



Universiteit Utrecht

THE HUMAN, THE CAT, AND THE BURNING HOUSE

The Moral Status of Animals in Virtue Ethics

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January 20th, 2020

Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Applied Ethics

ABSTRACT

Moral status is an often-discussed concept in deliberating on the ethics of marginal cases: those who are regarded as less cognitively sophisticated as the average adult human. Non-human animals are considered to be such marginal cases, and moral status is used as a conceptual tool to defend certain obligations humans may have towards animals. Non-consequentialist eudaemonist virtue ethicists, however, have mostly left the concept of moral status unaddressed or have rejected its usefulness as giving us realistic moral guidance.

In this thesis, I consider four virtue ethicists who have written about animal ethics, moral status and the good life: Alvaro, Rowlands, Hursthouse and Hacker-Wright. I argue that these virtue ethicists, in spite of their reservations, should address the concept of moral status. Firstly, because moral status helps us determine who is morally considerable, even in virtuous terms; secondly, because moral status helps us determine who can engage in certain morally important relationships with us; and thirdly, because moral status can be understood as a deontic constraint the virtuous person should consider. Virtue ethicists talking about animals thus may need to develop a conception moral status in order to determine who or what is the appropriate object of our virtuous conduct.

PAGE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|------------------|---|
| Abstract | 2 |
| Page of contents | 3 |
| Introduction | 4 |
| Chapter I | Moral status: its definition and traditional conceptions |
| | 9 |
| | <i>What is moral status?</i> |
| | 9 |
| | <i>Who or what has moral status?</i> |
| | 10 |
| | <i>Why deliberate about moral status?</i> |
| | 12 |
| | <i>Traditional understandings: Singer and Regan</i> |
| | 13 |
| Chapter II | Virtue ethics deliberation about animals |
| | 17 |
| | <i>The virtue ethicist's motives</i> |
| | 17 |
| | <i>The virtue of compassion</i> |
| | 19 |
| | <i>The virtue of mercy</i> |
| | 22 |
| Chapter III | A virtue-ethical rejection of the use of moral status |
| | 24 |
| | <i>Objection to moral status: fetuses and animals</i> |
| | 24 |
| | <i>Hursthouse's thought experiment: the cat and the burning house</i> |
| | 27 |
| | <i>Hursthouse's thought experiment revisited</i> |
| | 29 |
| | <i>Relational properties of animals</i> |
| | 31 |
| Chapter IV | Differentiating between the vulnerable, the wronged and the harmed |
| | 34 |
| | <i>An objection to my case</i> |
| | 34 |
| | <i>Virtuous reasoning and deontic constraints</i> |
| | 36 |
| | <i>Moral status as a deontic constraint</i> |
| | 38 |
| Conclusion | 42 |
| Works Cited | 43 |

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The Moral Status of Animals in Virtue Ethics

Can virtue ethicists defend an animal ethics without addressing the question of moral status of non-human animals? In this thesis, I will argue that although virtue ethicists do not address the moral status of animals, or claim that it is not necessary to address it for an adequate defense of animal ethics, they nevertheless should address moral status in order to decide whom we should be virtuous towards. In order to navigate our relationship with animals clearly, and navigate our relationships with different types of animals in different contexts, we need to know what their properties are and in what way those properties inform us of our relationships with them.

Philosophers who have discussed moral status are attempting to captivate what properties or qualities a being should have in order to have moral status. The implication of moral status deliberation is that we have certain obligations or should have a certain attitude towards those who have it, for that being's own sake (Metz 389). I interpret moral status reasoning as thinking about the relevant intrinsic properties of animals that inform us of how we should morally regard them. There have been philosophers who do not prefer the use of the term "moral status" as such a broad term, even if they do agree with the concept philosophically, as its conceptions are so various and perhaps confusing (Sachs 99). I will forgo this issue, however, and use moral status as an "umbrella term" for all its different definitions.

Moral status helps us understand the moral claims other beings have on us; in the case of animals that are not able to convey their needs and wants through language, we try to determine their moral status in order to clarify the demands of morality with regard to our obligations to and relationships with animals (Gruen 27). I will argue that virtue ethicists are essentially talking about this, too. If we want to know how to regard animals, we need to ask ourselves: what is it about animals, whether that be some animals or all animals, that asks us from us that we treat them virtuously?

I will respond to the work of four virtue ethicists specifically: Carlo Alvaro, Mark Rowlands, Rosalind Hursthouse and John Hacker-Wright. Henceforth I will mostly refer to "virtue ethicists" in a general sense for simplicity. However, I do not mean to generalise all virtue ethicists in my argument. I will

consider, for the most part, the four aforementioned specific virtue ethicists. I will clarify that I have identified these virtue ethicists as eudaemonist and non-consequentialist in chapter II. Furthermore, all four have given an account of how we should regard and treat animals from a virtue ethics perspective, mostly related to a defense of practicing a vegan or vegetarian lifestyle. The former two of these ethicists give a virtue ethics defense of animal ethics without addressing moral status at all, while the latter explicitly reject the usefulness of moral status.

The four specific virtue ethicists all, from my observations, either engage with defending an animal ethics or with what application of moral status to “marginal cases” we should or should not ascribe (Sachs 88). This is different from engaging with environmental virtue ethics, which is concerned with the ethics of “relationships and interactions with the natural environment” (Cafaro 4). The latter often includes animals in its ethics, but takes on a wider perspective of animals as an integral part of nature. There are more virtue ethicists who have considered animal ethics: for example, Cheryl Abbate has argued that virtue ethics proposes a “minimally decent ethics” for animals (Abbate 922-4). However, as her arguments are mostly derived from the writings of Hursthouse and Rowlands, I think that with addressing these four virtue ethicists I am able to address the most prominent arguments within the field.

I argue that those particular virtue ethicists should discuss, in spite of their reservations or objections, moral status for three reasons. Firstly: certain facts about animals are meant to inform us who is morally considerable. This is what the concept of moral status is meant to capture, and I argue that for the virtuous agent it is necessary to distinguish, to some extent, between the beings and things that are within the virtuous person’s “moral scope” and those that are not.

Secondly, because of virtue ethics’ emphasis on contextual relationships between humans and non-human animals, I argue that since there are also certain conceptions of moral status that capture this relational essence, moral status deliberation cannot be fully escaped here, either. A classic individualistic interpretation of moral status, as virtue ethicists have rejected, does not rule out the usefulness of moral status if understood as having relational value. Hursthouse has argued that moral status is a useless concept for animals, as we encounter all different sorts of animals in all different sorts of contexts: as pets, in the zoo, as animals we experiment on, and so on. Thus, it would make no sense to ascribe the same moral status to all animals or to a sort (Hursthouse 2006, 140-1). However, because Hursthouse is

talking about relevant differences between our relations with animals, I suggest that she is either referring to a different interpretation of the graduated form of moral status, as Singer has put forth, or to a relational account of moral status. The relational account of moral status asks us to not only consider intrinsic properties of animals, but also what beings are “capable of being part of a communal relationship” (Metz 393).

Thirdly, I will also consider an important objection: the necessity of us having to be informed by facts about animals does not justify the necessity of using the concept of moral status. Hacker-Wright does not outright reject the usefulness of moral status but argues that, instead of asking what criterion an animal should have for moral status, “we might rather ask, ‘what conception of how to live must’” animal ethicists “hold, such that this is the course of action that should be pursued in this case?” (Hacker-Wright 459). Hacker-Wright speaks of the “virtue of justice,” through which we recognize the moral wrong in the exploitation of those who are vulnerable (462-3). I will respond that even the answer to this question is presupposed by certain things we need to know about animals.

Moral status can thus be understood as a “deontic constraint,” which enables us to recognise others as having the standing to make moral claims upon us as “part of the virtuous person’s dispositions” (LeBar 652). LeBar argues that our reason-responsive attitudes should include “all and only the relevant features of the (potential) victims of our actions” (663). Therefore, since animals often fall victim to our behaviour, the virtuous person should reason about features of animals, too. Because we can recognize these features, we can take on a “second-person standpoint,” through which we might recognize animals as possessors of a moral standing; to make moral claims upon us, for reasons unrelated to what is good for us (LeBar 662).

I must clarify that, in this thesis, by “animals” I mean “non-human animals,” and I will henceforth mostly refer to non-human animals simply as animals. Furthermore, if I am referring to “you,” “we” or “us,” I mean “humans” in the most general sense (and not, for example, only philosophers or animal ethicists). I recognize that the animal-human dichotomy may imply a distinction that some animal ethicists may wish to avoid, as it separates human animals from non-human animals semantically, whereas animal ethicists argue against speciesism, and for less “moral distance” between human and non-human animals

(Coeckelbergh and Gunkel 730). For clarity's and simplicity's sake, however, I will leave this issue aside.

Furthermore, while I will refer to some empirical facts about specific animals, I will not be going into details into to neuroscientific side of arguments about animals. Much research has been done as to whether a specific sort of animal's cognitive capacities, in any regard, are comparable to average human capacities. A few examples: primates are prosocial and cooperative, and do not always behave that way out of merely selfish reasons (De Waal and Suchak 2010). Dogs can solve problems, and have a similar structure of cognitive abilities to people (Arden and Adams 2016). Ants are known to be able to communicate a variety of means for an attraction to a food source (Ryabko and Reznikova 1996). However, I will not go into specific evidence for different species' properties of animals. In fact, much is still unknown about animal's cognitive capacities, which is also a possible complication for the solidity of arguments from moral status I will address (Hursthouse 2006, 139). Our attitude towards animals depends on empirical evidence on the one hand, and philosophical conduct on the other (Glock 119). I will for the most part focus on the latter. I will differentiate between different sorts of animals as examples, however, and will assume firstly, that animals have the cognitive capacities that the authors I respond to mention, and secondly, that cognitive capacities of some animals are more developed or complex than other animals.

In chapter I, I will give a basic review of how moral status has been philosophically understood in a general sense, as well as by animal ethicists from the deontological and utilitarian tradition. In chapter II, I will give an account of what a general virtue ethics approach to animal ethics looks like, and how the virtue ethicist reasons in order to arrive at certain conclusions about animals. To clarify the latter, I will discuss Alvaro and Rowlands, who respectively justify their virtue ethics account of animal ethics with a central position of the virtue of compassion and the virtue of mercy. I will then suggest that their virtue-ethical position does depend on an account of moral status as I have described in chapter I.

Then, in chapter III, I will discuss the specific virtue ethicist's rejection of the usefulness of moral status, and argue that moral status may yet still be necessary to determine who it is we should be virtuous towards. I will outline Hursthouse's detailed rejection of the usefulness of moral status, and

elaborate on the concept of relational moral status. I argue that we need to know about capacities that animals may have for relationships with one another and with us in order to determine what animals are in our moral scope and in what circumstances.

In chapter IV, I consider the argument of Hacker-Wright, who states that the problem is not “there is nothing to say about moral status, but [...] that what there is to say about moral status must be spelled out in terms of the relevant virtues” (Hacker-Wright 457). I will treat this as an objection to my case. Hacker-Wright holds that the necessity of us having to be informed by facts about animals does not justify the necessity of using the concept of moral status. I am, to some extent, sympathetic to this argument, as I would not argue that determining moral status results in acquiring all of the answers to questions regarding animal ethics. Yet, I hold that if we want to discover “how to live,” and how to navigate the complexity of our relationships with animals in virtuous terms, perhaps considering the capacities for animals to live a good life on their own terms is a good place to start. I will elaborate on how we can understand moral status as a deontic constraint that the virtue ethicist should consider.

Finally, I will conclude in chapter V that virtue ethicists may want to consider moral status. In my view, they already do so unconsciously, or when they explicitly reject the concept I will formulate a response. The virtuous person would do well to reason about capacities of animals as a reflective starting point of our thinking about animals.

I. Moral status: its definition and traditional conceptions

What is moral status?

In order to make my case, it is important to have a clear understanding of the concept of moral status, which is sometimes also referred to as “moral standing.” Hence, what is moral status? Answering this question is not an easy task, since different definitions and conceptions of moral status have been subjected to philosophical dispute. The general understanding of moral status is this: to have moral status is to be morally considerable, or, alternatively, to have moral standing. An entity that has moral status has moral importance; not because the importance of that entity would benefit anyone apart from that entity, but because that entity possesses such importance in its own right. Consequently, the needs or interests of the entity deserve to be considered in our moral deliberation (Warren 3). So, moral status is something one can have, or not have, or have to a certain degree, depending on certain conditions, that tells us what this entities’ place in our moral community is.

First and foremost, it is important to understand difference between the concept of moral status and different conceptions of moral status. The concept of moral status is the idea that an entity with moral status is the object of a direct duty, or an entity that can be wronged by another entity. So, a moral agent has reason to treat an entity a certain way for the entities’ own sake. For clarity, we can compare this with an indirect duty, wherein an agent has a moral reason to treat an entity a certain way, but not ultimately because of fundamental facts about this entity (Metz 389). To clarify: if I would want to kick my dog, I would be obligated to refrain from doing so, because it may indicate that I am more likely to hurt fellow humans if I am willing to kick my dog. As such, I have a duty to not hurt my dog, but for reasons unrelated to the dog’s moral status.

Contrastingly, a conception of moral status is a theory about moral status that attempts to determine “a comprehensive and basic principle” to justify what “things either have moral status or lack it” (Metz 389). This does not have to be a single principle, but generally a philosopher that argues for an account of moral status aims to identify the underlying structure of a group of entities – animals, cognitively disabled people, foetuses – by having its account rely on as few properties as possible. Thus, competing conceptions of moral status all aim to accurately capture what the correct interpretation of the concept of moral status is, based on properties rather than right action or good character (389).

My argument will be that the virtue ethicists I will discuss, in spite of their emphasis on right action or good character, should acknowledge the concept of moral status with regard to animals. I will address several conceptions of moral status to clarify my point; the utilitarianism of Singer, the rights-based theory of Regan, and relational moral status. However, I will refrain from making a judgement on which of these conceptions I think is best or most appropriate.

Who or what has moral status?

The question that naturally follows, then, is: what entities, groups or individuals have moral status? Who or what do we consider morally important enough that we feel we should have a moral obligation towards them for their own sake? Furthermore, what are the specific conditions that qualify one for moral status? These questions alone have sparked much philosophical debate. There seems to be an intuitive consensus that most humans do have moral status. It seems we can generally agree that we have a moral obligation to not hurt other humans for their own sake, or at least not if there are no other mitigating circumstances. We do not hurt others humans because we agree that there is something about humans that prohibits us from hurting them, apart for whatever reason there is of in what way not hurting them would benefits ourselves.

Contrastingly, we do not have the obligation to avoid tearing apart, say, a piece of paper for the paper's own sake (Warren 4). Intuitively, we feel we have no direct obligations to inanimate objects. There may be other reasons why it is wrong to tear the paper: it may be a piece of paper that has emotional value to someone, or because someone who tears paper for no reason other than selfish enjoyment does not have an admirable character. But it is not wrong to tear it apart out of any moral obligation to the piece of paper in itself. If anything, it would be wrong because it would be violating an obligation to the person the piece of paper belongs to, if this person has moral status.

It can be and has been argued that being human is the principle qualification for having moral status. But this assertion soon proves to be problematic. The "human-only" qualification is referred to as personhood, defined as "a set of higher psychological capacities that include self-consciousness and rationality" (Kittay 102). "To be a person," to have personhood, separates humans from non-human animals. If personhood is where we draw the line for granting moral status, animals cannot have it.

However, personhood is certainly not the only quality that is deemed sufficient, or even relevant at all for justifying moral status for an entity. Other possible conditions for moral status could be: “being alive, possessing a human genetic code, having neo-cortical function, being self-aware, possessing a capacity for interpersonal relations, and contributing to an ecological community” (Hacker-Wright 452). The only agreement on the concept of moral status is that any condition that is relevant to moral status ought to be intrinsic to the entity and fundamental to the entity’s mental experience. To summarize: in order to qualify for moral status, one must have either so-called “intrinsic properties” or “capacities,” like the property of rationality or the capacity to have interests. One cannot have moral status based on the fact that one is rich, for example. This is neither an intrinsic property nor a capacity.

Let me now introduce how animals fit into all of these questions, for one might already sense that it is difficult to pinpoint how we can justify classifying one entity differently from another on the basis of their moral status. Even a qualification such as the aforementioned “personhood” is not always understood as exclusive to humans. Research has suggested that some animals have very developed cognitive capacities, even more so than some humans, and as such animals would also be qualified for having moral status (Kittay 101). Thus the answer to “who has moral status?” becomes more difficult if we are talking about entities that “are significantly less psychologically sophisticated than typical adult humans” (Sachs 88). These entities are often referred to as “marginal cases.” Non-human animals have generally and historically been considered to be less psychologically sophisticated than humans, and there are definitely animals that are far outranked by humans in terms of psychological capacities.

Yet, if there is no need to address moral status concerning these marginal cases, then perhaps moral status is nothing else than an expression of human exceptionalism (Sachs 89). In fact, most writing on moral status has almost exclusively revolved around marginal cases (90). What is the problem with animals that we, apparently, cannot intuitively grant them moral status? Or if there is a universal moral intuition underlying the status of animals, why is it not so obvious as it is with humans? Some animals have a developed language amongst one another, but they cannot speak human language. One of the problematic consequences of this fact is that animals have no means of expressing moral claims upon us humans. They also have no way to express their interests, even if we can observe and conclude from empirical research on their behaviour that they most certainly do, in their own ways. Some animals

clearly have inferior psychological and cognitive capacities than most adult humans, so if we think animals or certain animals to be morally important enough to us that they deserve our consideration, there must be something else to them, or to us, that justifies granting them moral status. As Gruen states it: “The challenge for us, as ethical agents who are responsive to values, is to try to identify what values are being threatened in their particular contexts, to try to make their claims on us understandable, and to act accordingly” (Gruen 27).

Why deliberate about moral status?

Before I proceed, I need to address another issue. If moral status is such a complicated, splintered philosophical endeavour to take on, one may wonder: why bother at all? After all, if I want to defend the statement that virtue ethicists should and do indeed speak of moral status, it seems that I need to clarify why moral status would be a helpful tool in our moral conduct in the first place. What good does it do for a being to grant it moral status, what use does “having moral status” have? Firstly, it is desirable to have a moral fundament that most people can understand and agree upon, not just academic philosophers. Human beings are capable of causing harm, both to other humans and other parts of the world; and this capability has increased over the years (Warren 11). Whereas hundreds of years ago, people lived in small communities, having a relatively low impact on the ecosystem they lived in and eating mostly plant-based food, “the history of the twentieth century abundantly demonstrates the human capacity to perpetrate horrors against one another on a scale which has no parallel in human history” (12). On the other hand, we are also inclined to care for and about things: not only each other, but also plants, animals, nature, works of art or inanimate objects such as a piece of paper. We are social and intellectual beings, with a power to be productive and destructive to everything on this earth (12-3). Moral status may give us a sense of who belongs in our moral community, and who or what we think is worthy of protecting of destruction and harm, out of a consideration for the being’s inherent moral worth.

We can perceive moral status as either a “moral minimum” or a “moral ideal,” depending on how we choose to integrate the subject in our daily lives, and what that integration demands from us. In the case of the former interpretation, we have a fixed baseline to treat others with respect and in accordance with moral rules. Moral status can be a relevant consideration in law-making, for example.

In case of moral status as a moral minimum, we may be more likely to speak out against controversial practices, such as the use of animals in research. Whatever threshold we use, it is important to act with moral status according to what we expect from it. If we think of moral status as a moral ideal, is not desirable to implement it as a moral minimum. We must also be pragmatic in this sense: we cannot reasonably expect people to conform to certain moral standards if they cannot meet them (Warren 14). In fact, I will discuss Hursthouse later, who states that moral status as a moral ideal is too demanding (Hursthouse 1991, 237).

In order for moral status to be useful, it must be based upon arguments that are comprehensible to most of us, regardless of religious adherence or cultural background. It also must correspond with our “moral feelings” of well-informed and thoughtful persons, in the hope of establishing a moral standard (Warren 13). Then, moral status can be used as a tool to clarify what it is we should do and who we should consider in making decisions (13-4).

I will now go into the most prominent conceptions of moral status by Singer and Regan. It is important to note that there are more philosophically developed conceptions of moral status. For example, Warren, who I have quoted above, has argued for a “multi-criterial moral status,” in which she develops a pluralistic account of moral status based on seven principles (Warren 148). Furthermore there is the idea of holism; that moral status is accorded not to individuals but only to groups, where individual entities are similar or dependent on one another (Metz 390). Undoubtedly there are other alternative conceptions of moral status, but I will not go into detail on any of the aforementioned. I will elaborate on Singer and Regan because they are most commonly referred to, and virtue ethicists have mostly criticized these conceptions, and I will introduce relational moral status in chapter III by way of example of how virtue ethicists could conceptualize moral status other than their rejection of Singer and Regan.

Traditional understandings: Singer and Regan

Philosophers of “the big three” mainstream ethical traditions – utilitarianism, deontology and virtue ethics – have had something to say about this matter. I will give a brief synopsis of what a prominent utilitarian and deontologist consider to be moral status, in order to show why virtue ethicists reject it. First, I will discuss deontology, for which the most prominent animal rights philosopher is Tom Regan.

Deontologists commonly take on a rights-based or duty-based approach, and as such, Regan has specialized in animal rights theory and has argued that animals are the bearers of rights not because of how they are different from humans, but in how they are similar. In doing so, Regan rejects the traditional deontological framework of so-called contractarianism: the idea that morality consists of voluntarily agreed-upon rules between humans. In this view, it can still be wrong to harm animals, but only out of indirect duties. In fact, I would argue many would think it is *prima facie* wrong to harm an animal, unless there are circumstances that justify us doing so (DeGrazia 1996, 231). But Regan rejects the justification for why this is wrong: traditionally, we have no direct duty to not cause pain to animals, only indirect duties. So, it would be wrong for me to kick your dog, not because I am engaged in a moral contract with your dog itself, but because I do have a moral contract with you and I am harming something that is important to you, or because it would imply I have cruel character traits (Regan 181). But Regan also argues that imposing a direct duty of kindness or a direct duty to not be cruel would be insufficient to protect animal's needs: someone can be genuinely kind, or genuinely avoid cruelty, but still do pursue the wrong action. Someone can be, for example, a genuine racist: the kindness to members of their own race can be good and genuine, but it may still be rooted in injustice (183).

Regan holds that both individual humans and animals are the “experiencing subject of a life, a conscious creature having an individual welfare that has importance to us whatever our usefulness to others” (Regan 186). Animals want certain things, feel certain things, and have memories of certain things akin to how humans do. Whether or not they do this to the same extent as humans do, is irrelevant, Regan argues. Therefore, animals have moral status. Likewise, humans do not have a certain level of intelligence or rationality, but they are nevertheless valued for their own sake just as much as other humans, outside of their usefulness of others (187). So: animals indeed have *interests* just as much as humans do, although those interests may vary from animal to animal, as they may do from human to human.

Because of this fact, Regan argues, we have reason to recognize the moral status of animals: not out of sentiment, not out of emotion, but out of rational deliberation (187). Regan does not speak of the moral status of animals, however, but of their “inherent value:” the idea that an entities’ value is independent of their usefulness to others (186). Yet, because Regan argues that the recognition of

inherent values should lead to the recognition of animal rights, and because interests for the entities' own sake – the fact that animals have the capacity to want and need certain things – are central to Regan's argument, I believe inherent value could be regarded as moral status. Every entity that has inherent value, has it equally to anyone else, human or non-human animal, and therefore has an equal right to be treated with respect (187).

For utilitarian animal ethics, the most notable philosopher is Peter Singer. Singer challenges the idea that all human life is of equal value and this value is superior to any non-human animal's value (Singer 574). If we attempt to draw the moral line at some cognitive ability, we will either have to exclude some human individuals with underdeveloped cognitive capacities, or include non-human animals whose cognitive capacities are comparable to aforementioned human individuals. Singer therefore also challenges Regan's proposition that we should raise animals to hold the same moral status as humans, although Singer is to some extent sympathetic to this idea (574).

Singer, however, thinks that it is not obvious to assume that every individual human has equal moral status, but rather holds that if an entity can suffer and can enjoy life, its interests should be taken into account and we should "give those interests equal weight with the interests of all other beings with similar interests" (575). The fact that an animal's interests deserve equal weight is as far as Singer goes in defending the equality of all humans and animals, as Singer's account of moral status is more graduated, "in which moral status depends on some aspects of cognitive ability, and that graduated view is applied both to humans and nonhumans" (575). In other words, both human and non-human animals are awarded a certain degree of moral status on the basis of their cognitive abilities, eradicating the distinction on the basis of species alone. The right question to ask to determine whether a being has interest and therefore is "can they suffer?" (575). In this view, pigs would hold the same moral status as some mentally handicapped people, since they have comparable cognitive capacities (579). And neither pigs nor mentally handicapped people therefore have as high of a moral status as a fully developed adult would have, for example. However, for every being that is capable of suffering, their interests should to some extent be considered in moral deliberation.

These are, quite generally, the two interpretations of moral status and animal ethics from a deontological and utilitarian standpoint – the former absolute, in the sense that there are certain properties to animals that should award them moral status, and thus rights; the latter variable, in the sense that moral status is not a black-and-white status, but rather a matter of degree. Moral status is used mostly as an important part of a justification for treating animals in a certain way: often, the argument goes that we should adopt a vegan lifestyle, do our best to eradicate the bio-industry, et cetera. To summarize: moral status can be ascribed to an entity that a) has consciousness; as both Regan and Singer emphasize the sentience of animals as a prerequisite for any degree of moral status, and b) has interests, even if they are as simple as staying alive (DeGrazia 1996, 231). After all, moral status is about a certain protection of the unhindered pursuit of those interests: practically, about giving an entity rights or taking an entities' interests into account when deliberating what is the right or good thing to do. An entity that has personhood, but has no interests, would also have no interest in having moral status (Kittay 104). Furthermore, moral status is c) to be decided based on individual property: for Regan, it is being a subject of a life, for Singer, it is the capacity to suffer.

These are certainly not the only accounts of moral status. Furthermore, Singer and Regan have faced criticism for their interpretation of moral status, not only from virtue ethicists. However, it is not my aim to defend one of these conceptions of moral status, nor argue that moral status alone can hold all the answers to solving the problems of animal ethics. However, what I wish to make clear is, whatever conception of moral status we adhere to, philosophers who reason about moral status attempt to think about what it *is* about animals that we must deliberate about them morally. We ask ourselves what property or quality an animal has that renders it morally considerable, from where we can discuss what the implications of their moral status are. Of course, there are more accounts of moral status than those of Singer and Regan, as well as there are accounts outside of deontological or utilitarian ethics. One of these accounts I will elaborate on later is the idea of relational status. However, for now, now that we have an understanding of how moral status has been conceptualized, I will move on to explicate criticism on the concept of moral status from virtue ethicists.

II. Virtue ethics deliberation about animals

The virtue ethicist's motives

Several authors have defended veganism, or otherwise argued for putting an end to the intensive farming industry, from arguments that seem unrelated to moral status. Before I go into detail on specific authors who have argued along these lines, let me introduce a general understanding of how virtue ethics works. If we understand how the virtue ethicist reasons, we may also understand where virtue ethicists stand on the issue of moral status. Moral status has seldom been directly addressed by virtue ethicists, and whenever it has been, it has mostly been a rejection of the concept. Deontology and utilitarianism “each clearly establish a criterion [...] specifying a property that creatures must possess for inclusion in the moral community” (Hacker-Wright 449). Virtue ethics does not define such a criterion. Right action in virtue ethics may still be defined as some sort of principle, but it would not be expressed in terms of a sort of fundamental, universal rule. Such a principle may be expressed along these lines: “An action is right if and only if it is what an agent with a virtuous character would do in the circumstances” (Oakley 128).

When virtue ethics as an ethical theory regained interest in the 1980s, it had been understood as an ethics expressed mostly in negative claims, arguing against ethical ideas stemming from the deontological and utilitarian tradition (Oakley 128). Some animal ethicists have indeed constructed their critique of the concept of moral status as criticism on several conceptions of moral status, as we will come to see. This rejection mainly comes from where virtue ethicists locate the rightness of something, which is in someone's character rather than in the act of that person. Thus, virtue ethics is different from deontology and utilitarianism in the sense that the goodness of an act is not located in the act itself, but in the person acting. Virtues are intrinsically good character traits that someone can develop through life; they are not assigned by birth, but developed through cultivation of character.

A common account of virtue ethics, then, which is embodied by the ethicists I will discuss, is *eudaemonist* virtue ethics, rooted in Aristotle. Eudaemonist virtue ethicists hold that virtues are character traits necessary to lead to flourishing lives (Oakley 133). The ultimate end of all actions is happiness, or *eudaimonia*, which is a good achievable by virtuous action (Aristotle 9). Living the virtuous life is to live happily, as a happy soul is one that lives in perfect accordance with virtue (18). Aristotle himself

did not address animals in his ethics, but virtue ethicists that are dealing with animal ethics have reconstructed Aristotelian virtue ethics to deliberate on how we should regard animals ethically. Contemporary virtue ethicists may call themselves neo-Aristotelian: they agree on the total wrongness of Aristotle's views on slaves and women, which would now be considered quite conservative, and do not restrict themselves to the list of virtues Aristotle described. However, they otherwise try to stay as close to Aristotle's philosophy as possible and try to apply it to issues that Aristotle has never applied it to (Hursthouse 2000, 9-10).

Thus, their outlook on virtue is that whatever character traits we find virtuous, for example "kindness, sensitivity, compassion, generosity, and responsiveness," are those traits we should also extend to animals (Gruen 41-2). And the incentive for doing is because to be virtuous, whether towards humans or towards animals, is something that is valuable intrinsically rather than instrumentally. So, virtues do not promote another value, but are valuable for their own sake (Oakley 139-4). The idea that virtues all promote the end of happiness may appear quite selfcentered intuitively. But this is not how eudaemonist virtue ethicists take it to be. After all, since virtues are valuable for their own sake, the virtuous agent promotes virtuous actions to benefit others. The virtuous agent would not benefit others for the mere sake of promoting virtuous actions – that would not be virtuous (Whiting 278). To live the life of virtue, to live the good life, is to be sensitive not only to one's own virtue but also on the rights and interests of others, to avoid committing a vice, to recognize when a wrong has been done, to protect other beings from harm, et cetera (Hursthouse 2006, 153).

Furthermore, Oakley argues that virtue ethicists can roughly be divided in either the category "non-consequentialist" and the category "consequentialist." The virtue ethicists I address fall in the former category. Within this form of virtue ethics, emphasis rests on acts resulting from motives that express an agent's commitments to "particular-directed relationships," and acknowledge certain constraints necessary to promote the impersonal good (Oakley 145). Virtues provide a rational force to observe certain constraints, in circumstances where it may be morally required of us to impartially benefit others (146). One might already sense from this that virtue ethics is meant to make sufficient moral space for the consideration of animal's needs. Contrast this with consequentialist virtue ethics, where the virtuous life is constructed as the promotion, not the honouring, of the good (148). Thus

consequentialist virtue ethics is less about my being virtuous or your being virtuous, but rather about promoting a maximisation of the virtuous altogether (148-9).

As with any ethical theory, virtue ethics has been criticized. It is characterized as vague, as providing no useful guidance as to what to do, and allowing no room for personal growth if to be moral means to always act as the virtuous agent (Johnson 818-9). I will be proposing a criticism of virtue ethics as well, but only so in the narrow scope of moral status; I will leave criticisms on virtue theory in its entirety unaddressed. I merely described the very basics of what the virtue ethicist constitutes as “the good life;” that is, the eudaemonist non-consequentialist virtue ethicist. How the virtue ethicists I will discuss have applied virtue theory specifically to animals will become clear in the next sections.

The virtue of compassion

A virtue ethicist, then, might hold that our moral lives and our relations with others are too complex, too multi-faceted and too contextual to be understood through principles (Alvaro 770). Carlo Alvaro has argued that while principles, intentions and consequences surely play an important role in virtue ethics, they are not primary in deciding what is the right thing to do. What is primary for the virtue ethicist is “whether the individual’s actions are expressions of good character, through the acquisition of the moral virtues” (771). This means that someone should act in a way that is in accordance with what is the right thing to do in the given circumstances: if we help a friend, we do so because we like our friend, we care for our friend, and we feel good about helping them. We do not help a friend out of a sense of duty or because we think helping our friend will maximize overall utility (6). Or, if we do feel obliged to help our friend, it is the very relationship that is the driving force behind this sense of duty that we experience. I may feel obliged to take care of my sick friend by virtue of our friendship, whereas I do not feel obliged to take care of any sick person I meet.

With this virtue approach, Alvaro defends ethical veganism. Alvaro starts with a rejection of Singer and Regan. He rejects them on the grounds that, in his view, Singer and Regan both hold that there is no morally relevant difference between humans and animals that would justify exploiting the latter (Alvaro 769). But Alvaro thinks the argument of no morally relevant difference is not obvious; humans and animals have a fundamentally different relationship with one another than a human

friendship. There is less of a reciprocal relationship, and animals are not considered moral agents to the extent that they could act virtuously on human's terms. Furthermore, because the cognitive capacities of animals are not as sophisticated as human capacities, our relationship is too complex to equate human suffering with animal suffering (770).

Given this objection, how does Alvaro think about our relationship with animals? For Alvaro, there is a certain expression of virtue that can help us in this relationship, which is the virtue of compassion. We express compassion when we see the suffering of the other, especially when we feel the suffering is undeserved or out of balance with any fault on the sufferer's side. In this sense, compassion is also contextual: the virtuous person has compassion about the right things, in the right amount, at the right time (Alvaro 775). The central claim Alvaro makes is that killing an animal in order to consume it is wrong, if there are nutritious alternatives that are equally good or better. Hence, veganism is justified under these circumstances from a virtue ethics standpoint. This standpoint is compatible with the idea that animal suffering and human suffering or enjoyment are fundamentally different (11). Even if human animals in contrast with non-human animals experience play, pain and relationships in a way that is not comparable, we recognize that animals can live a good life, albeit on different terms to humans.

Yet, Alvaro's main claim – that veganism is justified under certain circumstances, despite the fact that human and animal suffering are different – depends on certain things we have to know about animals. For what is it about animals that requires us to treat them compassionately? Why is it that animals are worthy of deserving our virtuous compassion? We know they can suffer and enjoy life, which are, for example, also the conditions that are morally relevant for Singer. Alvaro says the following: "For virtue ethics, animals' mental capacity and their capacity to feel pain or pleasure inform our virtuous character of their moral importance" (13). Let us now consider the following quote from Singer about animals:

"Can they suffer? Can they enjoy life? If so, they have interests that we should take into account, and we should give those interests equal weight with the interests of all other beings with similar interests. We should not discount their interests in not suffering because they cannot talk or because they are incapable of reasoning; and we should not

discount their interests in enjoying life, in having things that are fulfilling and rewarding for them, either” (Singer 575).

I would argue that both Alvaro’s and Singer’s main claim rest on quite similar biological facts about animals, although they would likely not agree on how the moral implications of those facts are shaped: for Alvaro, it is being virtuous; for Singer, it is the consideration of animal’s interests. In any case, their arguments rest on the recognition of the animal’s capacity for suffering. Alvaro states that the fact that we know that animals have a conscious experience, and can lead, on their terms, a good life, gives us an objective reason to take them into account in our moral considerations. This reason is objective, because it is based on objective moral characteristics – the capacity to live a good life – of an animal’s subjective experience (Alvaro 770). While not all philosophers agree with the claimed objectivity of morally relevant features to animals, the fact that Alvaro grounds his defense of veganism in the capacity for a good life points towards an attribution of moral status (Coeckelbergh and Gunkel 719).

Alvaro does not mention moral status as such as a component in his argument, although Alvaro does not explicitly reject its usefulness, either. However, Alvaro does criticize Singer and Regan for their interpretation of what cognitive capacities of animals tell us about where they stand in relation to us, and Alvaro shortly cites Hursthouse’s objection of moral status (Alvaro 768-9). And yet, Alvaro refers directly to cognitive capacities of animals to justify why we should treat animals virtuously. Let me reconstruct Alvaro’s argument this way:

1. We know that animals have the capacity to experience pleasure and pain;
2. In deciding who we should consider if we want to act virtuous, we are to be informed by an entity’s mental capacities such as experiencing pleasure and pain;
3. Therefore, we must consider animals in our virtuous behaviour.

Now consider the following:

1. We know that animals have the capacity to experience pleasure and pain;
2. An entity that has mental capacities such as experiencing pleasure and pain has moral status;
3. We should consider those who have moral status if we want to act virtuously.

I would argue that the former and the latter reconstruction rest on the same assumptions about animals, if not for the conclusion to be expressed in different ethical terms. Hence, whether or not we agree with Alvaro that compassion gives us a force to treat animals virtuously, moral status appears to be part of the equation in considering animals compassionately. I will now turn to look at another virtue ethicist, Mark Rowlands.

The virtue of mercy

While Alvaro takes compassion as the central virtue for his argument, Rowlands argues that mercy is a fundamental virtue; in fact, it is a conditional virtue for other, related virtues (Rowlands 31). This is because the virtue of mercy exposes us to power relations; it is not realistically conceivable that we are able to express virtues towards entities that are capable of helping or hurting us, but not towards entities who are not capable of doing this. For, if we would be kind to a friend but not to our neighbour's dog, that would not be an expression of the virtue of kindness. And, in fact, animals are relatively powerless to humans, certainly the ones we eat, experiment on and keep as pets (34).

In order to understand Rowlands clearly, I must make clear that Rowlands understands virtues to be "multi-factorial." If a virtue is multi-factorial, it "consists in more than behavioural tendencies or dispositions alone, even if these are stable through time" (Rowlands 29). Let us take the virtue of courage as an example. To have the virtue of courage in a multi-factorial sense would not only be to act courageously when it is appropriate. It is also to have the tendency to be courageous, to reject cowardice in oneself and in others, and to experience and express disappointment when a lack of courage is witnessed (29). Thus, the courage is not only situated in acting from one's virtuous character but also in thinking and judging from one's character.

However, I wish to raise a similar objection here as I have with the virtue of compassion: who do we think we should have mercy for, and how do we decide? I think the objection is not as strong with the virtue of mercy as it is with compassion, because we can clearly show mercy to animals exactly because we see them as "lower," or less powerful, than us. But would it also mean that we can leave any consideration of moral status out of the equation? Can we have genuine, multi-factorial mercy, for a tree, for example?

I would argue that we cannot, or least not in the way Rowlands describes it. I am not implying that a tree is excluded by default from what matters to us ethically, or that it would not be good to be kind to our environment. However, Rowlands considers the virtue of mercy to be fundamental in our interactions with others, especially those who have less power than us. If we want to treat animals mercifully, we must also recognize that there is something about them that make them appropriate recipients of such mercy. Rowlands even proposes that there are some animals can be virtuous agents, that they “are capable of acting on the basis of moral reasons – as possessors of moral virtues (and vices) broadly understood” (Rowlands 35).

Rowlands does not develop this argument much further, but if Rowlands understands some animals as moral agents, he surely also must understand them to be moral patients. Moreover, Rowlands explains his multi-factorial virtues as “dispositions [that] must be surrounded by, and grounded in, a milieu that consists of the relevant judgments and emotions” (Rowlands 32). So it seems that Rowlands is also referring to cognitive capacities, at least in his argument for why animals are morally considerable: perhaps it is more explicit in his suggestion that some species can be moral agents, which is likely not as relevant here. I would suggest that Rowlands is however implying that, because animals are engaged in power relationships with us, animals are objects of our power over them. But to decide who is the appropriate object of our action may depend on what we derive from the capacities of animals. Humans also hold power over the natural environment, for example, to manipulate its aesthetics and function to match their desires. We build cities or plant flowers. Yet, I would not say that this is the power relationship Rowlands is referring to. Rather, we might understand animals as appropriate receivers of our virtuous mercy. Natural environments and inanimate objects are not the appropriate receivers because they do not have moral status. That is not to say that we may not treat them virtuously, but when we treat them virtuously, we do so on different grounds. We treat animals with mercy

Alvaro and Rowlands both have not addressed the concept of moral status directly. However, I would say that this concept is what they are indirectly, and perhaps unconsciously, basing their arguments on. I will now move on to the virtue ethicists who have set out an explicit rejection of the concept of moral status, why virtue ethics should not bother with developing a conception of it.

III. A virtue-ethical rejection of the use of moral status

Objection to moral status: fetuses and animals

Rosalind Hursthouse is a virtue ethicist who has explicitly rejected the relevance of the concept of moral status. In order to fully make clear Hursthouse's ideas on moral status, including the claimed irrelevance thereof, I must briefly diverge from animal ethics and write about abortion ethics. It is not my aim to take a stance within the abortion debate: however, Hursthouse's rejection of the usefulness of moral status originates within an abortion context. Specifically, it regards the discussion around the moral status of fetuses. We will see, however, that whereas Hursthouse thinks moral status may be of some use still in the abortion debate, it is completely useless in the animal ethics debate. Thus, to clearly understand Hursthouse's rejection of using moral status in animals as a justification, we must first understand what Hursthouse says about the moral status of fetuses, as Hursthouse explicates her moral argument in more detail within an abortion context. Essentially, the argument Hursthouse makes about either moral status of fetuses or animals is the same. If anything, the argument for animal ethics is a stronger version of the argument for abortion ethics. Hursthouse thinks that moral status is not sufficient for abortion ethics, but it is not necessary at all for animal ethics. However, Hursthouse lays down the rejection that is put forward, clearly with examples from an abortion context.

For Hursthouse, to attach moral status to a fetus would be to go beyond "the familiar biological facts." The biological facts are, for example, that we are generally aware of the fact that pregnancy lasts around nine months in which the fetus grows and develops, that a woman generally gets pregnant from having heterosexual intercourse or through artificial insemination, et cetera. And yet, from these facts, philosophers have attempted to derive a conclusion on moral status. For virtue ethicists, however, the question that follows from these facts should not be "what conclusion can be derived from the biological facts on moral status?" but rather

"How do these facts figure in the practical reasoning, actions and passions, thoughts and reactions, of the virtuous and the nonvirtuous? What is the mark of having the right attitude to these facts and what manifests having the wrong attitude to them?"

(Hursthouse 1991, 237).

What Hursthouse ultimately argues for is that the moral status of foetus, which would be derived from the familiar facts, is not an adequate condition on which to determine solely whether or not abortion is morally right or wrong. To derive a conclusion on the status of a foetus from these facts would merely be rooted in the desire to solve the problem of abortion by having it fall under a universal moral rule. Therefore, the philosophical discussion on moral status is out of touch with reality (Hursthouse 1991, 236).

In order to clarify why it is so out of touch, Hursthouse asks us to imagine that you are an alien here on Earth for anthropological research. You would not have any knowledge of how human reproduction works: you do not know that pregnancy happens through intercourse between a man and a woman or through artificial insemination, nor do you know that pregnancy lasts around nine months, and that pregnancy and parenthood are physically challenging and emotionally charged. If you would want to get to know these facts, you would certainly not get to know them through writings on moral status by academic philosophers. So to ask what the moral status of the foetus is, and how to act according to it, would be to ask the wrong question (Hursthouse 1991, 237).

In order to answer the question “what should we do?” realistically, it may be better to evaluate the context of our emotional and family lives, which differs from individual case to case. Hursthouse mentions that women get pregnant in circumstances – for example in case of neglect of using protection – in which they cannot welcome the child into the world because they, at the time, lack certain virtues required to raise a child well: for example, the virtue of responsibility (Hursthouse 1991, 243).

“So even in the cases where the decision to have an abortion is the right one, it can still be the reflection of a moral failing-not because the decision itself is weak or cowardly or irresolute or irresponsible or light-minded, but because lack of the requisite opposite of these failings landed one in the circumstances in the first place” (Hursthouse 1991, 243).

Hence, the idea is that to question the moral status of the foetus is not so relevant to the evaluation of whether it is morally right or wrong to have an abortion. We could still deny that a foetus should have moral status, and maybe compellingly argue for it, but even then having an abortion could be a reflection of a moral failing. We do not need to have a definitive answer on what can be derived

from the familiar biological facts about the status of the foetus (Hursthouse 1999, 237). Rather, we should look at what it means to live well, to live a virtuous life, for the parents and the unborn child. In order to examine this well, we can do without moral status, since there are better, more relevant moral factors that inform us.

Let us conclude from Hursthouse that moral status alone cannot adequately answer the question of abortion. But is the moral status of an entity still not one of those contextual factors which we should also take into account, then? Hursthouse claims that perhaps moral status is more of a metaphysical concept than a moral one. Metaphysical philosophers often regard the world in terms of particulars and their properties. So, if the animals are the particulars, the awarding of moral status to a particular foetus, or horse, or firefly, is based on certain properties or capacities of that entity: sentience, agency, and so on (DeGrazia 1999, 126). But we do not know everything about all organisms' capacities, nor do we know the metaphysical status of the foetus. We know only the familiar biological facts. So until we do know all there is to know, or at least enough to be certain about the metaphysical status of marginal cases, perhaps there is no moral theory that can provide an answer. Since knowledge and wisdom have an important role in informing the virtuous person, if status is relevant to the moral rightness or wrongness of abortion, the status of the foetus (or a particular animal) must be known to the virtue ethicist in order to provide an answer. But, Hursthouse argues, to require this sort of wisdom from a virtuous person would be unrealistic, because it would be overtly reliant on the conclusions of academic philosophers (Hursthouse 1999, 235).

In other words: moral status is too demanding and therefore unhelpful in any realistic sense. It is a concept that requires too much from "ordinary" humans that are not involved in academic philosophy (Hacker-Wright 450). Moral status may be a relevant factor still, but only in a sense that the familiar biological facts are: they are not facts that are deeply intertwined with the emotional context in which pregnancy and abortion happens. Thus, the concept of moral status, for the virtue ethicist, is out of touch with reality, providing us no tangible guidance on how we should act (Hursthouse 1999, 237).

As little as moral status may have its use in the abortion debate, Hursthouse argues, it is completely useless for animal ethics. For, as opposed to the foetus's species, there is no single animal species. Rather, there is a wide variety of animals and also a variety of relationships in how we engage

with them; some animals we interact with only in zoos, others we hold as pets. We generally interact differently with animals in zoos than we do with animals in our home – or animals on our plate. Even in the case where we could interact with a cat in a zoo or on a farm in comparison to a cat which we interact with as a pet, there is a difference as to how this cat appears to us in our moral lives (Hursthouse 2006, 140).

Hursthouse's thought experiment: the cat and the burning house

Hursthouse gives us another thought experiment to demonstrate the aforementioned point. Consider the following scenario: if I own a cat as my pet, that I have genuine feelings of love and care for, it is not ridiculous to think that my psychological capacities still outrank those of my cat. If my house is set on fire and it is up to you, a random passer-by at an unfortunate timing, to save either me or my cat and remain unharmed yourself, you should save me, since I have a higher status than my cat. My interests are probably more worth pursuing for my own sake more than the interests of my cat. But if I myself got out of the burning house unscathed, it is not ridiculous to think that I have good reason to attempt to save my cat, either. Maybe not if I will have to risk my own life for it, but if the risk is quite low, or if I have no other relations to anyone or any animal except for my cat, I have a sound motivation to at least attempt to save it. It would be less understandable if I risked my life to save a cat out of a building that I have no relationship with, although we do admire people who do so: we do tend to call people (that are not firemen) who save animals that are not their pets “heroic” or “noble,” because those are people willing to sacrifice or hurt themselves in order to protect animals with a “lower” status. But in this scenario, the feature to the cat that is relevant to my wanting to save it, is that it is my cat and not just any cat. I love it and care for it, and although I do not think that my cat outranks me in moral status, I do value our relationship to an extent that I would be willing to put myself at a relatively minor risk to save it (Hursthouse 2006, 140).

Using this thought experiment, Hursthouse concludes that, just because humans outrank cats in moral status terms, this does not mean that they cannot be called upon to rescue animals when possible. After all, part of fireguard's duties is not just to save people, but also animals whenever possible, and otherwise we may feel very sad if a cat does not survive a fire, even if our partners and family members

all have escaped the fire safely (Hursthouse 2006, 140). Thus it becomes clear that moral status is not an easy-to-use tool to safely decide what to do in these complex scenarios.

For Hursthouse, to say that X has moral status means that X has rights, or that X's interests should be given the same weight of other X's (Hursthouse 2006, 137). If we extend Hursthouse's argument of abortion to animals, it would imply that the moral status is not as relevant for the virtue ethicist as it is to ask the relevant questions that address "the good life" in an animal ethics context. In fact, Hursthouse considers the concept of moral status even more useless in the animal ethics debate than in the abortion debate, for reasons explained in the previous paragraph (140). The question we should be asking instead could be along the lines of "Is this (veganism or vegetarianism) a virtuous practice?" (141).

This is because we are better off asking how human beings affect the world, and if it is not good, ask what we can do to change this (Hursthouse 2006, 151). One could ask, however, if the questions Hursthouse gives us as alternatives truly give us guidance. For, what if the question of how to treat animals is dependent on the answer to the question of the moral status? What if the effects of human behaviour on the well-being of animals can be enhanced or otherwise negated by moral status? Hypothetically, such an answer to the moral status question could point the virtuous person directly to what it means to live a good life.

Thus far, I have given a detailed account of Hursthouse's argument. I will now continue to respond to it. Hursthouse may be correct in stating that the different contexts in which we encounter interaction with animals makes the attempt to assign a single moral status to animals redundant. I wish to refer back to Hursthouse's thought experiment about the cat and the fire. To recapitulate, Hursthouse's argument is that there are several relevant features to a cat other than its moral status. Moral status, for Hursthouse, is "a clumsy (and often wildly inaccurate) attempt to capture [...] "the right attitude to the familiar facts" of how we come to be" (Hursthouse 2006, 140). And for animals, there is no one set of familiar facts, as there are very different and sometimes not yet known facts about very different species of animals.

Hursthouse's thought experiment revisited

However, I would argue that what Hursthouse does not address and should address is why *the cat*, as opposed to anything or anyone else in the house, is worth rescuing in particular contexts. Let me propose the following scenario. My house is on fire yet again, and I can save my cat, that I adopted a year ago. In the house is also a collection of photo albums that my family is very fond of. It contains many photos that are not stored elsewhere, collections of generations of my family and it is a treasured family possession that I have carefully stored in my house for many years.

Should I save the photo albums or the cat? I could say that I should save the photo album. After all, the loss of the photo album may cause more hurt to my family than the cat's suffering from dying in the fire, or the suffering caused to me by the loss of my beloved cat, or combined. But this would be an uninteresting argument for Hursthouse or any virtue ethicist, since it would be an argument on utilitarian grounds. My inclination would be to say that Hursthouse would condemn a person who would save an inanimate object over an animal because of our contextual relationships with these things. However, the fundamental difference between any inanimate object and a cat, in this case, is not only my relationship to either of these things but also intrinsic properties of those things that constitute my relationship with it. Why am I in a different relationship with my cat than with my treasured possessions?

This ought to be known by the virtuous person in order to be informed of what to do, and, in fact, it *can* be known. Even without a comprehensive understanding of the cat's cognitive capacities, we can be aware of the relationship we have with our cat because we want to give our pet a good life, for we know it can experience one, we can recognize when the cat is in pain, et cetera. I am not arguing that the animal's moral status is the only informer that could determine, beyond any doubt, what I am to do in these scenarios. However, the moral status – the inference of a degree of moral relevance out of biological facts about an animal, even if on the basis of quite simple capacities – of an animal is relevant to the virtuous person. The morally relevant relationship that Hursthouse mentions is thus, on a basic level, reliant on these inferences, and therefore on the concept of moral status, too.

But perhaps the previous scenario I sketched is too far-fetched, and Hursthouse would criticise me for being out of touch with reality. I agree with Hursthouse that our relationships and encounters with animals are different from one another to the extent that we cannot realistically award all animals

the same degree of moral status. Hursthouse has indeed considered the fact that we recognize that a cat has a higher moral status than an inanimate object, albeit a lower one than the average adult human. Now consider the following scenario. I have suffered from multiple instances of bad luck and yet again I find myself in my house on fire. I have a dog and a goldfish, that I both took in my home five years ago. Although I interact with them in different ways, I care for them both.

Now, if I can only save one without risking my own life or health, who should I save? I would say this is a more difficult scenario than the previous one. Perhaps I should save the animal that I love more. Yet again, however, I do not think the consideration of either my dog's or my goldfish's cognitive capacities are irrelevant to informing this decision. For example, whether fish can feel pain is still disputed among biologists and neuroscientists. Some have argued that fish cannot feel pain at all, as some vertebrates such as fish "lack the neural machinery or architecture to consciously experience (i.e., to feel) noxious stimuli as painful" (Key 2016). Others consider the view that only human neural structures can process conscious pain in order to conclude that therefore fish cannot experience pain to be insufficient (Braithwaite and Droege 2016). In any case, we know that the structure of dog's cognitive ability is generally similar to the ability found in people (Arden and Adams 2016). Therefore, I am inclined to state that, because of those cognitive abilities, one generally might develop a more profound relationship with a dog than a goldfish.

I do not want to argue that it is, in all cases, right to save the dog over the fish. Again, moral status is not the only informer in these scenarios; I agree with Hursthouse on that part. But I think there are intuitions that call on us to save a dog over a fish, since we feel that a dog can suffer more than a fish for its own sake, and as far as we currently know, this is true. Moral status is a tool to effectively transform these intuitions into action guidance. Nonetheless, these intuitions may change once we know more about a fish's cognitive experience and once this becomes common knowledge, just like we have with arguments against racism, sexism or homophobia.

The significance of this knowledge need not be ignored just because we do not know everything. Hursthouse has argued that ranking possessing of morally relevant features is wrong, as recognizing differences between cats and men is not going to provide a definitive answer. In a similar sense, we consider the differences between men and women as features that should be taken into account, and

hopefully do so without ranking one above the other (Hursthouse 2006, 139). But I do not think differences between men and women inform our moral actions as significantly as the differences between human animals and non-human animals. To reiterate, the biological facts about different animals partly constitute the different types of relationships we have with them. This is because women and men are of the same species, and a man might still differ in level cognitive capacities from another man, or from another woman, a cat may differ individually from another cat. That is, however, not to say that there are no different significances between men and cats that negate the need to differentiate between species in order to decide who deserves our virtuous consideration.

Relational properties of animals

Hursthouse, on the other hand, emphasizes the different types of relevant relationships we have with different animals. But decision-making cannot rest in those relationships alone, apart from any consideration of the entities' relevant features relevant for those relationships. This would imply that any animal that is not in a relationship with either a human or another non-human animal would not have any moral status (Metz 392). Yet, the relational aspect of why animals are morally considerable has not remained unaddressed in the context of moral status deliberation. DeGrazia, for example, has briefly touched on the idea that if we consider animals to be metaphysical particulars, and their properties to be things such as sentience or personhood, we ignore the relation between different particulars (based on their individual properties). We can thus construe moral status "as a function (at least partly) of *relations among individuals*" (DeGrazia 1996, 126). So, because animals have certain properties and, in part because of those properties, are social beings, moral status can be based on those relations.

This is the idea of "relational moral status." Relational moral status can be considered a critique of traditional western interpretations of moral status as well, yet on different grounds than those with which a virtue ethicists may reject it. Metz has argued for a paradigm of moral status understood as relational, thereby offering an alternative to the common western interpretations of moral status. Metz rejects the mere connection from intrinsic properties to moral status, in which intrinsic property is understood as "internal to an individual and that includes no essential connection to any other being" (Metz 389). The accounts I have mentioned in chapter 1 by Warren, Singer, and Regan all share a central

role for the emphasis on intrinsic properties. Metz, on the other hand, develops a different way of thinking about the interpretation of such intrinsic properties.

Instead of intrinsic properties, Metz emphasises the idea of “interactive properties” of animals. Moral status is not located in the relationship between animals itself, nor is it solely located in the intrinsic nature of animals in such a relationship. Rather, it is located in those who are capable of being part of a relationship (Metz 394). Beings that are not engaged with interaction with other beings, or do not have the capacity to interact, cannot be objects of our direct duty (391). It is not argued that these interactive properties alone make up an adequate definition of moral status; that would imply that any individual not engaged in any relationships would not be entitled to moral status (392). Rather, Metz states that the morally important relationship is the communal one. A communal relationship “in which people identify with each other and exhibit solidarity with one another” (393).

This may yet raise questions as to why I am quoting a relational theory of moral status, as a communal relationship is described as a relationships specifically between two human individuals. The idea of relational status is to navigate how to ascribe moral status if there is no intrinsic difference between to two beings – or even not between individual humans, animals and ecosystems (Hursthouse 2006, 152). But there could be a “(modal-)relational difference between them, qua capacity to have a life that is shared with, and cared for by, normal human beings, that grounds differential degrees of moral status” (Metz 392).

I suspect that this is what Hursthouse is, perhaps unconsciously, referring to. Hursthouse would say that the lesser moral status of an animal does not matter in terms of how I am to act towards it. However, there certainly is a need to differentiate between different types of animals in terms of what our relationship is with them. In this sense, Hursthouse is ascribing a gradual moral status to animals despite her rejection of it. After all, why is Hursthouse referring to a cat in her thought experiment? Would Hursthouse argue for the same things if the animal in question were a goldfish, a butterfly? I suspect not. Naturally, we can have genuine care for goldfish and butterflies, especially if we hold them as pets. Yet, I hold that Hursthouse emphasizes the difference between certain more sophisticated animals and animals that are less sophisticated. Hursthouse holds that animals have three ends: individual survival, continuance of the species, and enjoyment of pleasure or freedom from pain that are

characteristic of the species' nature; i.e., how an animal would behave in its natural environment without artificial interference. But Hursthouse adds a fourth end for animals that are more sophisticated: the good functioning of the social group (Hursthouse 2000, 153-4). If we recognize the moral significance of these functions, we must also acknowledge that all animals have an interest in enjoying pleasure and being free from pain, as opposed to inanimate objects. We must also acknowledge that some animals are more social than others and thus will be more interested in the functioning of the social group, and therefore have relational properties. Thus I conclude that Hursthouse is differentiating between different sorts of animals on the basis of their cognitive capacities.

I want to again clarify that it is not my aim to defend the relational status account of moral status as the best or most accurate existing conception of moral status. One possible problem with relational moral status, for example, is that we might end up with a situation in which “less-than-equal consideration for animals might be justified by our having stronger social and emotional ties to the rest of humanity than we have to animals (with the exception of pets and other animals with whom we have especially close relationships)” (Degrazia 1999, 126). Furthermore this view of relational moral status can be criticized as being too anthropocentric, as its starting point is the human's relational capacities because of which animals can have certain relationships with us, rather than the other way around. The animal's moral status is then based on how well the animal's capacities enable forging relationships with humans – although Hursthouse might well be differentiating between cats, ants and inanimate object on this fact as well. This may be true or untrue; regardless, the argument I make is that Hursthouse, in spite of her rejection, may be talking about the conception of moral status as I have just described.

IV. Differentiating the vulnerable, the wronged and the harmed

An objection to my case

I have given several arguments as to why I think virtue ethicists who talk about animals should discuss moral status: either because they implicitly do so already, or because virtuous conduct must be guided by a basic understanding of intrinsic properties and capacities of animals. I will now address a counterargument by John Hacker-Wright. This is not an explicitly direct counterargument to my arguments, however, I will take Hacker-Wright's argument to be the following: the necessity of us having to be informed by animal's capacities does not necessitate the use of the concept of moral status.

In fact, Hacker-Wright also criticizes Hursthouse in a similar way I have: that Hursthouse is not entirely putting aside the issue of moral status, but rather that Hursthouse rather pursues a different way of thinking about the matter (Hacker-Wright 450). This is because, for Hacker-Wright, Hursthouse understands reality as a "thoroughly moral concept," hence Hursthouse's position that traditional moral philosophy on issues like moral status is out of touch with reality (458-9). However, "acknowledging the truth of Hursthouse's claim by no means puts an end to controversy about abortion; it turns the moral question to individual cases" (459). So, Hursthouse's claim about fetuses does not solve the problem adequately because it turns the argument from "moral status of fetuses" to "moral status of every single fetus."

I think the Hacker-Wright's criticism could well apply to Hursthouse's account of animal ethics, as exemplified by the example of the cat and the fire I borrowed from Hursthouse earlier. There is no one straightforward answer to the question "should I save a cat from a burning house?" whether this based on moral status or on another philosophical principle or theory. There are many circumstances in play: whether is it our own cat, how risky is it to save the cat, is my life important enough that my friends and family will suffer if I do not survive the rescue attempt, et cetera. And moral status may be one of those circumstances that we consider when making a decision, even if it is indirectly. This is what Hursthouse argues for as well, but I agree with Hacker-Wright's criticism here: that Hursthouse is not entirely avoiding the concept, although I have rejected this on different grounds.

However, Hacker-Wright agrees with Hursthouse on the argument that moral status is too problematic to give us direction. Hacker-Wright defines moral status as something that "based on an

intrinsic property or set of properties of a thing that, when recognized, places us under a moral demand, specifically, the demand to take that entity into account in our moral deliberation” (Hacker-Wright 452). Understood this way, moral status can be considered a sort of citizenship within a moral community, and thus Hacker-Wright names it a “legalistic” notion of moral status (451). The qualifications of such membership are based on the capacities of an entity, or at least closely related to capacities. These capacities are based on a certain set of or a single intrinsic property: being self-aware, being able to have interpersonal relationships, for example. If these properties are accurately recognized, the entity is placed under moral demand (451-2).

Now, let me explain why Hacker-Wright thinks moral status as a sole condition is insufficient. If we consider a dog’s sentience to be its “entrance ticket” to the community of moral consideration, what does that tell the virtue ethicist? At the very least, it could help the virtue ethicist in determining whether or not we should take the dog into consideration in acting virtuously. But this is not enough to protect the dog from cruelty. It is argued that there is a notion of virtue in pointing out why ridiculing a cognitively disabled person is wrong. Virtue ethicists can account for a wrong action independently of whether harm has been done and whether the harm is done to someone with moral status (Hacker-Wright 454).

Consider a case of mocking or ridiculing a cognitively disabled person, in which the person in question would not be able to understand or grasp the seriousness of the ridiculing. Would it be wrong to ridicule them? The utilitarian might not think it to be wrong, for the ridiculing would not cause any physical or psychological pain to the person ridiculed (Hacker-Wright 452). Alternatively, for a Kantian philosopher, it would be wrong to ridicule a cognitively disabled person, because the character of someone who would do this would be blameworthy but perhaps less so because of any obligation to the disabled person. In any case,

“it is hard to imagine someone who could do these things without being disposed to abuse the object of mistreatment physically (directly wrong for a utilitarian) or to behave otherwise cruelly toward cognitively able human beings (directly wrong for a Kantian)” (Hacker-Wright 454).

Hacker-Wright concludes that whatever there is to say about moral status must thus be spelled out in terms of relevant virtues, and thereby we should move away from abstracting moral commitments from factual properties of things that we suppose are identifiable independently from those moral commitments (Hacker-Wright 457). In order to develop the latter, Hacker-Wright proposes an alternative conception to justice than the right-based conception. Instead, the demands of justice fall on those who are strong in power relative to those who are weak. Thus we are informed not only by the sentience of an animal, but by vulnerability; by being a possible victim of harm. Endangered plants or works of art can be damaged or wronged, but animals can be harmed. A work of art cannot have awareness of its being damaged, but an animal can have awareness of its being harmed (Hacker-Wright 461). The value of the vulnerable being “need not be correlated to any of the capacities that ordinarily underwrite something’s moral status on the legalistic view” (461).

Virtuous reasoning and deontic constraints

I will respond to this criticism with an argument from Mark LeBar. I will argue that moral status can be considered a “deontic constraint,” as LeBar phrases it. First, I will elaborate on LeBar’s argument. LeBar poses a response to an objection against virtue ethics: namely, the objection that virtue ethicists wrongly locate the wrongness (or goodness) of an action in the character or act of an agent, instead of the individual that the action has effect on. LeBar then refutes this objection to ultimately argue that virtue ethics and deontic constraints are properly integrated. The aforementioned objection is shortly referred to as “The Objection.”

Virtue-ethical eudaemonist theories are accused to neglect giving a proper account of an important class of moral wrong, because the identification of a moral wrong should not be rooted in self-interest. Or, to state it in virtue-ethical terms, it should not be rooted in the violation of one’s eudaimonia. In a case of murder, for example, the victim must be given central place to identify the moral wrong, rather than the lack of virtue in the murderer (LeBar 642). Thus, eudaemonist virtue ethicists cannot defend actions unless for reasons that attribute the goodness of an action to the agent itself and not on anyone or anything the agent’s action has effects on (646). To fully understand this conclusion, we must

first talk about what LeBar calls “deontic constraints,” and secondly about the underlying moral intuition of The Objection, called “The Intuition.”

First, I will address the definition of deontic constraints. Central to this concept is the idea of the second-person standpoint. This standpoint entails that we take up the perspective of someone else, when we make and acknowledge claims of that person’s conduct and will. We imagine what it would be like to be the other, because we recognize the relationship we have with other individuals that underwrites our moral obligations to them. The reason this relationship is “second-personal” is because if we make moral claims, we must address others involved in our moral claims “as “you,” as a rational agent in certain relationship with us” (LeBar 647). In doing so, we distinguish between reasons that make claims upon the person whose reasons they are (agent-relative) and those reason which are not (agent-neutral) (647). As such, deontic constraints are the moral claims we can make on others, because of the fact that we see others as sources of such claims on us, as well (643).

Secondly, a brief explanation on what LeBar refers to as “The Intuition.” This is a moral intuition LeBar identifies which supports the formerly discussed Objection. The Intuition refers to the idea that in order to not violate deontic constraints, the reason for someone to act or not act must have as its core feature the effects of this action on the victim, as opposed to the effects of this action on the agent itself. This seems contradictory to the virtue ethics perspective that our reason to act a certain way is directly linked to our own eudaimonia or happiness, or even that how our eudaimonia is affected is all that is needed to justify an act (646). This is why The Objection against virtue ethics is raised: again, because virtue ethics would make morality and self-interest coincide, which would result in incorrect explanations of why something is wrong. Consider once more a case of murder: if we are consistent with the Intuition, we would hold that the reason that murder is wrong should not be “it does not contribute to the well-being of the murderer.” An adequate explanation of why murder is wrong should at least incorporate an account of the effects of murder on its victims (645).

But why should a virtue ethicist care about these deontic constraints, and therefore The Objection, at all? Firstly, it is argued that second-person reasoning is deeply embedded in our moral life, regardless of what moral theory we think is most accurate. I identify second-person reasoning as something similar to the notion of moral status, as LeBar states “the practice of such address assume

[...] our recognition of others as having the status to make claims upon us and hold us accountable for our treatment of them” (LeBar 648). So it is, because we regard others as having moral status, that we can make moral claims upon them.

“We should see others as having the standing to make claims upon us just because seeing them thus is good for us, or necessary for living well. And the remaining concern is that this is the wrong kind of reason for doing so. The right kind of reason would be imply that they do have such standing” (LeBar 662).

However, even if we should disqualify the concept of moral status or the interpretation thereof, we still are faced with the fact that we engage in moral relationships in which we hold each other accountable. Yet, that still does not answer the question of why the virtue ethicist should care.

For this justification, LeBar draws on Aristotle, claiming that “inferences to what is to be done always begin from some starting point, and apprehension of the right starting point for these inferences is impossible without virtue” (651). To be virtuous is to be sensitive to the conditions in which one acts: firstly because we acquire virtue through habituations, and secondly we acquire virtue through perception of particular relationships. For example, if our friend is in need, we are perhaps obliged to help them if we can, whereas we would not be obliged in such a way to someone we have no personal relationship with. Friendship itself, however, is not a virtue, at most an implication thereof. And yet, friendship gives us reason to act virtuously (650-1). LeBar concludes that occupying the second-person standpoint is somewhat like friendship: it is “part of the virtuous person’s dispositions” (652).

Moral status as a deontic constraint

This is, in short, what LeBar’s argument about the virtuous life and respecting deontic constraints is. Naturally, real life situations are more complex than simple dichotomies between a) the wrong-doer and b) those that have the wrong be done to them. But let us, for the sake of the argument, extend the Objection to animals. What would it look like?

An important note to make is that LeBar talks strictly about the moral relationship between two (or more) rational agents, and this rationality is a key prerequisite for the deontic constraints. This would mean that most, if not all, animals are excluded from such relationships, because if we do form a moral

relationship with them, it is not a strictly rational one on their part. Still, I think we could talk about The Objection in an animal context: many people intuitively feel that it is wrong to kill an animal; perhaps they do not feel it as strongly as they would with killing a human individual, and yet I would contend there is a general intuition that it is wrong to kick a dog for fun, even if kicking a dog would contribute to the well-being of the kicker. Interpreted in this way, the Objection is still stooled on the Intuition; the wrongness of kicking a dog should rest on the intrinsic worth of the dog, rather than in the pursuit of the virtuous agent's self-interest.

Maybe it is difficult to take up a second-personal perspective towards an animal because we share less common capacities between humans and animals than we do between humans and humans. But, as Diamond has argued, this may be out of confusion about the realistic differences between humans and animals. These differences are present, but there are also many obvious similarities (Diamond 470). If rationality is the very contingent condition upon which LeBar's argument rests, then I cannot argue that we can take on a second perspective for animals.

However, what is it that separates humans and animals other than rationality? There may be more that we have in common, in terms of cognitive capacities, than that in which humans and non-human animals are fundamentally different. This may not be true for all animals, but it is at least true for those animals with sophisticated capacities. Referring back to Hursthouse's four ends for sophisticated animals (individual survival, continuance of the species, and enjoyment of pleasure or freedom from pain, functioning of the social group), there is not so much that sets humans from animals apart from rationality in the first place, and there are also certain animals that are nearing levels of human rationality (Hursthouse 2000, 167).

What is it, then, that separates humans and animals from plants? Again, Hacker-Wright holds that whereas a plant can be wronged, an animal can be harmed as well be wronged (Hacker-Wright 461). Is it not true that both humans and animals can experience suffering, and that this fact about animals makes our lives comparable to them? Can we at least imagine what it would be like for an animal to be involuntarily caged, because it would be quite similar? What is there to be rational about if we are being caged, anyway? I cannot experience life the way a pig experiences it; but I can also not experience life the way my neighbour, my teacher or my partner experiences it all the same.

It is such facts about an animal's sentience, its capacity for suffering or experiencing pleasure that make it so that we can compare our lives to theirs. The recognition of the significance of animals rests on our recognition of our capacities, because humans have these capacities, too. We feel for an animal when we see it suffering; we show compassion for it (Alvaro 10). Naturally, in those moments, we are probably not asking ourselves "what moral status does this animal have?" But in our virtuous compassion, we are recognising *that* it suffers, that it is *capable* of suffering just as we are. I am sympathetic to the view that there is more than moral status to determine how we should regard animals morally. Certainly awareness of an animal's sentience does not provide all the ethical guidance necessary to know where we stand in our relationship with animals.

However, I hold that moral status is, if nothing else, a good place to start. An awareness of these facts about animals calls on us to reject the Objection of LeBar, because we recognize that animals have moral claims on us. Surely animals cannot articulate these claims, but moral status is an attempt at developing an articulation of those claims that correspond with our intuitions of how to treat animals virtuously. Hacker-Wright's account of the virtue of justice "there is no criterion that definitively delimits the scope of beings with moral status" (Hacker-Wright 468). But what moral status can at least contribute is differentiating between those beings that can be harmed and those that cannot, and denote that those that can be harmed are worthy of protection against it. After all, the second-person standpoint calls for the recognition of "the standing of others to be the grounds of our regard for them as (potential) victims" (LeBar 643).

Recall that Hacker-Wright has stated that virtue ethics can account for a wrong action independently of the harm it causes (Hacker-Wright 454). But to say an entity has moral status does not mean there are no wrongs that can be accounted for outside any grounds of moral status. What moral status can do instead is clarify *what kind of* harm is being done, even if this is spelled out in virtuous terms. Moral status clarifies "the demands of morality with regard to our obligations to and relationships with animals" (Gruen 27). In this sense, I think virtue ethicists would do well to embody second-person reasoning that LeBar is talking about. If second-person reasoning is part of the virtuous person's dispositions, virtuous person should be informed by facts about animals that force us to take up such a perspective.

Therefore, I conclude that Hacker-Wright speaks of “the demands of the virtue of justice” but that moral status is an attempt to capture “the demands of morality” just the same. A theory of moral status does not claim to have all the answers, nor does it claim to. It rather represents a general claim about how agents should conduct themselves towards animals (Warren 9). From there, the specifics can be spelled out in virtue-ethical terms without deeming a theory of moral status irrelevant. Hence I contend moral status and virtue theory would in fact work quite well together, especially if virtue ethicists understand moral status as a deontic constraint. Incorporating moral status can also be a way of countering the Objection as we are to treat animals for unselfish reasons but for reasons that take into account the moral standing of animals for their own sake.

V. Conclusion

In this thesis, I have argued that non-consequentialist eudaemonist virtue ethicists should embrace the concept of moral status if they want to strengthen their argument for animal ethics. I have not defended a position on a certain conception of moral status; rather, I hold that virtue ethicists would do well to develop their own conception of moral status.

I have argued that Alvaro and Rowlands already imply moral status in their reasoning as to why we should treat animals virtuously. Furthermore, I have suggested that Hursthouse's rejection of the irrelevance of moral status may be reconsidered if we think of moral status as the incorporation of relational properties of animals. If we consider animals to not solely have individual intrinsic properties, but that those properties also enables us to engage in morally important relationships with them, perhaps it is necessary to derive morally relevant principles from the familiar biological facts in order to determine what animals we should consider in our virtuous dispositions. This does not exclude room for the different contexts in which we encounter animals, because we can take moral status as a general claim, as a starting point. Lastly, I have stated that the concept of moral status may be integrated in virtue ethics as a "deontic constraint," which asks from us that we consider animal's capacities as an incentive to take up this second-person standpoint. I therefore suggest that virtue ethics must not reject moral status, but embrace it on its own terms.

I realise that I may not have covered all ground necessary to defend the concept of moral status on its own, as I have not argued for a specific conception of moral status for animal ethics. Every conception of moral status has its own flaws, and I would not hold that moral status is the definitive answer to how we should treat animals. However, this is not what I have intended to argue for. I have merely spoken about the concept in its varieties, and have taken moral status to be reasoning about an animal's properties, intrinsic, interactive or otherwise, and from this reasoning defend the moral significance of animals. Nonetheless, it is my hope that I have contributed to the debate on how to clearly reason about animals: about what they are, and what they are *to us*. A theory of moral status, expressed in virtue-ethical terms, may help the virtue ethicists to identify our underlying intuitions in facts about animals, and thus form a strong account of defending an animal ethics.

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