



The following essay appears in:  
THE PRACTICE OF VIRTUE  
Classic and Contemporary Readings in Virtue Ethics  
Edited by Jennifer Welchman  
Copyright © 2006 by Hackett Publishing Company

Rosalind Hursthouse

*Applying Virtue Ethics  
to Our Treatment of the Other Animals*



Applying virtue ethics to moral issues should be straightforward. After all, it basically just amounts to thinking about what to do using the virtue and vice terms. “I mustn’t pull the cat’s tail because it’s cruel,” I might say to myself, and surely that is simple enough. But somehow, when one turns, as a virtue ethicist, to engaging in current moral debates, applying virtue ethics becomes very difficult. Of course, applying the virtue and vice terms correctly may be difficult; one may need much practical wisdom to determine whether, in a particular case, telling a hurtful truth is cruel or not, for example, but that does not seem to be the main problem. In my experience, the main problem is just getting started. Why is this? Well, the thing I found most difficult when I was first trying to work out the virtue ethics approach to abortion was shedding the structure of thought about the issue imposed by the other two approaches, and I had the same difficulty trying to think about applying virtue ethics to our treatment of the other animals. We can’t get started until we have cleared enough space to think in our own way and have found the right questions to ask.



AGAINST MORAL STATUS

In the abortion debate, the question that almost everyone began with was “What is the moral status of the fetus?” and I wasted a lot of time asking myself “What is the virtue ethicist’s answer to that question?” (and, indeed, “What does virtue ethics say about that question?” and “What would the virtuous agent’s answer to that question be?” and even “What would the virtuous answer

to that question be?”). Eventually it occurred to me to wonder *why* we were all trying to determine the moral status of the fetus and, once I saw why everyone else was, it became clear that virtue ethicists needn't bother. For everyone else was assuming the correctness of some moral rule or principle about respecting the rights of, or giving equal consideration to the interests of, or the wrongness of killing, Xs, and so they really needed to know, Are fetuses Xs or not? But we virtue ethicists had roundly declared that normative ethics did not have to consist of a system of such moral principles and that practical ethical thought was better conducted in terms of the v-rules.

The consequentialist and deontological approaches to the rights and wrongs of the ways we treat the other animals (and also the environment) are structured in exactly the same way. Here too, the question that must be answered first is “What is the moral status of the other animals (or other living things, such as trees, or indeed other natural things such as rocks and mountains)?” Here too, it is supposed that to establish that the other animals (or some subset of them) are Xs would be to establish that they have rights, or that their interests should be given the same moral weight as those of other Xs, or that prohibitions that apply to other Xs apply to them. And here too, virtue ethicists have no need to answer the question.

Moreover, we have reason to reject it. Kant's infelicitous distinction between *persons* and *things* highlights a problem inherent in this structure which virtue ethics, with its case-by-case approach, should be well fitted to avoid. Suppose that the distinction has been drawn in such a way that Xs are, in practice, mostly very similar. Xs are, let's say, rational, or self-consciousness, or human. Then the problem is that the non-Xs are bound to be a very heterogeneous class. Let us grant, for the sake of the argument, that if I am faced with an X then there are certain things I must or must not do to it. But what if I am faced with a non-X? Where is my action guidance? May I do anything to it I please, however wicked my desires? Well, if it is indeed a thing such as a bit of wastepaper or mud it is hard to imagine any wicked desires engaging with it, and perhaps the answer is, indeed, “Yes, do as you please.” However, precisely because the class of non-Xs is so heterogeneous, that clearly can't be the right answer every time. Not every non-X is “just a thing” in a colloquial sense, and much

of what I may or may not or ought to do to a particular non-X is going to depend in part on what features it has, other than failing to be an X.

While debates about the status of the fetus were so exclusively concerned with the issue of abortion, this problem was not glaringly obvious. What, after all, did anyone want to do with a human fetus, or embryo, but preserve it or kill it? If it was a non-X, it was something you could kill, and that was all anyone wanted to know. But then it turned out that there were other things people wanted to do with the fetuses or embryos, such as use them for experimental purposes, and the question “What may I do to this rather special sort of non-X, beyond killing it?” became pressing.

What happens when we turn to debates about the status of the other animals? Most philosophers writing on this come down on the animals’ side, classifying them as Xs and thereby generate the complementary version of the problem. Now it is the Xs that form a heterogeneous class, not, it is true, as heterogeneous as Kant’s “things,” but still encompassing, arguably, fish and birds, mice, rats, and cockroaches, as well as the familiar domestic animals and mammals quite generally, including us. This heterogeneity makes it extremely difficult to maintain the “All Xs are equal” stance which, in the name of antispeciesism, had motivated awarding the other animals moral status in the first place.

As is well known, the chick’s interest in a few years of simple henly pleasures, or its right to life as something of inherent value, turn out, in Singer and Regan,<sup>1</sup> to guarantee very little when they come up against my consciously contemplated future sophisticated pleasures or my right to life. The quasi-Kantian person/nonperson distinction is now drawn within the class of items accorded moral status and, although Singer and Regan can both plausibly claim that they still avoid speciesism (because of their stances on mentally incompetent humans), they do not avoid (what we might call) animal elitism. In their systems, some animals are more equal—

---

1. See Peter Singer, ed., *In Defense of Animals* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985) or for full statements of Regan’s and Singer’s positions, see Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) and Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*, rev. ed. (New York: Avon, 1990).

have a higher moral status—than others. Some moral philosophers, working within the same structure, have made this explicit.<sup>2</sup>

Well, one might say, what's wrong with saying that differing animals—and even human beings at differing stages of their development—have differing moral status? Isn't this just to recognize a whole variety of morally relevant features that should be taken into account when deciding what to do, instead of lumping everything together under a single principle, and isn't this what virtue ethics recommends?

I would say there are two things wrong with it.

One is that the “variety” of features recognized is so paltry, a few psychological capacities selected ad hoc to capture a few crude intuitions about which animal should win in cases where interests conflict. In this context we should note in passing the standard objection environmentalists make to the animal liberationists. It is that the latter draw no distinction between domestic and wild animals, and that what their positions on “animals” entail might be all right with respect to the former but are absurd with respect to the latter.<sup>3</sup>

The second is that the assigning of differing moral status is not merely recognizing a few features often relevant to good practical decision-making. It is recognizing them *and ranking* the possessors of those features accordingly. That, after all, is what the concept of status does. In welcoming recognition of (some of) the obvious differences between cats and men as an improvement on always lumping them together as sentient, or experiencing subjects of a life, virtue ethicists are not going to commit themselves in advance to saying that the cited differences will always guarantee that, in cases of conflict, it is the cats that will go to the wall because of their inferior status. After all, we can recognize differences between women and men as features that should often be taken into account when deciding what to do, without for a moment thinking that we thereby commit ourselves to any kind of ranking.

2. For example, Donald VanDeVeer, “Interspecific Justice,” *Inquiry* 22 (1979): 55–70; and Mary Anne Warren, “Difficulties with the Strong Animal Rights Position,” *Between the Species* 2 (1987): 163–173.

3. See J. Baird Callicott, “Animal Liberation: A Triangular Affair,” *Environmental Ethics* 2 (1980): 311–338.

To illustrate the wrongness of both, we might briefly consider me and my cat. On any prevailing assignment of differing moral status, my psychological capacities easily outrank my cat's. If you can only rescue one of us from the burning building without danger to yourself, you should rescue me, preserving the animal that has the higher status. What if I have escaped by myself, should you then rescue the cat? Most people say no, unless you really can do it with no danger to yourself at all, because you outrank the cat too and should preserve the animal with the higher status. Is the same obviously true of me?

I would say that this is, at least, not obvious. For a further feature of the cat relevant to my decision-making is that he is *my* cat, a cat for whom I have assumed responsibility. Although it would, I take it, be sentimental idiocy of me to run a high risk of dying to rescue him, and highly irresponsible if I have family and friends, I am inclined to say that, if the risk, though real, is fairly low, and no one will be devastated by my death, going to rescue him might well be a good decision. After all, despite my superior moral status, my life mightn't be worth much, and although I can't risk your life on the grounds that it isn't worth much, I can surely risk my own.

Moreover, it is not obviously the case that, just because you outrank my cat, you are not in any way called upon to rescue him. I am reliably informed that people with the further feature of being firemen regard rescuing animals from burning buildings (when the risk is not extreme) as part of their normal duties.

Given these problems, virtue ethics can dismiss the question of the moral status of animals without a qualm. As a tool in the abortion debate, the concept of moral status had its uses. In my view, assigning the embryo or fetus a certain moral status was a clumsy (and often wildly inaccurate) attempt to capture what I called "the right attitude to the familiar biological facts" of how we come to be, and that's worth doing. However, in the context of the ethics of our treatment of the other animals it is simply useless. There isn't one familiar set of facts concerning *the* other animals, but a whole host of sets of (largely unfamiliar) facts about different species, and another host of sets about individual animals, and another host about groups—pets, zoo animals, the animals we eat, the animals we experiment on. . . . Questions about right and wrong actions in relation to animals arise in a wide variety of contexts, far too many to be settled by a blanket assignment of status.

Since there are so many different questions about right and wrong, I'll just jump into one of the most familiar areas, *viz.*—

#### VEGETARIANISM

The first thing for a virtue ethicist to say about vegetarianism, to correct a surprisingly common mistake, is that it cannot be a virtue. This is a grammatical, not an ethical, claim. Vegetarianism can't be a virtue because it is not a character trait but a practice, and virtues have to be character traits. Well, is it a virtuous practice? If we take that as asking "Is it a practice which, as such, manifests or expresses virtue?" the answer is "Obviously not" because people can become vegetarians for such a range of different reasons. If I become vegetarian on health grounds it might well manifest temperance, but if I go in for it simply because it is fashionable it would be a mark of folly.

However, if we take "Is it a virtuous practice?" as asking "Is it a practice that the virtuous, as such, go in for (or ideally, would go in for); i.e., a practice it is right to go in for?" we get to the question that someone employing a normative virtue ethics is supposed to address.

One way I begin to approach it is by taking several leaves out of Singer's first book, *Animal Liberation*. As some reviewers on the Amazon.com Web site note, you can skip over Singer's philosophy in this book without missing anything important. What is doing the work are the detailed descriptions of factory farming (and animal experimentation). Thirty years ago,<sup>4</sup> they showed his readers that what we are being party to in eating meat is a huge amount of animal suffering that could be substantially reduced if we changed our habits. So I take the leaves on which he does that and think about them in terms of, for example, compassion, temperance, callousness, cruelty, greed, self-indulgence—and honesty.

Can I, in all honesty, deny the ongoing existence of this suffering? No, I can't. I know perfectly well that although there have been some improvements in the regulation of factory farming, what is going on is still terrible. Can I think it is anything but callous to shrug this off and say it doesn't matter? No, I can't. Can I deny that

---

4. The first edition of Singer's *Animal Liberation* appeared in 1975.

the practices are cruel? No, I can't. Then what am I doing being party to them? It won't do for me to say that I am not actually engaging in the cruelty myself. There is a large gap between not being cruel and being truly compassionate, and the virtue of compassion is what I am supposed to be acquiring and exercising. I can no more think of myself as compassionate while I am party to such cruelty than I could think of myself as just if, scrupulously avoiding owning slaves, I still enjoyed the fruits of slave labor.

What if I needed to eat meat to survive? That would, of course, be a very different situation. No one would think of many Africans, situated as they are, as being short of compassion solely on the grounds that they ate whatever the aid agencies provided. But that is not how it is with me, nor with anyone in a sufficiently privileged position to be reading this book. Once again, honesty compels me to admit that I do not *need* meat, I just *like* it. A lot. It gives me an enormous amount of pleasure. However, precisely what temperance requires is that I do not pursue such pleasure while ignoring the claims of the other virtues. Pursuing the pleasures of consuming meat, in the teeth of the claims of compassion, is just plain greedy and self-indulgent.

Suppose that, on occasion, I eat meat not in the pursuit of pleasure, but for some other reason? I have many hospitable meat-eating friends. Before they all know that I am vegetarian, am I to be Banquo at their feasts, refusing not only the meat, but the anchovy-corrupted salad and the stock-made soup, inflicting on my hosts the embarrassment of having nothing to offer me but bread, potatoes, and a couple of bananas? Politeness and consideration would give me good reason to eat what was put in front of me and that would not count as greedy or self-indulgent. Should I not have telephoned them well beforehand to tell them that I have become a vegetarian? Well, sometimes yes; there would be circumstances in which it was either thoughtless or (supposing I had thought about it) cowardly, in a way, not to do so. I don't telephone, and I eat what is put in front of me, because I want to avoid the confrontation and the cries of "Oh no, not you too! I thought you had more sense." But, after all, I think I have sense on my side; in ducking the issue I merely manifest the fact that I lack the courage of my conviction.

Of course all my friends will have to know one day that I have become vegetarian, and most will change their menus accordingly,

at least somewhat, when they have me to dinner. Some may choose to ignore it (this is less common than it used to be) and what then? Their doing so is hardly a mark of the quasi-virtue of friendship, but neither is my continuing to attend their dinner parties, bringing embarrassment and censure to the table every time I do. (Other guests will notice how little I am eating and ask why, or whether I am vegetarian; on learning that I am they will naturally ask, Did our hosts not know? I can't lie about it so I will say yes, they know, or imply by my smile or shrug that that is so.) So I could give up the friendship, or I could excuse myself from their invitations but continue to have them to my (vegetarian) dinner parties in the hope they will come round. Or I could initiate our talking about it—not about their becoming vegetarian, but about their being more conciliatory about my having done so.

So, with respect to vegetarianism, a virtue ethicist may reach roughly the same practical conclusions as Singer and, albeit to a lesser extent, Regan, though on different grounds. The practices that bring cheap meat to our tables are cruel, so we shouldn't be party to them.

#### EXPERIMENTS ON THE OTHER ANIMALS

Does virtue ethics run the same line of thought about using sentient animals in scientific experiments? To a limited extent, yes. In other ways, no—not, or at least not immediately, because of virtue ethics' "human centeredness" (of which more later) but, surprisingly, because of virtue ethics' extreme practicality.

Let me deal very briefly with the first, in part because it will allow me to clear up a common misconception of cruelty. Consider the use of the other animals to test cosmetics. A virtue ethicist should agree with Singer and Regan that this is wrong, for it is, in my view, quite certain that such experiments are cruel. However, this is not beyond question, since some philosophers, such as Regan, maintain that cruel actions are limited to the intentional causing (or allowing) another to suffer by an agent who either enjoys or is indifferent to it.

This claim enables Regan and those who follow him to reject the idea that the prohibition against cruelty will suffice to ground any robust negative duties to animals. For, they point out, it allows



people to subject animals to suffering as long as they regret the necessity. However, the claim is quite false, as a quick look at a dictionary should remind us. The causing of pain or suffering can count as cruel even when it is unintentional; people can be found guilty of cruelty to children and animals without the prosecution having to establish intent. More commonly, a cruel action is intentional, but the agent's professed or manifest purpose is quite enough, and neither his pleasure, his indifference, nor his regret is required for the assessment of his action as cruel or not. All that is needed is that the action is the infliction of pain for a purpose that does not justify it. Some experimenters on animals have inflicted horrifying suffering on cats; their purpose was to discover how much pain cats can stand before it kills them. Such experiments can be rightly condemned as cruel simply on the grounds that the knowledge gained was far too insignificant to justify the experiments, without any consideration of the experimenters' feelings.

The same is true of experiments to test new cosmetics, for, as Singer so rightly remarks, we don't *need* any new cosmetics, and, as virtue ethicists mindful of the vices of vanity and self-indulgence could add, we don't actually need any cosmetics at all. Their use could be a harmless pleasure, but only if limited to the use of those produced by companies that do not test their products on the other animals.

So, as before, the three different approaches may reach the same practical conclusion regarding the use of animals to test cosmetics—that we should refrain from being party to these practices. A utilitarian shouldn't be party to the infliction of unnecessary suffering, a deontologist to the violation of rights, and a virtue ethicist to cruel practices.

However—moving on now to the ways in which a virtue ethicist cannot continue to pursue this line—this is action guidance only if “refraining from being party to such practices” can amount to something that I can *do*, something that people who are being party to them don't do. It is ironic that the critics of virtue ethics, claiming that it couldn't give an account of right or wrong action and *hence* couldn't provide action guidance, failed to notice that, in many cases, for most of us, their establishing that an action type is wrong provided no action guidance whatsoever. This is true for many people regarding experiments on animals to test cosmetics, and becomes striking when we turn to the field of medical experimentation.

It is here that the issue of moral standing is assumed to be crucial. Medical experimentation on the other animals is directed toward saving, and improving, the lives of human beings. If many of the other animals used have the same moral status as human beings, then either we should be using brain-damaged orphans instead, or we shouldn't be doing it at all; it is wrong. What could be more important than establishing whether or not this is so?

But why is it so important, practically speaking? Suppose I had accepted that Singer and Regan have, in their different ways, shown that most/all experiments on the other animals are wrong. How does that provide action guidance? What does it tell me to do? Obviously, to refrain from performing such experiments. For most of us, that's not an issue. I'm not an experimental biologist or technician, I'm a philosopher. So is just continuing to be a philosopher all their arguments tell me to do? That's also what I would do if I had rejected their conclusions.

As we have just seen, for some people, for some of the experimental practices, what one should do is obvious enough. Women who regularly buy cosmetics, and the few men who buy them for themselves or their partners, should refrain from buying them from companies that test their products on animals because we shouldn't be party to that practice. This leaves those who have no reason to buy cosmetics unaddressed, and, more importantly, leaves us without any action guidance with respect to the vast field of medical experimentation. What *is* it to refrain from being party to medical experimentation on animals? One might, if the choice were offered, refuse to save or prolong one's life by accepting a transplant of a vital organ from a nonhuman animal, but that is an issue for very few of us. And, short of refraining from *any* of the benefits modern medicine has to offer, there doesn't seem to be anything that most of us could do that would count as "refraining from being party to the practice."

If normative ethics is to be truly about action, finding things to do with respect to medical experimentation on animals is far, far more important for philosophers concerned about our treatment of the other animals than trying to work out whether or not human lives and suffering count in some way more than the lives and suffering of the animals used, or whether the rights of human beings outrank theirs. Whichever way the arguments fall out, for or against, the conclusions on their own won't say anything practical to most of us.

They are philosophical exercises we engage in, but not to discover what each of us, individually, should do about medical experimentation on animals. Suppose I do reach the conclusion that experimenting on a nonhuman animal is every bit as wrong as experimenting on a brain-damaged orphan. “So,” I say to myself, “I must . . .” Must what? Practically speaking, I am no better off than I would have been if I had concluded that it isn’t as wrong, but still, in many cases, it may be very wrong, or quite wrong. Now, why is this?

Here we come to another piece of the structure imposed by the other two approaches that needs to be unpicked. I should note that I do not think the following mistake is intrinsic to the other two approaches, only that, in practice, their overly theoretic stance has resulted in its prevalence.

Suppose one begins doing normative theory by thinking in terms of providing a systematic account of why “act X” or “such and such an action” is right or wrong. The intentionally abstract phrases leave it unsettled whether one is talking about action types or action tokens, and, moreover, whether the action—type or token—is, or forms, part of a practice. Sometimes this doesn’t matter. Given an act description such as “lying,” direct utilitarianism will tell you when a token is right and when it is wrong, and deontology will tell you that the action type is wrong and hence each token is (or that the action type lying-in-such-and-such-circumstances is wrong though the action type lying-in-so-and-so-circumstances is justifiable), and with the ascription of wrongness to a token, that is, an individual action, we have our general action guidance.

The prevalent mistake lies in assuming that what goes for something like “lying” goes for any other act description; that is, that getting “is wrong” attached to it is going to provide general action guidance by somehow hooking up with an action token. Lying is not a practice, but a type of individual action that any one of us might do on almost any occasion. When practices are what is at issue, it is much harder to get to individual actions that any one of us might do or refrain from doing.

Singer overlooked this problem in the first edition of *Practical Ethics*,<sup>5</sup> failing to notice that while the direct utilitarianism he had committed himself to might support the conclusion that farmers

---

5. Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979). A second, expanded edition appeared in 1993.

should stop meat production; it did not license his conclusion that I should not buy meat in supermarkets. He had argued that the *practices* of producing meat were wrong, that those who engaged in it were failing to give equal consideration to the interests of the animals involved. Yet when I turn up at the supermarket and follow his instruction “to take account of the interests of all those sentient beings affected by my decision,” I know that my individual action of buying meat is not going to affect the interests of any nonhuman animal, except, perhaps, my dog. His claim that I should not be party to these wrong practices needed the support of the indirect utilitarianism he introduced in the second edition.

Here again, it is a mistake to assume that what goes for one description of a practice goes for any other description; that is, that attaching “is wrong” to it is always going to provide corresponding guidance to be derived from “being party to the practice is wrong.” You have to look at the practice at issue and see what it is like.

Medical experimentation is, unlike lying, a practice. But, unlike meat production, it is not a practice that any one of us can readily, in our individual actions, refrain from being party to. What is it like?

It is a practice that is deeply entrenched in a powerful, and also well entrenched, set of institutions—not only medical schools training doctors, medical research centers, and corporate research centers and laboratories seeking drugs or treatments that will make money, but also universities training students who can then work in such places, some of whom will remain in the universities doing research that may feed back into the training of the doctors and medical and corporate research centers. This set of interlocked institutions is something that most of us, individually, are utterly powerless to change.

That is why the debate over whether “*it*,” or only *many*, or *some*, aspects of it, are wrong is not important, practically speaking. Settling that issue one way or the other will not make most of us one whit less powerless.

Conversely, making no more than the modest assumption, consistent with any outcome of the debate a philosopher might reach, that at least *some* of it is wrong, is enough to get us going, once we have it under that description—a practice entrenched in an interlocked and also entrenched set of institutions. We have to begin by thinking about what changes that sort of setup. Racism was like

that, and although it still is to some extent, things have improved enough in the last forty years for us to be able to look back and learn something from the changes. What brought them about?

In part, as we know, the leadership of some great figures such as Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela. In part, as we know, the courage and determination of a great number of black people. However, as we also know, in part the individually insignificant but collectively influential actions and reactions of a great number of white people. Some people were in a position to do more than others; for example, lawyers, journalists, writers, and teachers—and academics, being both writers and teachers. Some of them joined in the collective action and some of them didn't. A lot of what was done was, individually, very insignificant indeed. People signed petitions, joined pressure groups, went on perfectly safe marches, voted for politicians who spoke against racism. And, I suppose, argued and often broke off relations with their parents and some of their friends. These are not the sorts of things one can recount with justifiable pride when asked "What did you do about racism in the sixties, Mummy?" but they were things that almost anybody white could do, they were worth doing, and again, not everybody did them.

We are, perhaps, inclined to think that "What would a virtuous agent do in the circumstances?" has to be answered by the description of an action that merits praise. That certainly is not always true; it depends on the circumstances. When I do something as ordinary as tell the truth in response to the stranger's question "How do I get to the station from here?" I do what is honest. When I leave a standard tip for the waiter who brought me my coffee I do what is just. Such actions are too minimally decent to call for praise, and since "virtuous" is a term of praise, it is contrary to common usage to call them "virtuous." However, they are no less "what a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances" just because they hardly call for virtue and are regularly done by a lot of people who doubtless fall far short of possessing it. In the circumstances imagined here, there isn't anything else for the virtuous agent to do, the doing of which would distinguish her from the nonvirtuous, either the merely conventional or the dishonest and unjust.

Now the white antiracists who signed petitions and so on did a bit better than that. Protesting against the prevailing convention, they did distinguish themselves from the merely conventional, and

from the unjust racist and also from the cynics and those who despaired of bringing about change and were paralyzed by their individual powerlessness. If they hadn't, things would still be just as bad as they once were.

Much of this is directly transferable to the issue of medical experimentation. Any of us can sign petitions, support animal-rights pressure groups, and vote for politicians who speak up on behalf of the other animals. In this context, the role that lawyers play in combating the racism entrenched in the legal systems will mostly have to be played by scientists within the set of institutions that enshrine the practice, but it is up to the rest of us, collectively, to make enough noise to get more of them concerned about bringing about changes.

Some people are in a position to do more than others. A growing number of science undergraduates now refuse to do animal dissections. I gather (without being quite sure) that some have just been kicked out of their classes and thereby forced to fail them, but I have also been told on good authority that, in some universities at least, the system has been changed to accommodate them. Some people can get onto the ethics committees that, in some institutions, now regulate, to some extent, the use of the other animals, and some can campaign to get such committees established.

Suppose one does get on such a committee, what should one do? Isn't this a situation in which one would have to make up one's mind one way or the other whether at least some of the other animals had the same moral status as human beings? In my view, no, because if you decide that they do, and argue and vote against every experiment that comes under scrutiny, you will just be thrown off the committee. Your only chance of staying on and achieving anything at all is to join forces with those who are arguing and voting against the experiments whose benefits to humans are (in Singer's words) "either non-existent or very uncertain." But suppose you really, truly believe it? Is it not a failure of integrity, or shameful hypocrisy, to allow any of the experiments to pass without protest, however fruitless? How could a virtuous agent do that?

Well, if you really believed in the equal moral status, for you the set of institutions in which medical experimentation is entrenched would, I think, be comparable to the set of institutions imposed by the Nazis. Yet most of the people we admire from that dreadful time concentrated on doing the very little that they could,

“allowing” many Jews to go to the death camps “without protest,” and we do not condemn them for hypocrisy or lack of integrity. Think of Schindler, jovially entertaining powerful members of the SS while he schemed to get more Jews into the protection of his factory.<sup>6</sup> How, situated as he was, could he have shown more virtue?

True, everyone who did anything to help the Jews in Germany or the occupied countries risked their lives, and so we admire them for their courage as well as their compassion, justice, and practical wisdom. Their virtue was, in Philippa Foot’s words, “severely tested” and passed the test.<sup>7</sup> It may be that some of those who are strongly committed to the cause of animal liberation yearn for some appropriately heroic expression of this strong commitment, something that would severely test their virtue, finding it intolerable that all they can find to do are such trifling things as sign petitions and join pressure groups.

There is no reason to suppose that, for many of us, there is any such expression. Think of racism again. There was very little most people living outside South Africa could do to express their commitment to ending apartheid beyond boycotting South African goods and the usual trifling things one hopes will, eventually, influence one’s government to bring more pressure to bear. Aristotle does not give enough attention to the nameless virtue, which we might now call proper modesty, that consists in correctly assessing one’s limited capacities to achieve great things, being more interested in its grand form, *megalopsuchia*. No doubt in such a tiny democracy as his Athens, the idea that change could be brought about only through years of collective endeavor made up of individually insignificant actions was unlikely to occur to him. However, that is how things are with us now. It is not heroic courage but unexciting virtues that call us to such actions—amongst them, hope, patience, and modesty.

You may complain that none of what I have said about our actions in relation to the other animals is exciting but all pretty obvious. I think myself that this is how it should be. Most of the results of applying virtue ethics *should* be pretty obvious, because,

6. Thomas Keneally, *Schindler’s Ark* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1982).

7. Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

rather than constructing theoretical principles, virtue ethics just applies the everyday virtue and vice terms to our actions in the world as we find it. But what is there to be found, even right under our noses, is often not obvious until it is pointed out. We have to make sure we really are looking at the ways human beings are affecting the world and, if they are bad, that we ask ourselves “What can I do?” instead of getting tied up in abstruse questions about moral status.

#### HUMAN-CENTEREDNESS

It will not have escaped the observant reader that much of the preceding discussion smacks more of consequentialism than of an absolutist rights-based position. Of course, virtue ethicists have always shared a form of antiabsolutism with consequentialists, agreeing with them that many act types—lying, killing, meat-eating—are right in some circumstances, wrong in others, adding “depending on the circumstances” rather than “on the consequences.” This might lead a committed animal-rights advocate to protest—as Regan protests against Singer—that someone approaching the matter via the virtue ethical term “cruel” has really missed the point. “[W]hat is fundamentally wrong,” Regan says, “isn’t the pain, isn’t the suffering . . . [though] [t]hese compound what’s wrong. The fundamental wrong” is viewing animals “as *our resources*.”<sup>8</sup> Hence his insistence that the other animals have inherent, rather than merely instrumental, value. Can virtue ethicists take some leaves from Regan’s book too?

Well, we had better not do so by taking on the blanket ascription of inherent or intrinsic value, because that will take us straight back into moral status territory and the usual problems of whether Xs have the same value as, or less value than, non-Xs. We can recast talk about things having intrinsic value as talk about their being worth our pursuing or having or preserving (or bringing into being, protecting, maintaining, restoring, desiring, loving . . .) for their own sake, and there is no reason why virtue ethicists shouldn’t

8. Tom Regan, “The Case for Animal Rights,” in Peter Singer, ed., *In Defense of Animals* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), p. 13.



agree with Regan that the good of the other animals is such a thing and thereby has intrinsic value in that sense.

Unconstrained by the need to assign moral status, and thereby to find a feature (such as being the experiencing subject of a life) that grounds it, there is no reason for us to stop there. The environmental ethics literature has compellingly reminded us that species, and the good of plants and ecosystems, also have “intrinsic value”—that is, in our terms, they are also worth our pursuing or preserving, protecting, desiring, and so on for their own sake, not merely for our own.<sup>9</sup>

However, it is often supposed that virtue ethics (or at least, Aristotelian or eudaimonistic virtue ethics) has a peculiar problem in ascribing intrinsic value in *any* robust sense to the other animals, let alone to plants or ecosystems, because, it is thought, it counts *human* flourishing or the good *human* life (*eudaimonia*) or *human* virtue as “the fundamental” or “top” value. Thereby, it is thought, virtue ethics is objectionably “human-centered,” regarding the rest of nature as no better than a resource for *us*.<sup>10</sup>

This is a mistake (or set of mistakes) but it is hard to pin down how it arises. Let’s begin by considering *eudaimonia*—i.e., human flourishing or the good human life—separately from virtue. At least part of the trouble arises from misunderstanding the role this plays in eudaimonistic virtue ethics and trying to identify that role in terms of its “counting as the top value.”

According to ancient Greek ethics, my final, architectonic end—and everyone else’s—is indeed *human* flourishing, living a good human life. But, as Julia Annas has frequently pointed out,<sup>11</sup> this is not, in itself, a form of egoism, nor, we may now add, does it in any way privilege the value of *human* flourishing or *human* life. It

9. It is, I think, in the area of “environmental,” rather than “animal” ethics—assuming that to be a currently comprehensible division of the academic literature—that discussion of wild animals belongs, though space does not permit it here.

10. See, for example, Holmes Rolston III, “Environmental Virtue Ethics: Half the Truth but Dangerous as a Whole,” in Philip Cafaro and Ronald Sandler, eds., *Environmental Virtue Ethics* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), pp. 61–74.

11. In many places, but see *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), especially pp. 127–128, 223, 322–325.

is not egoistic in virtue of its directing me to think about *my* flourishing, *my* good life. I am to think about how I should live *my* life, how to give it a shape, simply because it is only *my* life that I can live, not because I am to take it to be necessarily more worth preserving than yours. It is not chauvinistic in virtue of its saying that my end—and everyone else’s—is human flourishing, living a good human life. This doesn’t rank human life over other animals’ lives and direct me to choose to live a human one because it is more valuable. I have no choice. Since I am a human being, there is no other kind of life I could live.

So far, the content of human eudaimonia has been left unspecified. Let us move on to (human) virtue. As Annas has also stressed,<sup>12</sup> ancient eudaimonism could, and did, take an egoistic form—when, that is, *eudaimonia* is taken to be the life of pleasure. No doubt someone who lived only for pleasure (of the egoistical sort) would indeed regard the rest of nature, as well as other human beings, as no better than resources, but things are very different when we take *eudaimonia* to be the life of virtue. Just as the exercise of virtues such as charity, generosity, justice, and the quasi virtue of friendship, necessarily involves *not* focusing on oneself and one’s virtue but on the rights, interests, and good of other human beings, so the exercise of compassion and the avoidance of a number of vices, involves focusing on the good of the other animals as something worth pursuing, preserving, protecting, and so on.

It is a commonplace of our thoughts about virtue—not only philosophical virtue ethicists’ thoughts, but everyday thoughts, reflected in common usage—that the exercise of virtues such as charity, friendship, courage, honesty, and justice may, if one is unlucky, turn out to involve laying down one’s life. This not only makes it clear that one’s individual virtuous actions are not aimed directly at either one’s *eudaimonia* or one’s personal virtue, but also that it is not virtue ethics, *per se*, which says that such self-sacrifice could not be required by virtue if what was at stake was “only” another animal, or the survival of a species or an ecosystem. It is not virtue ethics that says such things are not worth dying for; it is our everyday use of “worthwhile” and the virtue and vice terms.

---

12. Ibid.

Everyday usage of the virtue and vice vocabulary is indeed human-centered by and large (compassion and cruelty are the obvious exceptions) and we know why; namely, that centuries of Western ethical thought have been human-centered. Thereby, the same is true of our everyday use of such terms as “duty,” “obligation,” “rights” and “right” and “wrong” applied to actions. The problem of traditional human-centeredness is one that every philosopher who wants to change our attitudes toward the other animals and the rest of nature has to face, not one peculiar to virtue ethics.

Singer and Regan have become rightly famous for making it obvious to many of us that a great deal of gratuitous suffering is involved in our use of some of the other animals for food and experimental purposes. Once we have brought ourselves to recognize this fact, the ordinary usage of “cruel” and “compassionate” latches on to it quite unproblematically. However, as environmentalists constantly urge, we need a substantial change in our outlook to get any further—in virtue ethics’ terms, a clearly seen and affective recognition of the fact that human beings, and thereby human lives, are not only interwoven with each other but with the rest of nature. Then, and only then, will we apply virtue ethics correctly to what we are doing.

#### SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Much of the literature analyzing contemporary issues from a virtue ethics perspective makes use of Aristotelian conceptions of virtue, even when the source of these conceptions is not named. Simply by combining the search term “virtue” with any topic of interest in databases of philosophical, ethical, and/or social criticism, one can find a wealth of material (although care must be taken to determine that the conceptions employed really are Aristotelian and not drawn from some other source).

Edmund D. Pellegrino has argued for a virtue ethics approach to medicine grounded in both Aristotle and Aquinas in a number of essays, including “The Virtuous Physician and the Ethics of Medicine,” in *Virtue and Medicine*, Earl E. Shelp, ed. (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1985). Justin Oakley and Dean Cocking have argued for a more strictly Aristotelian virtue ethics of medicine and other traditional professions in “A Virtue Ethics Approach to Professional Roles,”

Chapter 3 of their book, *Virtue Ethics and Professional Roles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 74–94. Rosalind Hursthouse discusses such an approach to the morality of abortion in “Virtue Theory and Abortion,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 20 (1991): 223–246. Susan S. Stocker discusses the views of Aristotle and Nietzsche in “Facing Disability with Resources from Aristotle and Nietzsche,” *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy: A European Journal* 5 (2002): 137–146. On the ethics of extending life and age-based rationing of health care, see Susan M. Purviance, “Age Rationing, the Virtues, and Wanting More Life,” *Journal of Medical Humanities* 14 (1993): 149–165; and Juliet Cassuto Rothman, *Aristotle’s Eudaimonia, Terminal Illness, and the Question of Life Support* (New York: Lang, 1993).

Aristotelian approaches to the ethics of other professions are not lacking; see, e.g., Michael Milde, “Legal Ethics: Why Aristotle Might be Helpful,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 33 (2002): 45–66; Louis G. Lombardi, “Character Versus Codes: Models for Research Ethics,” *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 5 (1990): 21–28; and Douglas J. Crawford-Brown, “Virtue as the Basis of Engineering Ethics,” *Science and Engineering Ethics* 3 (1997): 481–489. There is also increasing interest in Aristotle’s work in business ethics; see, e.g., Robert C. Solomon, “Corporate Roles, Personal Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach to Business Ethics,” *Business Ethics Quarterly* 2 (1992): 317–339; Howard Harris, “Courage as a Management Virtue,” *Business and Professional Ethics Journal* 18 (1999): 27–46; and Peter Hadreas, “Aristotle on the Vices and Virtue of Wealth,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 39 (2002): 361–376. On environmental issues, see Susanne E. Foster, “Aristotle and the Environment,” *Environmental Ethics* 24 (2002): 409–428.