrealizable ideal. Nevertheless, as an ideal it is the standard we rely on when, having failed to get things right and do what we intended to do, we say “I wish I had realized or known that or thought of so and so; then I wouldn't have done what I did.” We say this—or should—not only when our error was the result of culpable ignorance, but even when it was not and we are not blameworthy, for our concern should be not the mere avoidance of wrongdoing, or being blameless, but being effective in good action.

We admire practical wisdom in people such as Spira in particular realms of action, without having to suppose they are perfect in every way. The general end he (p. 137) devoted himself to from his forties until his death was not the abolition of commercial farming and experimentation on animals as totally wrong, but reducing the amount of animal suffering caused. He always looked for really effective means to that end. Among the means he rejected as useless was the “self-righteous ... hollering ‘Abolition! All or nothing.’”²⁷ Among those he rejected as comparatively ineffective were the adversarial vilifications of animal-user industries in contrast to working with them in a friendly and cooperative way. This cooperative approach has been astonishingly effective.

It is not quite so astonishing when one looks at his unique campaigning methods and how he reasoned about securing his general end, the details of which are described in Singer's book on him.²⁸ One striking detail is that for each campaign, he set a specific and in some ways modest end that he thought was achievable. For example, in his perhaps most famous campaign, he did not set out to stop all testing of cosmetics on animals, but just the Draize test; not to stop all companies using it, but largely Revlon; and, indeed, not to stop Revlon from using it entirely, but to get them to take the step of putting money into seeking alternatives. This final restriction on his target exemplifies another striking detail—his non-adversarial approach. Having dealt Revlon a hefty blow with a full page *New York Times* advertisement showing a rabbit with black patches over its eyes, he gave them the let out. He met with the vice president of Revlon who had been assigned the task of coping with the fallout from the advertisement and its follow-ups, and convinced him that he was someone who, in the vice president's own words, “would listen to us and be prepared to work something out that we could live with too.”²⁹ Taking the step that

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was Spira's target was, it turned out, something Revlon could live with—unsurprisingly, because he had carefully selected it to be just that.

Spira's targets were, I think, modest in two ways: in being so limited in comparison with the enormous amount of animal suffering to be combated and also in being the targets of a modest man. When I read the details of what he did, I am struck not only by how dynamic and energetic he was—a real force to be reckoned with—but also by how modest and how lacking in self-centeredness he was. He was not interested in telling people about his moral views or in proving that they were right, or in what other people thought of his integrity, except insofar as that would have a bearing on the effectiveness of his campaigns. He was utterly lacking in the vanity that makes people think *they* can achieve great things that obviously no one can achieve: For over twenty years, he was focused on getting just *something* done about animal suffering, content to, in his own words, “move things on a little.”³⁰

At this point, I return to the topic of moral status, because I think Spira is an object lesson to moral philosophers who write on animal ethics and insist on making moral status the central issue. As I noted above, the fourth count on which experimentation on animals may be deemed unnecessary and hence cruel is that the good secured by the experiments is disproportionate to the suffering or evil involved. With respect to clinical research specifically directed toward the good of saving and improving the lives of human beings, the question of moral status is assumed to be crucial. If the animals used in medical experiments have the same (p. 138) moral status as human beings, then either we should be using brain-damaged orphans instead or we should stop it entirely, as it is all wrong.

However, insisting on making this claim, or insisting that rational argument shows that it must be accepted to avoid the speciesism that is just like racism, alienates many people who might otherwise be willing to contribute to campaigns against particular sorts of experiments. I have found, when teaching animal ethics, that many students who are reluctantly beginning to feel uncomfortable about our treatment of animals and drawn toward vegetarianism, seize on this claim when they come to it, finding in it an excuse to toss out everything that has gone before. They had feared Singer had a point about animal suffering, they had feared Regan had a point about exploitation, but now they can see that it is all just silly and they need not worry about it. So, having lost all the ground I had gained, I then have to try to show them that the initial points stand independently of any claims about moral status, that much medical experimentation is wrong, and that they should be thinking about what they can do about it. It is uphill work. I claimed previously that the concept of moral status drastically underestimated the range of features relevant to good decision making about what to do and that we did not need to use it. In the context of medical experimentation, I would claim further that the use of moral status as an evaluative concept is actually pernicious. It is the equivalent of hollering “Abolition! All or nothing,” which is guaranteed to impede progress rather than to further it.

Animal Ethics and Environmental Ethics

I have claimed that environmental ethics has a powerful effect on the notion of moral status and that this is underestimated by authors of animal ethics literature who isolate themselves from the issues environmentalism raises. I now conclude with a discussion of the impact of environmental ethics on contemporary moral philosophy as a whole. This connection is extremely challenging, for at least two reasons.

The first reason is the difficulty about moral status in a different guise. It is no accident that some of the early environmentalists, writing at a time when utilitarianism and deontology were the only viable candidates in normative ethics, said that what was needed was an entirely new ethic.³¹ They rightly saw that we cannot get rid of anthropocentrism by simply declaring that our moral principles apply to beings other than ourselves, because the fact is that neither the general utilitarian principle nor the familiar deontological principles were formulated to do so. They were formulated to govern our treatment of, primarily, each other as rational adults. The apparent ease with which the general utilitarian principle and some of the deontological principles can be applied to some of the sentient animals makes it look as though we can just keep going from there. However, this overlooks the point that, insofar as the extension is easy, the animals in question really are *very* like us.

(p. 139) It is not only that most of them look like us insofar as they have faces and looking into their eyes is like looking into their souls, but also that, with most of them, we can quite often read their body language and recognize what they are feeling and doing. Able to do that, we can also see, especially if we become familiar with individual animals, that like us they have lives of their own, personal preferences, and are individuals. So we can make some sense of the wrongness of causing these animals suffering and of thwarting their desires by exploiting them. When we limit our attention largely to commercial farming, hunting for sport, and cruel experimentation, the extension of some utilitarian and deontological principles seems to work.

However, as soon as we turn to other cases where the ways in which the other animals are not like us become salient, it is not so easy. When one group of human beings is disrupting the lives of another group, we find this difficult enough to sort out, but at least we have the possibility of negotiation and a compromise solution. We can't negotiate with any nonhuman animals. What can Singer and Regan say about the chimpanzee in the lifeboat? That we are to assume it would consent to our all drawing straws and agree to be the one that dies if the straw we draw on its behalf is the short one? What compromise can we reach with the elephants, who need an enormous amount of space if they are not to have a fatally destructive effect on their own habitat and thereby the other species in it?³² We cannot do anything *with* them but cull them; we have to do something *for* them by changing ourselves and the world.

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Moreover, the fact that sentient animals are not like us in some salient ways is only the beginning of the problem highlighted by environmental ethics. If we are going to look to the familiar principles of utilitarianism and deontology for the terms in which we should think about the moral significance of what we are doing, we will have to apply them to our treatment of things that are like us only in being alive, millions of which we can see only under a microscope. Indeed, we may need to go even further and apply these principles to things that are only alive in a broad sense of the word, such as ecosystems, lakes, and species.

There is a second, and related, reason why environmental ethics is so challenging. As we have recently discovered, we have, quite unintentionally, been changing the natural world on a devastating scale. We thought we were just changing the social human world to bring it about that human beings treated each other and some of the other sentient animals better and had better lives. Similarly, we thought we were only changing the natural world in very minor ways, for example by preventing various diseases and managing the way it yields food more efficiently, all of which seemed mandated or at least permitted by our moral principles. However, with industrialization the changes we have wrought in the natural world, many under the guidance of those very moral principles, have been major and disastrous. As Leopold says, we have been “remodeling the Alhambra with a steam shovel.”³³

The Enlightenment frame of thought that shaped utilitarianism and modern deontology prepares us ill for this discovery of our destructiveness, for it was shaped by Christianity. However avowedly secular the modern ethical theories may be, they presupposed that if we were all to adhere to their principles, the world was bound to become a much better place. The problem of the evil of natural disasters would (p. 140) remain, but everything else could be improved if we abided by the principles. How could we have known, ignorant of ecology, blind to “the tragedy of the commons,”³⁴ that our individually innocent actions, permitted or sometimes mandated by the principles, would collectively amount to our digging our own graves and killing off thousands of species of animals and plants?

One quick philosophical fix to this startling new discovery is anthropocentric environmental ethics, which requires no more than extending the application of our moral principles to future generations of human beings, since our obligations to them then place heavy restrictions on what we can permissibly do. However, it seems that in the areas with which animal ethicists are usually concerned, the restrictions would not be heavy. Although farming animals in order to eat them can be ruled out, because it is such a waste of resources, other activities, such as hunting, keeping animals in zoos, and medical experimentation might be positively encouraged, and cockfighting and bullfighting could continue unchecked.

The more commonly pursued approach in environmental ethics is to abandon the idea that one set of moral principles can guide us in our thinking about what to do and to use the concept of incommensurable, context-dependent, intrinsic value instead. This

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approach is closely allied to that of virtue ethics, as I noted above, especially if we make it clear that being as good as a human being can be reasonably expected to involve being able to recognize things that have intrinsic value as such.³⁵ It may be that rather than our needing a “new ethic,” virtue ethics will stand us in good stead in environmental as well as animal ethics.

Of course, to make this claim is not to deny that our understanding of many of the familiar virtues and vices will have to change, for our concepts of them have also been mostly used in relation to our treatment of, and more general responses to, each other. However, the very facts that the virtues are character traits and that someone with a virtuous character trait acts for certain reasons make the concept of a virtue open ended. Having been taught to restrain and moderate our own desires so as not to be cruel to others, including animals, in such a way that we do not even want to, some of us later find that we have reason to become vegetarian and come to recognize our meat eating as greedy and self-indulgent. In the same way, having learned more about the world we inhabit, we cease to want fur coats, modern furniture made of woods such as mahogany, new cosmetics, new cars, and the like. We acquire a new understanding of what is involved in being compassionate and temperate, rather than greedy, or in having respectful love for the natural world, rather than being arrogant.

It may be that we need to resurrect some forgotten virtues too, or take some over from Eastern thought. Roger Scruton claims that the feeding of meat products to cattle in the United Kingdom, which led to the outbreak of mad cow disease, was contrary to piety.³⁶ This comment initially struck me as odd, but I came to see it as insightful. In its secular conception, piety indicates proper humility, the virtue recommended by Hill as an appropriate one for environmental ethics,³⁷ and as such is the virtue opposed to the vice of arrogance. It also connects with the virtue of reverence, which along with “awe, ... respect, wonder (or) acceptance,” is one of the terms Midgley offers as suitable to speak of things in nature which, unlike the (p. 141) sentient animals, are very different from us.³⁸ In relation to such things, reverence, like piety, can readily be part of a secular virtue ethics.

Midgley offers this list in relation to her claim that moral philosophers who employ utilitarianism and deontology have “the tendency to insist on conceptual monoculture—on bringing all moral questions together under simple headings, reducible ultimately to a few key terms”³⁹ and says we need more words, not fewer. In my view, she is right; given the looming environmental crisis, we need all the help we can get, and the rich vocabulary of virtue ethics is waiting for us to use it.

Suggested Reading

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Notes:

Virtue Ethics and the Treatment of Animals

- (1.) I reiterate, in this paper, much that I have said in "Applying Virtue Ethics to Our Treatment of the Other Animals," in *The Practice of Virtue*, ed. Jennifer Welchman, (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 2006), pp.136-55.
- (2.) Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: New York Review/Random House, 1975); rev. ed., New York Review/Random House, 1990; reissued with a new preface, New York: HarperCollins, 2001.
- (3.) Mary Midgley, *Animals and Why They Matter* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983), pp. 28-30.
- (4.) Midgley, *Animals and Why They Matter*, p. 100.
- (5.) Rosalind Hursthouse, *Ethics, Humans and Other Animals* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 127-32.
- (6.) Midgley, *Animals and Why They Matter*, p. 100.
- (7.) Midgley, *Animals and Why They Matter*, p. 10.
- (8.) An instructive example is her strikingly titled "Duties Concerning Islands," in *Environmental Philosophy*, ed. R. Elliot and A. Gare (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1983), pp. 166-81.
- (9.) J. Baird Callicott, "Animal Liberation: A Triangular Affair," *Environmental Ethics* 2 (1980): 311-38.
- (10.) I owe this illuminating list to Clare Palmer, "Rethinking Animal Ethics in Appropriate Context: How Rolston's Work Can Help," in *Nature, Value, Duty*, ed. C. J. Preston and W. Ouderkerk (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), pp. 183-201.
- (11.) Without the label "virtue ethics," which did not exist at the time, this was the approach used by Stephen R. L. Clark in his book *The Moral Status of Animals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), first published by the Clarendon Press in 1977. Notwithstanding his title, Clark's Aristotelian view is that "what it is right to do is found by considering what someone of sound moral character ... would do" (p. viii); it is the book that converted me to vegetarianism.
- (12.) Richard Sorabji, *Animal Minds and Human Morals* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993).
- (13.) Louke van Wensveen, *Dirty Virtues* (Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity Books, 2000).
- (14.) For a much more thorough discussion of this issue, see my *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), chapters 2 and 3.
- (15.) Compare Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 12, and *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 13-14.

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- (16.) Midgley, *Animals and Why They Matter*, p. 27.
- (17.) Philippa Foot, "Virtues and Vices," in her *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- (18.) Lisa Tessman, *Burdened Virtues* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 4.
- (19.) Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), AK nos. 6: 449–6: 450, pp.198–99.
- (20.) I owe this illuminating term to Christine Swanton, who introduces the idea in her *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), chapter 5.
- (21.) http://www.genomenewsnetwork.org/articles/03_02/bunny_art.shtml.
- (22.) Martha Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 399–400.
- (23.) See Rebecca L. Walker, "The Good Life for Non-Human Animals: What Virtue Requires of Humans," in *Working Virtue*, ed. Rebecca L. Walker and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- (24.) Mary Anne Warren (agreeing with Regan, in her otherwise-critical discussion of his view), "Difficulties with the Strong Animals Rights Position," *Between the Species* 2 (1987): 163–73.
- (25.) See Thomas Keneally, *Schindler's Ark* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1982).
- (26.) Peter Singer, *Ethics in Action: Henry Spira and the Animal Rights Movement* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998).
- (27.) Singer, *Ethics in Action: Henry Spira*, p. 53.
- (28.) Reading Singer's whole book is best, but how Spira reasoned is encapsulated in pp. 184–192, under the heading "Ten Ways to Make a Difference," available at <http://www.utilitarian.net/singer/by/1998---02.htm>.
- (29.) Singer, *Ethics in Action: Henry Spira*, p. 102.
- (30.) Singer, *Ethics in Action: Henry Spira*, p. 198.
- (31.) Richard Routley (later publishing as "Richard Sylvan"), "Is there a Need for a New, an Environmental Ethic?" in *Proceedings of the 15th World Congress of Philosophy* 1 (Sophia, Bulgaria: Sophia-Press, 1973), pp. 205–10.
- (32.) Iain and Oria Douglas Hamilton, *Battle for the Elephants* (London: Doubleday, 1992).
- (33.) Aldo Leopold, "The Land Ethic," in *A Sand County Almanac* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

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- (34.) Garrett Hardin, "The Tragedy of the Commons," *Science*, n.s. 162 (1968): 1243–48.
- (35.) See Harley Cahan, "Against the Moral Considerability of Ecosystems," *Environmental Ethics* 10 (1988): 195–206, n. 6.
- (36.) Roger Scruton, *Animal Rights and Wrongs* (London: Demos, 1996).
- (37.) Thomas Hill Jr., "Ideals of Human Excellence and Preserving Natural Environments," *Environmental Ethics* 5 (1983): 211–24.
- (38.) Mary Midgley, "Sustainability and Moral Pluralism," in *The Philosophy of the Environment*, ed. T. D. J. Chappell (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), p. 149.
- (39.) Midgley, "Sustainability and Moral Pluralism."

Rosalind Hursthouse

Rosalind Hursthouse, Department of Philosophy, The University of Auckland, New Zealand

