

## Introduction – The Problem of Moral Status

We live in an orderly moral world, or so we believe most of the time. When we disregard the sour fruits of sceptical thinking, we usually experience a moral universe in which each entity has its proper place, a world in which value is arranged and distributed neatly among the entities. This moral and metaphysical harmony is not only pleasing to the mind; embodied and unfolding in our actions and our habits, it is also necessary to live our lives. How could we possibly go on with our daily business if we tried to *live* as sceptics in this respect? How could we live at all if we constantly questioned the value and status of entities? We would be at a loss to understand the world, to give meaning to the world and to ourselves, and to act in the world. Without the moral womb of tradition or ‘folk metaphysics’ that shields us from moral *Angst* and allows us to safely develop into responsible and social adults, we would starve from perplexity, unable to relate to the objects, people and other entities around us. We would find ourselves in the nihilistic situation Nietzsche sketched so vividly when he told the story of ‘The Madman’ (or ‘The Death of God’) in *The Gay Science*:

How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What did we do when we unchained the earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving now? Away from all suns? Are we not perpetually falling? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is it not more and more night coming on all the time? (Nietzsche 1882/1887, pp. 181–182)

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Such a night is unliveable and perhaps even unthinkable. In such a world it would not even make sense to call someone mad, since there would no longer be a standard of sanity. The absence of a value order seems to imply the absence of value and meaning as such. Thus, without the experience of a sufficient degree of moral and metaphysical order there is no *human* life worth the name.

However, to recognize this does not imply a claim about the precise nature of this order (for example, it need not be hierarchical), nor does it imply that we can *always* live in a state of moral paradise and innocence, entirely undisturbed by philosophical questioning. Even those who are not burdened by the philosophical tradition are vulnerable to what philosophers call the problem of 'moral status'. There are times when new knowledge and experience crack the calm of fossilized habit and received opinion, and challenge us to question the status and value of entities – the status of other entities and of ourselves, humans. Then Socratic scepticism is not only an adequate response; it is *mandatory*. Then Nietzsche's aphorism in *Human, All Too Human* becomes relevant: 'Convictions are more dangerous enemies of truth than are lies' (Nietzsche 1878, p. 264). Then it is time, in other words, for doing moral philosophy.

In our days, when science and technology play a major role in the framing and creation of human experience, this questioning of the moral status order tends to happen when we become aware of new facts and artefacts that challenge the existing moral (status) order. New evidence about existing entities which we call 'natural' entities and new entities created by technology, which we call 'artificial', expel us from the paradise of moral certainty and force us into the muddy, laborious business of moral status ascription. For example, long after Darwin's work stirred up debates on moral status (a storm that is not over yet), research on the so-called 'great apes' by pioneering primatologists such as Jane Goodall and Frans de Waal has made us question the sharp distinction we make between the moral status of humans and the moral status of the so-called great apes. Should some of them be considered as persons, rather than 'mere' apes? And, if chimpanzees use tools, then does that shift their status closer to that of humans? More generally, following accumulating scientific evidence on animal behaviour and animal (evolutionary) biology that suggests many similarities between human and non-human animals, there is a long-standing philosophical discussion about the status of non-human animals, for example the animals eaten by humans. Consider, for instance, Singer's *Animal Liberation* and subsequent discussions, but

also work by Midgley and others whom DeGrazia calls ‘second generation’ scholars. They ask questions such as: If an animal can suffer, if it has a ‘mind’, if it has its own interests, and so on, then should we not grant it a higher moral status than we do now, and treat it better? Should we perhaps grant it rights?

Technological developments – existing technologies, but also emerging technologies and even planned or imagined technologies (e.g. as presented in science fiction) – also raise philosophical inquiries about moral status. For example, the food and farming industry continues to develop new production processes, which have morally significant implications for the animals involved. And every now and then monsters of all kinds leave the laboratory or the film studios and disturb the peaceful moral order – ‘monsters’ meaning something that does not fit into our moral and cultural categories (Smits 2006). Some monsters are ‘real’ and ‘natural’ (e.g. new bacteria, genetically modified animals and perhaps soon humans); others are ‘artificial’ and/or ‘virtual’ (e.g. created with information technology). For example, some human-like robots seem to be an excellent example of what Campbell called ‘monsters’:

By monster I mean some horrendous presence or apparition that explodes all of your standards for harmony, order, and ethical conduct. (Campbell 1988, p. 222)

This is not only a matter of science fiction. As robots and artificially intelligent agents become more advanced, we are led to reflect on our justifications of moral status and, indeed, on (the moral significance of) the natural–artificial distinction itself. Can robots have minds and emotions, and, if so, what is their difference from humans? Should we grant rights to robots? And what exactly is the moral difference between a biological body, to which we tend to grant moral status and protection, and an artificial robot body, which we tend to interpret and treat as a thing? Why do we call biological life ‘life’, but refuse to use the term for robots? Can there be ‘artificial life’?

In a similar vein, one might consider the moral status of so-called ‘cyborgs’: hybrids between humans and machines. Why do we take the human body as the unit of our moral analysis, and not the human body *plus* computer, *plus* glasses or *plus* car? What exactly is the moral problem with replacing ‘natural’ body parts by artificial ones? How ‘artificial’ or ‘natural’ is a genetically modified organism? How artificial are *humans* if they have artificial body parts or if they were to have

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nanobots in their blood? In a sense, 'bio' is becoming more 'techno' (e.g. the 'making' of new living things, genetic engineering, synthetic biology, and so on) and 'techno' is becoming more 'bio' (e.g. growing neurons and brains connected to a robot body, self-developing robots, etc.). What does this imply for moral status?

Thus, the scientific and technological construction of new and old entities, their new or renewed entry on the stage of our world, motivates us to ask the philosophical question of moral status once again. What is the moral status of non-human entities? How should we categorize them – morally and ontologically speaking? Or is categorization itself part of the problem?

Interestingly and typically, as the great apes case or the robot case shows, new scientific evidence and technological developments do not only make us question the status of *non-human* entities; they also invite us to review the moral status of *humans*. Is there a difference in moral status between some great apes and humans, or between advanced robots and humans? If so, what is this difference? Are we basically great apes, or even biological robots (biobots)? Are we 'more' or 'different', and, if so, why? Why precisely is the border between the human body and the rest of the (natural and artificial) world a *moral* border? What is the place of humans in the moral universe? Can and should we justify or change the hierarchical moral order we have *lived* for so many generations? What is the moral value of humans as compared with non-humans? Can and should we keep a distance in moral status between humans and non-human animals, between humans and artefacts? How animal-like, how artificial and how virtual are we, and what does this imply for *our* moral status? And what is the moral status of non-person humans that we sustain, 'create' or make visible by technological advances in medicine, such as some coma patients, embryos created by *in vitro* fertilization, embryos made visible by echoscopes, and so on? What exactly is the moral place and relevance of 'the human'?

In this book I discuss the question of moral status by means of a two-step philosophical procedure that consists of two reformulations of the initial question, which together constitute (1) an exploration of a social and relational turn and (2) a critique of moral status ascription.

First I redefine the problem of moral status as the problem of (re)defining the boundaries of the social. I discuss standard justifications of moral status in the light of this question and (re)construct an alternative approach centred on appearance and relations. The central question becomes how we should relate to other entities and how they (should) appear to us. The preliminary answer I provide towards the

end of the first part of this book is a moral ontology that crosses individual/social and natural/artificial distinctions. However, I then argue that, if we want to make progress in our thinking on this matter, it does not suffice to construct a scientific or metaphysical world view that 'sorts out' the relations and ascribes value or moral status accordingly. As critical philosophers who can benefit from post-Kantian philosophical traditions, we also need to discuss the *conditions of possibility* of moral status ascription.

In the second part of this book this transcendental question allows me to identify and discuss the linguistic, social-cultural, natural-bodily, material-technological, religious-spiritual and historical-spatial forms of life that render it possible for entities to appear as having a particular value or status (passive formula) and for us to ascribe a particular value or moral status to entities (active formula). I argue that these conditions do not only enable moral status ascription, but also place limits on our discourse about moral status and on the possibilities of imagining new practices and changing our habits. Influenced by Heidegger and Wittgenstein, and drawing on interpretations by Dreyfus, Ingold and others, I show that such discourses and proposals for change presuppose lived, relational experiences, practices and skills; they must be situated *within* the social-natural theatre of humans, animals and things. I conclude that the question of moral status is fundamentally a social question – how we should relate to other entities, how we should live together – and that any answer to this question depends on the words, relations, bodies, technologies, spirits and places we create, find and live with.

Let me provide a detailed overview of the structure and content of the book, which I hope will be useful to the reader.

In the **first part** of this book, I discuss existing accounts of moral status and work my way up towards a (more) relational approach. First, I review standard justifications of moral status and their social-philosophical counterparts. I discuss direct justifications provided by deontological and utilitarian theory and indirect justifications forwarded by virtue ethics. In **Chapter 1** I show that direct justifications base moral status on (intrinsic) properties and rely on an atomistic metaphysics. Their social-philosophical counterpart is individualism and their political-philosophical counterpart is contractarianism. I point to several problems with these justifications (in particular epistemological problems) and discuss attempts to overcome them within the properties paradigm (e.g. changing the unit of analysis) and within the contractarian paradigm (attempts to expand the social contract). In **Chapter 2** I explore

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two potential solutions that seem to leave the boundaries of individual properties ontology. The first is a turn to appearance, which presents itself as a solution to epistemological problems related to properties and acknowledges the importance of appearance in social life. The second is an indirect argument for moral status based on virtue ethics and its political–philosophical counterpart communitarianism (a solution to problems with individualism and contractarianism). These solutions can be formulated by using the theatre metaphor and account for the *subjective* dimension of moral status ascription, which is an important step towards the work in the second part of the book. However, I then argue that we should not interpret this subjective dimension as implying that moral status just *is* a social–cultural construct or is *caused* by social and cultural factors. Moreover, the indirect argument does not account for our intuition that moral status should be about the entities in question and not about us – in other words, it is too anthropocentric and does not really expand the boundaries of the social. In **Chapters 3, 4 and 5**, therefore, I look elsewhere (ecophilosophy, Benton’s Marxism, Latour, Ingold) to construct a relational theory of moral status, which questions modern distinctions between humans and non-humans, and between nature and society. This ‘ecological’ approach avoids most problems discussed in the previous chapters. However, I emphasize that the relational approach can only constitute an attractive alternative paradigm if it is not understood as an alternative moral *ontology*, in the sense of a better description of moral reality. If we interpret this approach as just another dogma about the true nature of moral and ontological reality, we lose sight of the subjective and indeed relational–ecological dimension of moral status ascription: we ascribe moral status as beings who are already part of the world, who are already ‘environmental’. Thus, the subjective dimension does not imply that an expansion of the boundaries of the social is merely a question of (good) will, as if we could simply decide to change orientation; it depends on our relations. But can we just ‘switch’ to a different, relational paradigm? Can we simply change our practices? We might want to move towards a more relational way of talking and living, but under what conditions is this possible? I **conclude** this part of the book with some reflections on the ‘teachings’ of Diogenes the Cynic, pointing to the need for an approach that brings our attention to what might keep us from moving in a more relational direction, preferably one that brings more *life* into our thinking about moral status.

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In the **second part** of this book, therefore, I exclude any ‘dogmatic’ interpretation or recovery of the moral–relational project by making a

'transcendental' argument: I ask about the conditions of possibility of moral status ascription. This question can be formulated in terms of experience (What are the conditions for an entity to appear as having a certain moral status?) or in terms of ascription/construction (What are the conditions for moral status ascription/construction?). While moral status cannot and should not be reduced to these conditions (it *is* not these conditions), it depends on them in the same way as a building depends on the existence of space: they are conditions of possibility. This argument can be considered as a turn to the subject (Who is the architect, who constructs moral status? We humans do; in this sense this theory of moral status is anthropocentric), but this subject is not isolated and does not exercise absolute free agency. Rather, it is constituted (enabled and limited, shaped and reshaped) by structures or forms of various sorts.

In **Chapter 6** I discuss a first form: I introduce language as a condition for moral status ascription. I draw attention to the linguistic *form* moral status ascription takes. Using Searle's social ontology, in particular his concepts of 'declaration' and 'status function', I first construe the view that moral status is constructed in the same way as other social constructions: a physical entity is declared to have a certain status. The family member of this position in social theory is contractarianism: we live together as if we had made, *agreed* on declarations of status in an Original Position. We thus create our 'moral status grammar'. However, this view assumes a misguided view of language and presupposes a strict division between a physical world (objective, real) and a social world (subjective, constructed), a division which is untenable in the light of the subjective–phenomenological approach explored here. In **Chapters 7 and 8**, therefore, I argue that, if a linguistic turn is desirable here, it should not merely be about language as convention or declaration – if that means it is up to us to declare and agree about it. I show that, instead, moral status is *already* part of *one* linguistic–social–physical world. In line with Dreyfus's objections to Searle, I argue in Chapter 7 that our world is already a *Mitwelt* (Heidegger), and that in this sense the entity is already part of our social–linguistic world before we can ascribe moral status to it. Its moral status is already partly 'given' in language and social relations; this enables and limits moral status ascription. In Chapter 8 I also use the view of the later Wittgenstein that for any utterance (e.g. a moral status ascription) to be meaningful it must be subject to public rules and shared understanding; there must already be a 'form of life' in which the moral status ascription is embedded. It is 'part of an activity, a form of life' in a social and cultural sense. Thus, moral

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status ascription is as much a matter of linguistic declaration or social convention as it is a matter of how we already live with non-humans – even if the non-human in question is ‘new’ to our order. This insight draws our attention to the social–cultural conditions for moral status ascription: culture (language, social relations, etc.) shapes the conditions under which we ascribe moral status – regardless of the linguistic form that takes.

However, to emphasize ‘culture’ too much may give the impression that moral status ascription takes place in an ‘immaterial’ cultural realm alone, separated from the physical. Responding to this possible objection, I discuss in **Chapter 9** the bodily, material and technological conditions of possibility for moral status ascription. I use Latour’s deconstruction of the distinction between ‘nature’ and ‘the collective’, I interpret embodied cognition theory and Merleau-Ponty as implying that what we can say about other entities depends on embodied experience, I use Marxism and Foucault to argue that we already exercise power over other entities in more and less subtle ways and that this has a material component (e.g. food production power structures) and a bodily component (e.g. disciplining animal bodies), and I argue that technologies condition (shape, expand) the range of possibilities we have for ascribing moral status as redefining the social, and as redefining ourselves. Indeed, past technologies created existing relations and limit our ways of talking about entities, and new or future technologies condition our moral imagination (e.g. robots as a metaphor) and limit moral change.

In **Chapter 10** I discuss the relation between moral status, religion and spirituality. I argue that, even if some of us consider ourselves secular, religious belief and experience promote certain ways of seeing and transforming the world, and therefore frame our ways of thinking about moral status. I outline several forms of spirituality and discuss how each enables and limits moral status ascription in a particular way. In **Chapter 11** I discuss examples of forms of historical space, moral–geographical patterns that are traces of our ‘moral status’ thinking and doing and at the same time continue to constitute and limit that thinking and doing. I describe *distancing* processes of domestication, civilization and earth-alienation for this purpose. I end with the question of whether we can escape such ‘colonial’ forms of thinking. In **Chapter 12** I try to answer this question. I conclude that, if we want to move towards a more relational view and practice, we had better take into account these conditions of possibility for moral status ascription and the corresponding limits they place on our moral discourse.





Changes to our thinking and practices – changes to our form of life – are possible, but change is slow, and the role of individual will and action or social–political agreement is limited. It is a ‘moral metamorphosis’ rather than a willed and controlled ‘transformation’.

In my **general conclusion**, therefore, I claim that attempting to change moral status thinking amounts to attempting to change morality’s womb. In other words, the project of moral status ascription is bound to fail tragically if it does not recognize its limits. Changing moral status is a process of growing relations, which is at the same time the growth of a new form of life. It is a process that is already taking place, but it is not entirely in our hands. In so far as it is possible to re-form at all, I suggest that promoting relational growth in the moral domain can and does benefit from relations between ‘West’ and ‘East’, and between ‘North’ and ‘South’. In my conclusions I also explore alternative moral metaphors that may encourage a more fleshy, living and breathing way of thinking about moral status and moral knowledge, and conclude that ‘the transcendental–phenomenological argument made in this book amounts to a proposal for a kind of philosophical yoga: an exercise in becoming more aware of your moral breathing.’



# PROOF



**Part I**

**Moral Ontologies: From Individual  
to Relational Dogmas**

# PROOF



# 1

## Individual Properties

### 1.1. Moral status as property

The standard approach to the justification of moral status is to refer to one or more (intrinsic) properties of the entity in question, such as consciousness or the ability to suffer. If the entity has this property, this then warrants giving the entity a certain moral status, for example in the form of rights. Thus, according to this approach, the key to knowing the moral status of an entity lies in knowing that it has one or more morally relevant properties.

Consider the so-called first generation discussion about the moral status of animals in the 1970s and 1980s. Singer made the utilitarian argument that sentience and the ability to suffer are such morally relevant properties and that they give us a reason to promote the happiness and interests of animals (Singer 1975, 1993), whereas Regan, from a deontological position, argued for giving rights to animals if they are 'subject of a life': if they have wants, preferences, beliefs, feelings, memories, expectations, and if their welfare matters to them (Regan 1983). In spite of their disagreement (utility versus right), both camps unite in the form of their justification: they all rely on the animal having a morally relevant property.

A similar structure can be observed in discussions about the moral status of robots and artificially intelligent agents. For example, Levy has argued that artificially conscious robots should have rights (Levy 2009) and according to what Torrance has called the 'Organic view' artificial humanoid agents should be considered as having intrinsic moral status if they are natural or artificial organisms: if they have 'organic characteristics' such as sentience (Torrance 2008, p. 502). Again, in spite of disagreements about which property is the morally relevant one, there

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is a broad consensus on how to justify moral status: identify one or more morally relevant properties and then find out if the entity in question has them.

Put in a more formal way, the argument for giving moral status to entities runs as follows:

1. Having property *p* is sufficient for moral status *s*
2. Entity *e* has property *p*

Conclusion: entity *e* has moral status *s*

Usually, this procedure is not applied to an individual entity, but to a class of entities, for example an animal species or a particular class of robots. The argument for giving moral status to an entity belonging to class *c* then becomes:

1. Having property *p* is sufficient for moral status *s*
2. All entities of class *c* have property *p*

Therefore, all entities of class *c* have moral status *s*

3. Entity *e* is of class *c*

Conclusion: entity *e* has moral status *s*

However, the three premises incur at least the following epistemological problems.

First, how can we know which property is sufficient for (1) ascribing moral status at all and (2) ascribing a particular moral status *s*? Arguments for moral status of animals or robots tend to focus on human-like characteristics such as sentience or consciousness, or other features (e.g. 'organic'), but why exactly are these morally relevant characteristics?

Second, how can we establish that a kind of entity has a particular property *p*? This is difficult, since most properties we hold morally relevant involve a 'mental' aspect that is not directly transparent and accessible to us. For example, how can we establish the presence of consciousness or an ability of suffering? And where shall we draw the moral line if having a certain property is gradual rather than absolute? For example, for some animals it is difficult to determine whether their nervous system makes sentience possible. Consider the question of whether or not fish are sentient.

Third, can we define sharp boundaries between kinds of entities, and, if so, how shall we do this? For example, even within an animal species there may be differences: some may have the morally relevant property to a higher degree than others.

When we already know the entities very well, we do not ask these questions. In daily life we know what we owe to others and how to treat others – and this goes for non-humans as well. As philosophers, we assume that these moral practices are justified either by knowledge of the moral and metaphysical order – we have a ‘book’ that gives us clear categories of entities and that gives us the value or moral status of these categories of entities – or by the application of a method that allows us to establish whether or not a category of entities has a particular property. In modern times, we believe that this is the scientific method.

When we question the moral status of new or old entities, we lack the epistemic basis given by tradition. We thought we knew what (non-human) apes are, we thought we knew what humans are, we thought we knew the difference between the two types of entities, and we thought that there was a strict, clear difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’: they are (non-human) animals, we are humans. We thought we knew that robots are ‘mere machines’ and that we are not mere machines. We think we know, until science and technology shatter our world view, and thereby shatter the metaphysical categories and the moral categories based on them. Then we lose our ‘book of reference’. Reference to the older, traditional categories does not solve the epistemological problem; these older categories are part of the problem.

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The epistemological problem is a Platonic one: find instances of an Idea, be it a property or a type of entity. Consider the following example. Imagine that we have to establish whether a particular cat has consciousness in order to answer a moral status question. Then we have to ask the following questions:

Question 1: Do cats have consciousness? In order to answer this question we need the following knowledge:

1. We know what consciousness is, that is, we know the Idea of consciousness
2. We know what cats are, that is, we know the Idea of cats
3. Then we can ask: Can we find the Idea of consciousness in the Idea of cats? Does the property consciousness belong to the Idea of consciousness?

Question 2: Is this entity a cat? In order to answer this question we need to know the following:

1. We perceive this particular entity
2. We know what cats are
3. Then we can ask: Can we find the Idea cat instantiated in this particular entity?

Usually we can skip many steps here; a lot of this knowledge is taken for granted and usually there is no need to make it explicit. But if the entity is not known to us yet, or if it turns out that we know a lot less about it than we thought, then we do not have available an Idea of the kind of entity. Then we have to start with the phenomena and try to generalize, try to find the Idea and the Properties that belong to that idea (that is, other Ideas). In other words, we have to investigate, *research* and build theory. This is what science does – ancient ‘science’ and modern science. It is also what modern moral philosophers do, at least if they understand moral philosophy and indeed moral status ascription as a *moral science*. (I return to this approach below.)

## 1.2. Individuals and their contract

The moral status ascription procedure described in the previous section is not only a procedure we can use in (individual) ethics; it is linked to social and political philosophy, in particular to social–historical patterns of argumentation. The social–philosophical counterpart of the properties-based approach to moral status is emancipatory, individualist, liberal and contractarian. Let me explain this.

Once we thought that ‘slaves’ were non-human. However, gradually they were emancipated, that is, declared human – and thereby ‘made’ human. Will the same happen for some types of animals or robots? In any case, the formal structure of moral status arguments applies to emancipation arguments. Emancipation of a particular class of entities is justified by referring to the morally significant properties of that class of entities. One first discriminates between properties that are held to be morally relevant (e.g. the ability to reason, the ability to suffer) and properties that are considered to be morally irrelevant, such as skin colour or ancestry. Then a particular class of entities is said to have those morally relevant properties and is therefore given a new moral status. And the one who wishes to be emancipated *claims* his rights or other form of moral status on the basis of these morally relevant



properties. Showing that a particular class of entities ('them') have, and perhaps *share* with 'us', the morally relevant properties, is crucial to the argument for emancipation. These famous lines in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* are illustrative of this:

'If you prick us, do we not bleed?  
If you tickle us, do we not laugh?  
If you poison us, do we not die?'

Of course, not every entity can make such a claim: not all entities *speak*. Therefore, human subjects assume authority to speak on their behalf. Making the claim is delegated to humans. For example, one might claim rights for a particular class of (non-human) animals, or robots. (And, if some humans do not have the effective freedom to speak, others can speak for them and demand that they get that effective freedom and other 'human rights', that is, rights that belong to them, that are their property, in virtue of their being human.)

From a social–philosophical point of view, this approach is individualist, since moral status is ascribed to entities considered in isolation from other entities – including the observer. This isolating, alienating approach deserves further metaphorical–philosophical elaboration. Typically (in imagination or in reality) one 'brings in' a 'species' of the entity (a *specimen*) and then examines that species in order to determine whether or not it has the relevant moral property(ies). Slaves, women, blacks and animals are displayed and examined in the courtroom, dissected in 'anatomy theatres', examined in the laboratory. In other words: they are taken out of (their usual) context in order to determine their properties, their essence. If we find the Kantian thing-in-itself, then we know its moral status.

Indeed, the entity in question finds itself in the position of the corpse that is examined in Rembrandt's seventeenth-century painting *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*. The moral philosopher lectures about the moral status of entities by showing the moral anatomy of a particular entity. Once again this is a Platonic procedure: the appearances are stripped away. In the anatomy theatre, in the courtroom and in the lab, the moral qualities of the entity are revealed, shown to the eye of the public. The modern scientist, who forces nature to reveal herself, is now accompanied by the moral scientist, who forces the entity to reveal its true moral status. 'The animal only appears to suffer; in reality it feels nothing and we cannot ascribe moral status to it. Watch this; here is the evidence; I will show how it really works.'

Or: 'The robot is only treated as a pet; in reality its status is that of a thing. I can show it; let me open the machine and reveal what is under its artificial skin.'

I return to this question regarding appearance in the next chapter. For now, let me emphasize that the entity is examined without taking into account its relations to the world and to the observers. For example, when we discuss about the moral status of a pig in terms of its intelligence or sentience, we leave out the context of the pig, for example the context of meat production, the humans who eat the pig, how the pig lives with other pigs, and so on. Both the moral surgeon and those who visit the moral theatre or the moral lab are not meat consumers or people who had dealings with the animal before it was brought to the examination table, but 'impartial observers' who search for the truth behind the appearances. They take distance from the context. On the clean table of the moral anatomist, essences appear and relations disappear. In this sense it is an 'individualizing', non-relational procedure.

Note that this role of the moral scientist is assumed not only by philosophers or by scientists but also by, for example, animal *liberators*. Those who (sometimes literally) fight for animal *rights* have the same properties-approach to moral status and make their claims from the same pedestal: the position of the detached observer, who claims to know the real and true moral status of the entity, who tries to show to others what that status is, and who for this purpose engages in a way of thinking that alienates the entity in question from its relations – a way of thinking which we could call 'individualist'.

Moreover, the whole approach is individualist in the sense that moral status is viewed as 'prior' to the social. It is assumed that in an original, natural state – a kind of *state of nature* – the entity had particular moral status based on natural properties. However, so the emancipatory argument continues, in the unjust society of our days, these properties are not recognized and hence moral status is not given to them, that is, not given *back* to them. It was, as it were, stolen from them. Withholding moral status is withholding their moral property. This is regarded as a moral crime *par excellence* in liberal-romantic societies: entities are entitled to their 'natural' moral status.

Thus, property is not only the key metaphor when it comes to defining the natural properties of an entity (a metaphor at work in natural science), but also a metaphor for moral properties based on these natural properties (a metaphor at work in moral science). Moral status is something you can *have*, possess. It belongs to you in the same

way as luggage belongs to you. Entities come with a moral backpack and they have the right to carry that backpack since they have certain (natural) properties. Liberty, in this approach, is what Berlin called ‘negative liberty’ (Berlin 1958); which means here that no-one violates your natural properties or takes away your *moral properties* – which are based on these natural properties.

This description is especially adequate for one particular form of moral consideration: rights. Rights are often seen as *inalienable*: they belong to the entity in the same way as arms and legs belong to the human body. This reference to arms and legs implies a much tighter connection between the entity and its moral status than the backpack metaphor suggests. If you cut off the rights, then you violate the entity’s moral integrity and endanger its moral life. Therefore, the entity has a kind of meta-right: the right to claim its rights (or to have its rights claimed) at all times.

Human rights, for example, are seen as rights that belong to humans *qua* humans; they cannot be separated from the human; to do this would be to violate the moral integrity of the human in question. If any entity has the property ‘human’, then the moral property ‘human rights’ comes with it. They are as natural as (other) natural properties. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for example, speaks of ‘the inherent dignity’ and ‘equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family’ (Preamble). Given this inalienable character of rights, they become as natural as other properties. It is even said that human beings are born with them: ‘All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights’ (Article 1).

Historically and logically, this move is only possible since the human beings are *individualized*, cut off from other ties and from the social. For universal human rights, the only relevant relation is membership of ‘the human family’, that is, of the human species.

Society, in this view, can only be understood as a contract between individual agents who try to protect their basic liberties, rights and other moral properties. The social thus mainly appears as an architecture of security, providing a particular type of security: it ensures that property – moral and natural – remains with its owners. Liberalism and private property go hand in hand.

This bourgeois approach to moral status does not *necessarily* exclude non-humans, as deontological and utilitarian arguments for giving animals moral status show and as I will show next. But typically non-humans are not part of the ‘social contract’ understood as a security contract.

Partly this is due to the contract metaphor itself. In order to make a contract one has to be able to speak, to reason, and so on. Thus, as long as one requires that the givers of moral status are the same as the receivers of moral status, entities who lack these capacities cannot be parties to the contract. However, contractarians have a solution for this problem: humans can speak for those with ‘no voice’ – at least, those who cannot use the voice of reason. They can agree, in a contract amongst themselves (e.g. made explicit in law), to protect non-humans in virtue of the (lower) natural and moral properties they have.<sup>1</sup> However, even if we agree to give these entities moral status, they are not part of the social; they are not part of *our*, human, world.

In sum, the tradition of contractarianism is not *per se* hostile to giving non-human entities moral status, but has at its centre a social contract between humans. The social is therefore defined as exclusively human.

However, this approach becomes problematic when *outside* the moral laboratory some entities *appear* differently than they *are* – that is, they do not appear as they are supposed to appear according to moral science. We would like to categorize them as ‘beasts’ or ‘machines’, but, when we consider the so-called quasi-social nature of the new entities under discussion, it becomes harder to exclude them from the social. For example, not just animals (consider pets) but also robots may appear as ‘quasi-others’ (Ihde 1990; Coeckelbergh 2011a), as ‘artificial companions’ (Floridi 2008). In these cases a gap opens up between experience and theory: these non-humans appear to be part of the social, whereas (traditional) contractarian theory excludes them.

One possible response to this problem is to reassert the truth of the theory and *educate* people about the *real* moral status and *the truth* about the animal and about the robot. Another response is to leave the moral-scientific approach to moral status and to take seriously this social dimension of human experience and existence. This book chooses the second option. But, before exploring different approaches to moral status, I shall discuss some attempts to solve the indicated problems by stretching, not breaking, the standard approach.

### 1.3. First attempts to solve problems: change unit of analysis and expand social contract

First, in response to the mentioned epistemological problems, one might try to change the unit of analysis. This can take two kinds of theoretical directions. A first route is to replace the *entity* as a *scientific* unit of

analysis by the entity as a quasi-subject or subject. Perhaps ‘subject-of-a-life’ (Regan’s term) can be counted as belonging to this strategy. The purpose of this switch is to talk about (subjective) experience rather than objective properties. However, this move easily slides back to another kind of properties-based account, since proof is required that the entity in question really has these experiences (has desires, expectations and so on) and *can* have them: one has to show the presence of the properties necessary for an entity to be able to have these experiences. Thus, this approach reverts back to the standard approach, which assumes that moral status is based on ontological properties and that science (or indeed a Stoic or Christian insight into the moral world order) can tell us all about these properties.

A second route takes a *more* scientific approach and subscribes to the long-standing tradition of ‘elementary’ (meta)physics: change the unit of analysis from ‘entity’ (animal, robot) to something more elementary, such as genes or ‘information’, and use properties of *those things* as a basis for justifying moral status. Let me explain and discuss this proposed solution.

A scientific–philosophical reply to my second objection may be that, while mental properties are difficult to establish, we can establish their presence at an *elementary* level. The method of elementary science, which is Platonic and pre-Platonic in origin, is to look for elements (e.g. elementary particles) ‘behind’ or ‘underneath’ the phenomena. What we need, the argument goes, is a stable basis for morality, and this basis can be found at the elementary, physical level, where we can find the truth and reality, ‘beneath’ or ‘behind’ the lies of the phenomena.

For example, Liao has argued that rights and moral agency can be justified on a *genetic* basis, which is ‘identifiable’ and ‘physical’ (Liao 2008). But this does not solve the problem, since it is unclear what counts as a ‘property’ here. One gene? All genes? Which genes? Where do we draw the line? Should we talk about genes or something else? What *is* the ‘genetic basis’ of an organism? And why should anything that is part of the genetic basis count as a property at all, given that genes do not *determine* phenotype, behaviour, functions? Furthermore, this ‘solution’ incurs my other objections as well: which genes are morally relevant, which make a *moral* difference, for example the moral difference between us and a chimpanzee? Science and a science-based philosophy (alone) cannot answer these questions.

Similar problems occur in information ethics. One could try to find a basis in the *code* of an entity or in a more abstract ‘element’ like information, but it is not clear which part of the code or which information

should be selected and is morally relevant, that is, relevant for moral status.

Consider Floridi's information ontology (Floridi 2002): he links the moral status and intrinsic value of an entity to its ontological status *as information object*. By resorting to this strategy, one avoids having to talk about properties of entities like robots, animals or humans. They are analysed at what is taken as the most 'elementary' level (for example information). However, then one has to know the properties of that most elementary object. As Floridi says, the main question concerning the moral worth of an entity is: 'what is the intrinsic value of x qua an object constituted by its inherited attributes'. Hence the problems I identified previously remain intact: selection of the morally relevant property, proof of the entity having that property, and definition of boundaries between objects. The latter concern challenges elementary (meta)physics at the heart of its approach: it suggests that the border between elementary objects may be blurred and hence that there actually is no 'element'.

Second, in response to the limitations of contractarian thinking with regard to the social inclusion of non-humans, we should consider efforts to stretch these limitations. Some authors have proposed modification to contractarianism in order to include animals and other non-humans *in* the contract. Most attempts to do so are property-based, which incurs the epistemological problems mentioned above.

For example, Nussbaum has argued in *Frontiers of Justice* (2006) for extending the (parties to the) social contract to people with disabilities and to (non-human) animals. She argues that (human) rationality is not the relevant property (Nussbaum 2006, p. 93) and proposes other criteria instead. For example, she challenges the contractarian assumption that people are of equal power and capacity (Nussbaum 2006, p. 103) and argues that *sentient* animals, in contrast to non-sentient ones, 'have a secure entitlement against gratuitous killing for sport' (p. 393). Thus, Nussbaum's approach remains with the individualist properties-based approach.

In an effort to find a more *social* criterion to stretch the contract, I have proposed a different solution in a recent article: grant moral status on the basis of cooperation, a basic contractarian concept. I have argued that cooperation between humans and non-humans can *de facto* establish a social contract (Coeckelbergh 2009), which implies ascription of moral properties to non-humans also – or at least to those non-humans who cooperate with humans. This approach has the advantage that we do not need proof of properties such as sentience or consciousness.

Of course, being able to cooperate assumes certain properties on the part of the entity, and in this sense this approach remains properties-based: only entities that have the capacity to cooperate (with us) receive moral status.

Whatever the merits of these proposals, however, it must be clear by now that there is a link between moral status ascription and defining the nature and boundaries of the social, and that the properties-based, individualist–contractarian approach faces significant problems that cannot be solved easily.

But is there a real alternative to this individualist and properties-based approach? One solution we may want to explore is the ‘indirect’ argument for moral status. The argument for moral status analysed in this chapter can be called *direct*, since it seeks to protect the entity in virtue of the entity’s own properties. There is, however, an *indirect* argument as well: we can protect other entities in virtue of our *own* value and status as humans. I will discuss this solution in the next chapter, in which I will also start to search for an alternative to the Platonism and realism implicit in the properties-based approach to moral status.

## 2

# Appearance and Virtue

In the first chapter I have discussed properties-based and contract-based approaches to the problems of moral status as a problem about the boundaries of the social. I have also indicated problems related to these approaches and I discussed two modifications that turned out to be only 'superficial' solutions, that is, no solutions at all. In this chapter I wish to consider two theoretical avenues that deserve attention as better alternatives, one of which I will develop further in the next chapters and in Part II. One is an appearance-based justification of moral status (an alternative to a properties-based, ontological one) and the other is the indirect argument for moral status: virtue ethics and the related communitarian alternative to contractarianism. Both alternatives constitute a first turn to the subject in thinking about moral status, a turn which will be continued in the next chapters and in Part II.

### 2.1. Appearance and the social life: a turn to the phenomena

One way of trying to avoid the mentioned epistemological problems is to replace the 'thing-in-itself' (to use Kant's term from the *Critique of Pure Reason*) with the thing (object) as it *appears* to us (subject). The justificatory ground of moral status, in this view, is not ontology but phenomenology: what matters, morally speaking, is not what the entity in question *is*, but how the entity appears. Elementary (meta)physics, which, following Plato and pre-Socratic natural philosophy, searches for the real 'behind' or 'beneath' the phenomena, is replaced by attention to human experience and consciousness. Such a 'phenomenological' approach may then go two ways, which



we may call a ‘Husserlian’ and a ‘Heideggerian’ way. One way is to make it a science of consciousness or a science of experience (psychology), which easily slides back into elementary metaphysics: Husserl was after ‘pure consciousness’ and things-in-themselves, and contemporary psychology changes the unit of analysis from human beings to minds, behaviour, brains, neurons and so on. Another way is rather (post-)Heideggerian, hermeneutical and constructivist: it attends to the ways we experience, encounter, interpret and construct things in daily life, in moods, in context, in our worldly and social way of being – not in detached scientific consciousness. If we take the latter approach, moral and ontological status is neither something that is ‘in’ ‘the thing’ or that is its attribute (e.g. intrinsic value, rights, etc.), nor something we can experience purely and directly as detached observers, but something that is experienced, given, ascribed, interpreted, mediated and constructed. Moral status, then, is not about the entity but about us and about the relation between us and the entity: how we experience and construct the entity, how it appears to our consciousness and how we *give* it reality, meaning and status. (This will be the focus of Part II.)

For the moral status of non-humans (and indeed humans), the latter approach to moral status has at least the following implication. As I have argued in the previous chapter, standard moral–philosophical arguments view non-human entities out of their (existential, natural, social) context. I used the metaphor of the dissection theatre or laboratory: philosophers doing (applied) ethics rely on scientists who ‘examine’ or ‘dissect’ the (new) entity and then determine its ontological and moral status. “Can the animal feel pain? Is the artificially intelligent agent conscious? In order to know this, let us experiment and find out what this entity really *is*. Then we know how we should treat it: as a thing, as an animal, perhaps as a human being?” However, such an approach is neither appropriate nor possible. It assumes that what an entity is can be exhaustively described and determined from the ‘outside’ and from a point of view that is a ‘view from nowhere’ (Nagel 1986), without taking into account the (quasi-)subject’s experience and the context in which it exists. As sociologists and anthropologists of science have shown, laboratories are not non-places and non-contexts and scientists are subjects-in-context: they do not have unmediated access to reality; subjectivity and contexts enter into the process. Scientists do not ‘find’ or ‘discover’ reality but interpret phenomena and (have to) construct ‘reality’ by relying on a network of humans and non-humans (see, for example, Latour’s actor-network theory – Latour 2005). Even

the ‘elementary particles’ are not the ‘reality’ *behind* or *underneath* the phenomena but are themselves phenomena and constructions.

However, the problem with this view – in the form I have articulated it here – is that it may easily water down into a Platonic–scientific approach to moral status once again: social science, cultural studies, anthropology, and so on understood as sciences that reveal the truth and dismantle the phenomena. If this happens, then the problems discussed appear to turn up again. Indeed, this view can be misinterpreted as saying that moral status is a social–cultural construction in the sense that it is ‘caused’ by society and culture. If this interpretation is endorsed, then even the language of ‘construction’ turns out to be a form of scientific realism in disguise: yet another ‘reality’ discovered underneath the ‘reality’ of the scientists. This is Platonism once again: social science shows that moral scientists think moral status is something objective, whereas *in reality* moral status is a construction, is produced in the laboratory and so on. Latour’s ontology, for example, might be interpreted as implying that there is such an underlying reality: the network of humans and things.

In Part II, therefore, I will avoid this (superficial interpretation of) constructivism and, rather, make a transcendental argument: society and culture are (one of the) *conditions of possibility* for moral status ascription. This allows me to bring in all kinds of contextual conditions without reducing morality (moral status, value, etc.) to these conditions, as the sciences and philosopher–scientists tend to do.

## 2.2. Virtue

A (very) short way of summarizing the turn to the phenomena proposed in the previous section is to say that *we* (humans) ascribe moral status. Moral status ceases to be regarded as an objective property; attention is paid to the human subject, the ‘ascriber’ of moral status. This turn to the subject has epistemological and moral significance. First, there is a sense in which moral status ascription is always ‘anthropocentric’: when we consider the moral status of an entity, we always have to start from the position of the subject. For example, we use language to ascribe moral status to non-humans. This weak form of what we may call ‘epistemological’ anthropocentrism cannot be avoided and has important consequences for understanding moral status ascription (see Part II). However, there is also a different and stronger form of anthropocentrism (which we may call ‘moral’ anthropocentrism): the idea that our relation to non-humans should be shaped not by *their*

moral status but by *our* moral status – in particular, our moral character. This is the virtue ethics approach to moral status, which I shall now discuss. I will also discuss the related social theory (communitarianism), which I will present in the next section as an alternative to the individualist–contractarian approach to moral status discussed in the previous chapter.

Virtue ethics seems to avoid the problems discussed above by employing an indirect argument for moral status: if we *humans* wish to be virtuous persons, we should treat non-humans well – regardless of their moral status. Abuse of non-humans is not wrong because it violates *their* moral status (e.g. by creating moral suffering or by violating their rights), but because it is not what a good person is supposed to do. It is wrong because as *humans* we fail to live up to our moral status as humans and as members of a moral and political community. This shift to the subject of moral consideration seems to avoid the epistemological problems indicated in the previous chapter. We no longer need to know the properties of the object of moral consideration.

Moreover, in its *communitarian* version – that is, as a social and political theory – this approach rejects the individualist and contractarian view of the social and acknowledges the social, communal dimension of human being. There is not ‘first’ the individual and then society; according to this view, it is rather the other way around. ‘First’ there is the community; only in this context does it make sense to talk about the obligations we have towards one another and perhaps towards non-humans. In this way communitarianism presents itself as an antithesis and alternative to the individualist–contractarian view that leaves behind its problems. It also changes the focus from an ethics of the right (here: what is the right thing to do vis-à-vis a non-human entity, how should we *act* towards it) to an ethics of the good (what is the good, flourishing life and, related to this question, how should we *live* with human and non-human beings).

An interesting example of a virtue approach to moral status may be found in so-called ‘environmental virtue ethics’. Authors who argue for this approach (see, for example, van Wensveen 2000; Cafaro 2004; Sandler 2005; Sandler and Cafaro 2005; Hursthouse 2007; Sandler 2007) argue for the good of non-human entities as a requirement of *human* flourishing.

This turn to virtue and ancient philosophy is not new, but it is relatively new to the field: usually environmental philosophy does not ask “How should one live?”. As said, deontological and utilitarian theorists ask the question concerning right action. Moreover, virtue

ethics as an ethics of character has also long neglected the question of how we should relate to the environment. In response, environmental virtue ethics asks the question ‘what attitudes and dispositions we ought and ought not to have regarding the environment’ (Sandler and Cafaro 2005, p. 2). For virtue ethicists, having a good character in this respect is not only a means to *do the right thing* in relation to the environment; instead, environmental virtue is held to be valuable in itself (p. 3).

A good example of a virtue ethics approach to environmental ethics is Cafaro’s interpretation of Thoreau’s *Walden* (Cafaro 2004), in which he defines environmental virtue as a kind of self-cultivation (Cafaro 2004, p. 6) that requires ‘hard work’ (p. 22) and leads to the good life or human excellence. This excellence should not be defined narrowly in moral terms, as in Christian and modern ethics, but includes ‘physical, intellectual, aesthetic and spiritual excellence’ (p. 46). With Thoreau, he argues against overconsumption (be content with less; excellence should be the goal, not comfort) and warns that technology tends to ‘distance us from wild nature and from our immediate environment’ (p. 93). Instead he recommends freedom, self-reliance, self-knowledge, connection to nature, and philosophical reflectiveness (p. 109). In this way, leading flourishing lives is good for nature. We should aim at ‘joyful relationship’ with nature (p. 139). He contrasts this approach to ethics with Singer’s and Regan’s approach: instead of appealing to the demands of reason, Thoreau and Cafaro appeal to experience:

‘No argument about general ethical principles, or the essential nature of pigs or chickens, can take the place of actually visiting a modern factory farm and seeing how cruelly the animals are raised.’ (Cafaro 2004, p. 145)

Thus, Cafaro suggests that, if we had to slaughter an animal ourselves, we would most likely become miserable. We would *feel* that it was not right. The punishment for vice is not external but internal to the activity and the experience. In this sense, Thoreau is right that ‘the penalty is simply to *be* immoral and unjust’ (p. 69). And, if we live the good life, we also have a good feeling.

‘The simplest messages in *Walden* are to get outside, use your limbs, and delight in your senses. Run, walk, swim, sweat. Taste the sweetness of the year’s first huckleberries and feel the juice dribble down your chin.’ (Cafaro 2004, p. 155)

Ideals and principles can have a role in ethics, but we must try them in life; this is what Cafaro calls an ‘experimental virtue ethics’ (p. 222). Justification comes to us ‘within our own experience’ (p. 225). We are called to live our philosophy. Informed by virtue ethics and a good shot of romanticism, which connects ethics to personal commitment, feeling and flourishing, such an environmental virtue ethics seems to offer an attractive alternative to standard environmental ethics.

**AQ1** This ‘environmental virtue ethics’ draws our attention to an important problem with standard theories: they tend to be very abstract. This prevents the experiential processes promoted by Cafaro. Paradoxically, standard environmental ethics is at its best when it is *not* very principled and abstract but ‘down to earth’, when it lets people experience what they are doing. As Nigel Pleasants writes about Singer’s influential book *Animal Liberation* in his discussion of Marx and Wittgenstein:

‘When Singer succeeds, it is by getting people to *see* what they actually do, or are implicated in doing, to their fellow creatures [...]. In a word, then, *Animal Liberation* works not by teaching people [theory] but by getting them to look at and acknowledge what they do – or what is done for them – to animals.’ (Pleasants in Kitching and Pleasants 2002, p. 176)

As I will argue in part II, when I discuss Heidegger and Wittgenstein in order to develop a different approach, what is needed are indeed different ways of seeing and doing. In so far as it emphasizes experience and experiment, and avoids reification of virtues by not seeing them as abstract moral principles, virtue ethics is partly compatible with the approach I defend in this book (as it is with Deweyan pragmatism) and can reinvigorate environmental ethics and animal ethics.

Virtue ethics is also a worthwhile approach to ethics of information technology. For example, it has been applied to the issue of violent computer games (McCormick 2001; Coeckelbergh 2007) and it can be applied to other ethical issues in ‘virtual’ contexts as well, such as virtual child pornography. The advantage is that it allows us to say what may be wrong with abusing a *virtual* entity. Whereas deontological and utilitarian theories cannot make a strong case against abuse of such entities (at best they can employ an indirect argument: it is wrong only if real humans are abused for the purpose of creating virtual entities), virtue ethics directs our moral attention to potential harm to character on the part of the real, *human* player, porn consumer, and so on. Again, as in environmental virtue ethics, the moral status of the subject is at

stake – regardless of the moral or ontological status of the (virtual or natural) object.

However, virtue ethics and communitarianism have problems of their own. First, one needs to know what the virtues are. It risks making a circular argument: *x* is wrong (or living in an *x* way is not good) since it is not virtuous to do so and being virtuous means not doing *x* or not living in an *x* way. For example, strategies to specify environmental virtue rely on known inter-human virtues (e.g. humility, patience, temperance, and so on – which all have corresponding *vices*), benefit to agents, considerations of human excellence, or study of role models (for an overview see Sandler and Cafaro 2005, pp. 3–6), but there seems to be no further justification for selecting particular interpersonal values (and why they are *virtues*), for saying why something constitutes a *benefit* at all, for why human excellence depends on humans being ecological beings, or for why some role models really are role models, why the character of these persons is virtuous. It seems that views of what constitutes virtue and of what humans are must be taken for granted in order to start the environmental virtue ethics arguments. There is no ‘deeper’ justification.

Virtue ethicists could reply, perhaps inspired by Deweyan pragmatism, that we should give up this quest for justification if it means finding an ethical rock bottom outside experience. The benefit and value of a particular character and a particular way of life are experienced by those who have that character and live in that way. Consider Cafaro’s example again: quite apart from any external rule, we *experience* that slaughtering animals is a vice.

However, next to this problem of *justification* the theory faces at least two problems of *application*: it is not clear in relation to which entities we should exercise virtue (to all humans, to all animals, to all entities?) and it is not clear what the application of the relevant virtue to that entity consists in. This is a harder problem and cannot be easily solved by an appeal to experience. For example, should we behave benevolently towards bacteria? And does living a virtuous and flourishing life require us to refrain from eating meat? Deontological and utilitarian theories also face these problems, but, based on their properties-approach, have a clear answer (which, as I have argued, is problematic). Can virtue ethics avoid a properties-approach?

Unfortunately, virtue ethics, with its focus on human character, has to provide the same type of properties-based justification, but related to properties of humans instead of properties of non-humans: it has to argue that it is *our* ontological status which warrants the moral status

it ascribes to humans. As said, virtue ethicists typically rely on a view of human nature in order to define human excellence. In the neo-Aristotelian version, virtue ethics is rooted in a view of humans as rational and political animals – the latter meaning that humans can only develop themselves and flourish as part of a community (see, for example, Hursthouse 1999; MacIntyre 1999). This raises questions such as: Can we maintain Aristotle’s essentialist view of human nature?<sup>1</sup> How does this view relate to contemporary understanding of human nature influenced by evolutionary biology? But, whatever their justificatory basis (that is, whatever view of human nature), virtue ethicists still have to answer the question of what this means for our treatment of animals, nature, robots, virtual entities and other non-humans. Moreover, as van Wensveen suggests (in Sandler and Cafaro 2005, p. 26), a clear idea of *how* things should be changed is usually missing. She writes:

‘Calls to respect nature, to change our dominating attitudes, to be frugal, careful, and wise, tend to remain just that: calls. Usually they are not followed by a detailed analysis of how heeding them will bring about the desired social change.’ (Van Wensveen in Sandler and Cafaro 2005, p. 26)

Furthermore, there is the problem of motivation. Van Wensveen supposes that our ‘dominating attitudes’ can be changed. But why should people be *motivated* at all to adopt a different attitude? Unless calls for change are psychologically endorsed and socially realised, environmental virtue ethics will remain a philosophical theory or a moralist call.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, in an Aristotelian view of ethics (as opposed to a Stoic view), virtue is not sufficient for human good. As Sandler notes, ‘virtue is necessary but not sufficient for human flourishing’ since it also depends on circumstances beyond our control (Sandler in Sandler and Cafaro 2005, p. 217). This is the so-called problem of ‘external goods’: are they necessary for human flourishing or can we be ethical saints in the face of hardship and bad luck? I believe this question is particularly relevant to environmental virtue ethics, since much what happens to the ‘environment’ is not, or is only partly, the result of human action. Consider climate change: even if it makes sense to talk about such a thing as ‘climate change’, and even if this is partly and significantly due to human actions, then human environmental virtue alone is probably not sufficient to ‘change climate change’.

However, even if virtue ethics had good ontology-based/properties-based arguments, even if it could deal with its epistemological problems, and even if it had a (more) convincing answer to the four mentioned problems of justification, application, motivation, social change and 'external goods',<sup>3</sup> there remains a tricky problem with regard to virtue ethics' view of moral status: it remains *indirect*, that is, it is not directly concerned with the good of the object of moral status. Environmental virtue is about *human* flourishing (the aim) and *human* virtue (valuable in itself), not about the flourishing of the non-human entities, which are not understood as having intrinsic value. If we have the intuition that a justification of moral status should at least *also* have its source in the good of the entity in question (an intuition shared by some environmental virtue ethicists<sup>4</sup> but also by deontologists and utilitarians), something is missing here. Moral consideration seems entirely rooted in the moral subject.

The challenge for a more comprehensive theory of moral status, then, is to account for the fact that we humans *give* moral status to entities while at the same time accounting for the intuition that the moral status of an entity is at least partly related to something *about that entity*. Given the problems indicated in the previous pages, a further requirement is that this aim should be achieved without relying on a properties-based account – a requirement we would fail to meet if we argued that non-human entities also have intrinsic value. This seems to be a hard, if not impossible, task indeed. However, I hope to make some significant steps towards a solution in the next chapters, in which I will continue to develop the phenomenological–hermeneutical argument I started in this chapter by exploring a relational and transcendental approach to moral status.

Finally, as I said previously, it seems that environmental virtue ethics faces a problem of *motivation*. Even if we could identify, justify and apply the environmental virtues (and if we knew *to whom or to what* they apply, if we knew to whose flourishing a virtuous person should be responsive), then there would still be a gap between knowledge and action: we recognize the need for a different relation to nature, for different practice, but we fail to act upon that knowledge.

One could try to solve this problem by means of imagination. In its neo-Stoic version, this would involve one contemplating the *logos* of the universe and expanding one's imagination from the human to the non-human (to 'nature'). In its romantic version, this might involve *feeling* the unity of all living beings, the harmony of 'nature'. Both uses of the imagination would allow us to ascribe moral status to



entities beyond the human world. However, as I will argue in Part II, such moral thinking is in danger of *detaching* and *disengaging* us from the world. Moreover, in terms of moral epistemology, the very way the motivation problem is formulated rests on the misleading assumption that there is ‘first’ a moral *logos* (which can be contemplated or felt) and ‘then’ action. In Part II I will use the notion of skill to argue that this assumption should be abandoned in favour of a different view of moral knowledge and a different view of the relation between virtue and technology.

### 2.3. Community

Today virtue ethics is often interpreted as being concerned with individual character. But originally – that is, at the time Aristotle lived – virtue would have been strongly connected to the community. Hence virtue ethics is not necessarily about the moral status of the human individual, but about the ‘moral status’ of individuals *as members of a community*. Let me briefly discuss Book I of Aristotle’s *Politics* in order to explore ancient communitarian thinking as an alternative to the individualist–contractarian approach outlined in the first chapter. Thus, the point is not to endorse or criticize his particular status ascriptions, but to briefly examine and learn from his general approach to virtue and moral status.

For Aristotle, humans are political animals, that is, animals that live in a *polis*. Aristotle writes that the political community aims ‘at the highest good’ (1252a6). It seems that what matters for him is the moral status of the community and its members. Within the community Aristotle makes distinctions between different ‘elements’. Within the community, each has its role and status.

Aristotle starts his discussion with a history of the state. First there is the union of male and female, a relationship out of which arises the family (1252b10). The family is meant to take care of our daily needs, which it does by cultivating the land, using an ox (if the family is poor) or a slave (if the family is rich). When several families unite they form a village; several villages unite in a larger community. Then Aristotle draws an important distinction: for the *polis*, the aim is no longer merely sustaining life but the *good* life: ‘originating in the bare needs of life, and continuing in existence for the sake of a good life’ (1252b30). He calls this evolution ‘natural’, and hence he can say that ‘man is by nature a political animal’ (1253a3–4). He who is without a state is an ‘outcast’, an ‘isolated piece’ (1253a5–6).

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With regard to moral status, Aristotle mainly talks about different classes of humans. For example, he makes distinctions between master and slave, husband and wife, and father and children (1253b and following pages), based on the kind of soul they have. An exception is a distinction he makes between humans and non-political animals: man has ‘the gift of speech’, with which he can make moral distinctions, rather than ‘mere voice’ which is ‘but an indication of pleasure or pain’ (1253a10–13).<sup>5</sup>

Thus, we have properties-based reasoning here: speech is the morally relevant property. Another important property is the faculty of deliberation. Aristotle argues that the kind of rule differs according to the ‘parts of the soul’ that are ‘present in different degrees’:

‘For the slave has no deliberative faculty at all; the woman has, but it is without authority, and the child has, but it is immature.’ (1260a12–15)

Aristotle combines this kind of reasoning with a non-individualistic approach. According to him, the state is ‘clearly prior to the family and to the individual, since the whole is of necessity prior to the part’ (1253a19–20). His argument for this claim is that ‘the individual, when isolated, is not self-sufficing; and therefore he is like a part in relation to the whole’ (26–27) since we are social animals:

‘But he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god: he is no part of a state. A social instinct is implanted in all men by nature [...]’ (1253a27–30)

Thus, Aristotle does not think that there is a kind of ‘state of nature’ that is unsocial and in which individuals must try to become self-sufficient or set up society as a security structure; for him society and its laws are the *natural* destination of mankind. Only in the *polis* can men achieve the good life, become fully human. Community itself has a *moral* quality. This is a difference from the individualist–contractarian approach: the entity is not stripped of its relations with other entities; on the contrary, these relations are crucial to its moral development. Freedom does not mean negative freedom, being protected from interference by the state, but the freedom to be a member of the state as a condition for enjoying the good life. It is not about respecting rights but respecting one’s proper function in the whole.

Aristotle is concerned with humans here; hence this approach remains anthropocentric in a strong, moral sense: what counts is the moral status of humans. Moreover, his justification is as property-based as any other standard justification. What we end up with here is a picture of the well-ordered society: the picture of the body of the state with all the members of the body being assigned a specific place, based on their properties. But there is an important difference from the approach discussed in Chapter 1. With Aristotle, the 'moral status' question changes to a non-individualistic one. The question is not about the moral status of an individual entity but about the moral *development* of men-in-relation, that is, men as members of the *community*, which he claims is 'prior' to the individual. His 'moral status question' is not 'What is the moral status of entities of class *c*?' but 'Are entities of class *c* included in the moral-political community, and if so, what place do they have in that community?' This makes the question about moral status a social-political question rather than an individual-ethical question: it is about the boundaries and constitution of the social.

This is one way we can move towards what I will call a 'relational' approach, although it remains property-based. Fortunately, the Aristotelian view is not the only possible alternative; I will discuss more ways in the next chapters. I will also indicate problems with the 'communitarian' approach in general. For example, Aristotle, like many of his contemporary followers, is not concerned with the moral status of non-humans and is very 'anthropocentric' in this sense. But here we have an example of a non-individualistic, albeit property-based, way of thinking about moral status, which is at the same time sensitive to historical and material conditions.

### 3

## Relations: Communitarian and Metaphysical

In the previous chapters the initial question ‘What is the moral status of entities?’ has been reformulated: asking about moral status is asking about the boundaries of the social. In this chapter and in the next two chapters, I would like to further develop this argument and slowly move on to a different research question: how should we *relate* to (other) entities?

Leaving aside for a moment what I have said about appearance in the previous chapter, let me recapitulate what I have done so far. Faced with epistemological and other problems, I have tried to distance myself from an individualist, properties-based account of moral status and its related individualist–contractarian definition of the social. After considering attempts to change the unit of analysis and attempts to expand the social contract, I turned to virtue ethics as an alternative approach to moral status and to communitarianism as an alternative view of the social. It turned out that these theories, as well as having problems of their own, did not really manage to move away from a properties-based approach: they ‘only’ shifted the focus from the properties of the receiver of moral status (‘the object’) to the properties of the giver of moral status, the moral status ascriber (‘the subject’). While I ask the reader to keep in mind this shift from object to subject – I will need it in Part II – the approach remains properties-based.

An alternative approach, then, may be to redefine the social in a radically different way: in the next pages, I will explore the view that the social is neither a matter of individuals being ‘prior’ nor a matter of the community being ‘prior’, but a matter of *relations*. In other words, it is time to turn to a more relational theory of moral status, a theory which naturally involves – or so it seems – a relational ontology.

The term 'relational' here is vague and allows many interpretations. What do I mean by it? There are several potential candidates for a relational view.

### 3.1. Objections to communitarianism and collectivism

One candidate which should not be rejected too soon is – once again – communitarianism. As my brief discussion of Aristotle's view in the *Politics* has suggested, communitarianism is relational in the sense that it leaves behind an individualist view of society and emphasizes communal relations. In theory, it even moves beyond individual–society dualism. Communitarians such as MacIntyre (1984) and Taylor (1989) show that personal virtue and the building of a moral community go hand in hand, that there is no fundamental difference between fostering personal morality and fostering the morality of the community. Neither the community nor the members of the community are mere means to an end; they are ends in themselves. Indeed, if, as Aristotle argued, we are like members of a body, then this seems to amount to a holistic view of the relation between individuals and community, in which neither the whole nor the part takes ontological or moral priority.<sup>1</sup> If the communitarian view is conceptualized in this way, then it seems that, whatever else may be said about it, it is a *relational* theory. If we are political animals, then the moral status of the person is defined in a relational way.

However, in practice communitarianism has often become *collectivist*, in which case it tends to see the members of the community as mere means to the communal end and in which case only the whole counts (the body), not the parts (the members of the body). Moreover, both the Aristotelian version and the collectivist version of communitarianism once again rely on properties: properties of men *qua* human beings and properties of the *collective* are the basis of communitarian moral status: the moral status of the member of the community and the collective moral status of the community.

The collectivist version tends to grow not only in some groups but also in larger wholes; it seems inherent in state nationalism and therefore to all political entities that act as 'nation states'. What counts is not the moral status of the citizen but the moral status of the nation state, which is held to be based on its quasi-eternal properties. Nationalism de-historicizes the political community in the sense that it does not understand its current form as the result of historical processes. Instead, the nation appears as a non-historical, fixed entity with

its own ontological status and with a certain 'character'. The nation is assumed to have intrinsic features and an essence. In this way, the nation becomes a kind of 'individual', and international relations are seen in contractarian terms: the nation state (its status, its interests, etc.) is ontologically, morally and politically prior to individuals, to relations between individuals, to relations between states, and to relations with international organizations.

In addition, the 'body' is made so large that it no longer matters to the whole if some members are cut off; only the *head* of state cannot be replaced. This is why democracy is always a threat to nationalism (and why a democratic *nation* is a contradiction in terms): in the Cartesian-nationalist perception, it is unthinkable that the members take over command; each organ and each part of the 'body politic' has its proper function. (Hence in this sense fascism and Nazism are 'natural' outgrowths of modern nationalism and its Aristotelian roots; these ideologies are not bombshells alien to the development of Western thinking, but are rooted in it.)

The collectivist interpretation of communitarianism is also a danger for environmental virtue ethics. Instead of taking seriously the very term 'environment' and understanding entities as standing-always-in-relation-to-their-environment (see, for example, my discussion of Ingold's view in Chapter 5), environmental virtue ethics can yield to the temptation of seeing 'nature' as a collective, as something that stands apart from us or of which we are members, and which has individual-like properties. Therefore, both communitarianism-as-nationalism and collectivist environmentalism (for which reason it is rightly called eco-fascism) are not *really* relational theories in the sense I wish to elaborate. Their starting point is collective properties, and what matters is the moral status of that collective (e.g. of 'nature', of 'the earth'), not the relation between entities or between beings-in-relation.

Even if the communitarian approach to moral status were to be purified of its collectivist-organicist tendencies, it tends to be 'relational' in a weak sense only. Of course, according to Aristotle we are political animals, that is, thoroughly social beings. However, neither in Aristotle nor in his contemporary followers is this genuinely relational claim followed by a full-blown moral relationalism. Bound up with Aristotelian essentialism, it is assumed that there are intrinsic, inalienable features of an entity (i.e. the human and the community) and that moral status is based on these features. Although communitarianism considers relations between entities (e.g. the relation between the citizen and the state), its relational approach tends to stop at the boundaries of

the entity: the entity itself is understood in a non-relational way. The moral focus is on the (properties of the) human being and her community. The *relata* rather than relations are at the centre of the theory.

Note that this judgement does not fundamentally change if, like MacIntyre, we would emphasize that we are not only *political* animals but also political *animals*, in other words, when we would stress the biological nature of humans. In *Dependent Rational Animals* (1999) MacIntyre revises his project of *After Virtue*: he says that he 'was in error in supposing an ethics independent of biology to be possible' (MacIntyre 1999, p. x). According to MacIntyre, an account of the virtues must explain 'how that form of life is possible for beings who are biologically constituted as we are, by providing us with an account of our development towards and into that form of life. That development has as its starting point our initial animal condition'. In particular, MacIntyre recognizes our 'animal condition' by reckoning with human vulnerability as the 'central feature of human life' (p. x). We are dependent on others; not only in early childhood or in old age, but also when we are injured, ill or disabled. Therefore, MacIntyre proposes to view the moral subject not as an independent, rational and healthy agent, but as a rational *and* vulnerable, dependent human being. Humans are rational animals, but he points out that this does not necessarily imply that rationality is unrelated to our animal nature, and that Aristotle did not think this property separates us from non-human animals (pp. 5–6). MacIntyre shows that, although Aristotle put too much stress on self-sufficiency and did not give 'due recognition to affliction and to dependence' (p. 7), we can still construct an Aristotelian view of human being that recognizes both our relations to (human) others and our biological nature and vulnerabilities.

In this way, MacIntyre does not only sketch a more comprehensive picture of Aristotle's view, but also opens the door to thinking about the moral status of non-human animals from within a communitarian framework. He writes about the intelligence of dolphins and suggests that there is no sharp line between human and non-human animals. He criticizes those who make such a sharp line: they single out a particular human capacity such as having thoughts, argue that this depends on language, and then conclude that non-human animals do not have the capacity since they do not have language. But, as MacIntyre argues, we ascribe to some animals beliefs, thoughts, feelings and reasons for action. For example, dolphins appear to act purposely toward goals. MacIntyre suggests that language is not necessary for thinking. Of course there is a difference: humans can *evaluate* reasons, for example.

But to a significant extent we behave in the same way as other intelligent animals and we share a lot with them. MacIntyre wants to preserve ‘the significance of the continuity and resemblance between some aspects of the intelligent activities of nonhuman animals and the language-informed practical rationality of human beings’ (p. 50). Humans have a ‘second nature’ but this second nature is a (partial) transformation of our first *animal* nature.

For the problem of moral status, MacIntyre’s view seems to imply that we should give a higher moral status to some intelligent animals (e.g. dolphins) than we traditionally would do on the basis of a sharp human/non-human distinction. He might agree with Shapiro that moral agency is a matter of degree and that we should not underestimate the mental lives of other animals (Shapiro 2006). However, while MacIntyre offers a version of communitarianism that is neither collectivist nor speciesist in a strict sense, and therefore provides people who wish to remain within the Aristotelian tradition with an interesting alternative to other versions of communitarianism, it still remains roughly properties-based. By pointing to shared properties of humans and non-humans, MacIntyre challenges views that make a strict distinction between the two; but he shares with those views a properties-based approach. In the next chapters, I will explore more relational views – including views that centre on natural *relations* between humans and non-humans (Chapter 4), rather than on our animal *nature* and other natures, however similar or ‘transformed’ those natures may be.

### 3.2. Combining properties with relations?

In the previous section I said that properties-based views put too much emphasis on the *relata* as opposed to the relations. But is this really an either/or question? One may object that I should not present the problem as a choice between the properties-view and relationalism, but that, instead, we could try to combine the two approaches. In particular, one may object that we could hold a *pluralist* view on how to approach moral status or one that *integrates* the two approaches in one theory. Before going ahead and arguing for what I regard as truly relational views, therefore, I shall discuss these alternative proposals, which I find in Warren’s multi-criterial view of moral status and in Søraker’s two-component theory of moral status.

In her book on moral status, Warren criticizes what she describes as ‘uni-criterial’ theories of moral status, which use life, sentience or personhood as a criterion (Warren 1997). She argues that one of



these criteria may be a *necessary* but not a *sufficient* criterion. Inspired by Callicott's interpretation of Leopold's 'Land Ethic' (see the next chapter) and feminist ethics (Noddings 1984), she proposes to take into account relational properties: an entity's moral status *also* depends on its social role and its role within a 'biotic community' and on emotional connections between entities. *Next to* intrinsic properties, she argues, we should also give weight to social, emotional and biosystemic relationships (Warren 1997, p. 19). If human beings do not only belong to (human) social communities but also to biological communities, as Leopold argued, then we should also ascribe moral status to members of those communities in virtue of the relations between them. If we live in 'mixed communities', as Midgley put it (see below), then these relations should serve as moral criteria. However, she criticizes what she calls 'biosocial theory' for having a uni-criterial approach. She argues that 'our obligations to living things, sentient beings, and moral agents are not entirely contingent upon the prior existence of social or ecological relationships between ourselves and them' (Warren 1997, p. 123). In response to Callicott, who rejects an eclectic approach for not meeting the demands of theoretical unity, coherency and self-consistency, she objects that a 'biosocial' theory would deny moral status to 'persons and sentient beings that are not co-members of our social or biological communities' (p. 133). Moreover, Warren wants to distinguish between stronger and less strong obligations. For example, in line with Noddings (1984), she says that some relationships are caring relationships or love relationships, which are more 'complete' and give rise to stronger obligations – although she objects to Noddings's caring-based theory that 'we cannot always be bound by the limits of our empathetic capacities' (p. 146). Therefore, she concludes, we need a theory that puts forward several principles: respect for life, anti-cruelty, agent's rights, the ecological principle, the interspecific principles (these are principles concerning members of mixed social communities: some animals could get moral status on the basis their social relationships with humans), and the respect principle. We should consider all these principles and balance them. For example, according to Warren animals should not get equal moral status but *some* moral status if they are part of 'mixed communities'. According to Warren, 'only a multi-criterial account of moral status can incorporate the sound ethical considerations that underlie each of the uni-criterial accounts, while avoiding the distortions of moral common sense that result from the attempt to make all valid judgements about moral status follow from one single principle' (p. 177).

Warren's approach tries to take seriously the moral significance of relations and is methodologically pluralist. Therefore, it is better than uni-criterial and non-relational approaches. However, she pays too little attention to the relation between the different criteria. It seems as if Warren thinks criteria can simply be added, combined and balanced on a case-by-case basis, but that nothing general can be said about the relations between the criteria. In other words, I agree with Callicott that eclecticism is theoretically unsatisfactory.

In this respect, Søraker's approach is more interesting: he tries to *integrate* the non-relational and relational views in a theory of moral status that has two components. In his chapter on the moral status of information and information technologies (Søraker 2007), he distinguishes between moral status grounded in intrinsic properties (which he calls 'moral standing') and moral status grounded in relational properties (Søraker 2007, p. 15). He unifies both criteria in a two-component theory. This allows him to say, as Warren does, that moral status of entities comes in degrees. For example, he claims that non-sentient entities have no moral standing (they lack free will, reason, and linguistic competence, self-consciousness, and the ability to experience pain and pleasure) but they have still (a lower degree of) moral status, for example by 'being an irreplaceable and constitutive part of someone's practical identity' (p. 15). He gives the example of a notebook and the information in that notebook: such information and system might be 'a central part of [one's] identity as a cognitive agent' (p. 13) and if this is the case, he argues, we should respect that notebook since we have to respect the person's practical identity. Often technology is not purely instrumental, he claims, but part of our practical identity.

The last point about practical identity affiliates his theory with indirect views of moral status: the reason why we should treat an entity well does not lie in the moral status of that entity but in the moral status of us, humans. Søraker's notion of practical identity is Kantian (based on Korsgaard), not MacIntyrean or Aristotelian, but all the same his indirect argument is vulnerable to the objections I offered against the virtue ethics approach to moral status: it remains property-based (here: the properties we have as Kantian agents) and anthropocentric.

However, this indirect argument is not a necessary part of a two-component theory. We could also ascribe relational status to entities without moral standing on the basis of other relational properties, for example that they are part of an ecosystem (see also below). If we do so, then it seems a two-component theory like Søraker's (or a multi-criteria theory like Warren's) can capture and integrate two widespread

intuitions: (1) persons (or humans) have more moral status than non-persons (or non-humans) and (2) moral status partly depends on relations.

However, both Warren's approach and Søraker's hesitate to draw more radical conclusions from the claim that the relations matter morally. They acknowledge that an entity's relations are relevant to the moral status of that entity, but they remain within the paradigm of the properties-view. By holding that an entity has relational and non-relational properties, they do not go all the way with relationalism.

### 3.3. Towards a phenomenological argument

There is an entirely different way to forge a combinatory view. Consider what Aristotle says about relations to slaves in the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

AQ1 'But neither is there friendship towards a horse or an ox, nor to a slave qua slave. For there is nothing common to the two parties; the slave is a living tool and the tool a lifeless slave. *Qua* slave then, one cannot be friends with him. But *qua* man one can; for there seems to be some justice between any man and any other who can share in a system of law or be a party to an agreement; therefore there can also be friendship with him in so far as he is a man.' (1161b2–7)

The definition of friendship as agreement prefigures modern contractarian thinking, and traditional dualistic thinking about moral status is evident here (humans versus animals, masters versus slaves). His definition of a slave as a 'living tool' and a tool as a 'lifeless slave' is also interesting in the light of the question regarding the moral status of robots. But here I am interested in a different issue: pay attention to how Aristotle manages to allow for friendships with slaves *in spite of* the (lower) moral status they have in his view (a living tool): by using the adverb '*qua*', he distinguishes between the slave '*qua* slave' and the slave '*qua* man', that is, he distinguishes between two ways of perceiving or *interpreting* the same entity, between two ways the entity may *appear* to us. The same entity may appear as a living tool (a slave), but also as a man. This prefigures phenomenological introduced in the previous chapter. I will continue this line of thinking in Part II, but let me already briefly explain what I think a phenomenological approach might imply for thinking about moral status.

The main idea is that moral status is not a matter of the properties of the entity (relational or not) but has to do with the way the entity

appears to us. This implies that we can come to view particular animals and particular robots in a ‘dual’ or ‘multiple’ way. For example, a chimpanzee may appear as a non-human animal but also as a person. A patient in a hospital context may appear as a body – a medicalized and hence objectified body, an object of medical science – but also as a person or a friend, partner, parent, and so on, depending on the particular relation one has with the person. An embryo may appear as a bunch of cells (an object) but also as someone’s child, again depending on the kind of relation we have to the embryo. An intelligent humanoid robot may appear as a machine (an object, a thing) but also as a *living* tool; or it may appear as a human, an other (a social other) or a subject. It may even appear as a companion, partner, friend, and so on – depending on the relation we have to it and on the context. These entities have a ‘dual’ or ‘multiple’ ontological and moral status, depending on appearance-in-context and on the relations on which basis that appearance is constructed. Their status is ‘unstable’ or ‘multistable’, to use Ihde’s postphenomenological idiom (Ihde 1990).

In Part II, therefore, I discuss the linguistic, social, technological, spiritual and spatial relations that must be presupposed when we ascribe moral status. Moral status is no longer understood as something objective that stands apart from (the rest of) our experiences and activities. Instead, it is seen as something that grows out of the experiential–practical relational ground that is prior to our linguistic–scientific and linguistic–philosophical conceptualizations. But this argument is only conceivable if we first accept that there is no ontological stability in the form of an object-reality that is entirely disconnected from the subject.

In contrast, Warren and Søraker base their view on an ontology that allows for different kinds of properties, but not different ways of viewing the entity. Relational and non-relational properties can be found on the same, flat (and only) ontological level. There is not a hint of (multiple) perspectives, interpretations, angles, and so on. To use a geometrical metaphor: in this book I propose to move on from a two-dimensional

| Type of ontology   | Object  |
|--|---|
| 1-D ontology or object ontology  | <i>object</i>   |
| 2-D ontology or properties ontology                                      | <i>object + property</i>  |
| 3-D ‘ontology’ (1st level phenomenology)                                 | <i>interpretation</i> (object + property)                               |
| 4-D ‘ontology’ (2nd level phenomenology or transcendental phenomenology) | <i>conditions of possibility</i> (interpretation (object + properties)) |

ontology to a three-dimensional and four-dimensional ontology, if the label 'ontology' and this metaphor are still appropriate at all.

AQ3

Moreover, if one wants to avoid the view of relations as a kind of property, one should not view a relation as a kind of *entity* either. A relational view risks viewing relations as a kind of separate entity, which is somehow situated 'between' the (non-relational) entities, but this way of viewing relations is misguided. Without venturing too deep into the metaphysics of relations, this point can be clarified as follows: relations are not things. They are neither one of the *relata* nor are they of a different kind, that is, a different kind of thing. Just as things cannot be considered apart from their relations, relations cannot be conceived apart from the *relata*. As Bradley put it in the language of his nineteenth-century metaphysics: every relation 'essentially penetrates the being of its terms' (Bradley 1897, p. 347). In this sense, a relation is never 'external' (p. 513) since that would be 'psychologically meaningless' (p. 521).<sup>2</sup>

If we must use this vocabulary at all, we may say that relations are 'prior' to the *relata* (see also my reference to Callicott in Chapter 4), in the sense that they make *possible* the *relata* as phenomena: they belong to the domain of the conditions of possibility (and could there be a relation that is more 'internal'?). I will develop this thought in Part II: I will argue that linguistic, social-cultural, technological-material, spiritual and spatial relations are conditions that make moral status ascription possible.

Leaving aside these remarks for now, let me conclude from this chapter that neither communitarian indirect arguments nor existing integrative views go beyond properties ontology. They recognize relations, but understand relations as a property (or as an object). In order to construct a truly relational view, therefore, we must look elsewhere. In the next pages I will explore other theoretical avenues that could lead to a 'deep-relational' theory of moral status and of the social, which means, in this book, a theory that recognizes the 'deep' entanglement of the natural and the social ('deeper' than MacIntyre proposed, for example) and that eventually reinterprets moral status in a transcendental-phenomenological way.

To construe such a relational view, we need to explore and stretch the boundaries of our thinking, which can be done by engaging with non-Western and non-modern views (see, for example, Latour and Ingold in Chapter 6) – keeping in mind, of course, that there is no such thing as *the* West or pure 'modernism': cultures are always hybrid by definition (for example, contemporary African and Asian countries are infused

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with Western values). For example, it seems that East Asian (China, Korea, Japan) and so-called 'aboriginal' cultures (current Australia) involve relational ontologies.

However, there are views that claim to be relational and are much 'closer' to today's Western culture: (deep) ecology and (a reinterpretation of) Marxism. What can these views teach us about moral status?

# 4

## Relations: Natural and Social

### 4.1. Ecology and ecophilosophy: natural relations and the biotic community

'Ecology' can mean at least two different things: it can refer to (1) ecology as a *science* (a natural, psychological, social, anthropological or informational science, or combinations of these) and to (2) ecology as 'ecological' normative *philosophy* or ethics, for example 'deep ecology', which does not only refer to a descriptive view of 'nature' (e.g. the 'land' or nature as Mother Earth) but also to a normative view about how we should shape our relations to 'nature'.

*Natural* ecology studies the relations between organisms and their environment at different levels of organization. But there can also be different units of analysis: not just organisms but also humans (human ecology), populations (population ecology), systems (systems ecology) or information (information ecology; see, for example, Floridi 2008).

What we may call 'ecological philosophy' is a kind of environmental philosophy that has its roots in the work of Næss, who introduced the term 'deep ecology' (Næss 1973). As a theory of moral status, it proclaims the inherent worth of non-humans and emphasizes our dependence on these non-humans and, more generally, on the 'ecosystem' or 'ecosphere'. It rejects the traditional Western hierarchy of value based on properties such as consciousness or reason. It tries to be non-anthropocentric and is committed to 'biospheric egalitarianism': all living things have the same (intrinsic) value. It is relational in the sense that it sees living things (organisms) as nodes in a biospheric network and as *constituted* by these relations to other living things. Næss's view is often connected to Leopold's 'Land Ethic' (Leopold 1949): Leopold argued for including non-humans in the 'biotic community' (see below).

Another example of an ‘ecological philosophy’ can be found in Midgley’s view of animals (Midgley 1983). According to her, moral consideration should not stop at the species border, since there are multi-species communities (p. 111) or ‘mixed’ communities (p. 112). For example, all human communities have drawn in animals: ‘It is one of the special powers and graces of our species not to ignore others, but to draw in, domesticate and live with a great variety of other creatures’ (p. 111). We relate to them in affective and other ways. Moreover, while our ‘social’ concern is limited to humans, our ‘ecological’ concern is directed to ‘all living things and perhaps to the lifeless world which they inhabit’ (p. 144). For moral status, this view implies that our treatment of non-humans should be based on the relations we already have with them and on the affective and other concerns we already experience.

Both kinds of ‘ecological’ thinking – scientific and philosophical – are relational, but they remain vulnerable to objections similar to those I made to communitarianism.

First, how relational is ecology as science if it maintains strict borders between *relata* and relations? To the extent that it centres on relations *between* organisms, information, and so on but protects its unit of analysis itself from being polluted by relational thinking, it remains relational only in a ‘shallow’ sense. For example, in the natural sciences relations are studied between organisms, genes and their environment, but it seems that the units of analysis (e.g. genes) themselves are not always understood as fundamentally *constituted* and shaped by their relations to the environment. Moreover, to the extent that it prioritizes the whole over the parts, natural ecology is ‘collectivist’ – for example, if it keeps using the concept of ‘nature’ or maintains a strict distinction between organisms and their environment. It also assumes that we can define the boundaries of ‘wholes’. A radically relational theory would not accept such an ontology but would claim that neither the boundary of ‘wholes’ nor the boundaries of the parts of these ‘wholes’ can be clearly defined.

Second, at first sight deep ecology (as a theory of moral status) remains properties-based and is vulnerable to the collectivism objection. It is properties-based since it requires ‘life’ or ‘sentient life’ as a property that warrants moral status. Moreover, it tends to become collectivist and perhaps even totalitarian to the extent that it prioritizes the whole (‘nature’, ‘the Earth’, the biospheric community, the ecosphere, etc.) over the parts (organisms, living entities). Both features meet if the whole, for example nature, is said to have certain essential properties and is treated as an individual.



Midgley's philosophy, by contrast, takes seriously the subjective experiences we have of non-humans like animals and the already existing relations we have with animals. However, the strict distinction she makes between 'social' (with humans or conscious beings) and 'ecological' relations (with other beings) seems arbitrary, especially given the existence of 'mixed communities'. Why not apply the term 'social' to these mixed communities? We will need to further discuss the relation between the social and the natural.

Third, although ecology as science admits a wide range of units of analysis, ecology (in both senses) tends to uphold the distinction between 'nature' (or 'reality') and 'culture' (or 'appearance'). Ecology as science claims that its studies of ecologies show how things really and naturally are, whereas we common humans might see things in a different way; as such, it does not take seriously common knowledge (sometimes called 'folk' knowledge by scientists and philosopher-scientists). And ecology as an environmental philosophy and ethics tends to see 'nature' or 'the Earth' as something pure that stands apart from dirty, polluting and destructive human culture, society and technology. In the next sections I will discuss attempts to shed this problematic assumption.

At first sight, it seems that those who seek a relational view of moral status should not turn to science or to deep ecology. However, we can also give a different interpretation of both ecology as a science and deep ecology. First, although ecology remains non-relational in the senses indicated, it can have a powerful influence on our thinking and our perception – an influence that goes beyond the 'facts'. Thus, it is in its *non-scientific* influence that it contributes most to a relational turn. For example, ecology as a science can give us a different view of the landscape and indeed of morality:

Since ecology focuses upon the relationships between and among things, it inclines its students toward a more holistic vision of the world. Before the rather recent emergence of ecology as a science the landscape appeared to be, one might say, a collection of objects, some of them alive, some conscious, but all the same, an aggregate, a plurality of separate individuals. With this atomistic representation of things it is no wonder that moral issues might be understood as competing and mutually contradictory classes of the 'rights' of separate individuals, each separately pursuing its 'interests'. Ecology has made it possible to apprehend the same landscape as an articulate unity (without the least hint of mysticism or ineffability). (Callicott 1989, p. 22)

Second, deep ecology is not only about 'nature' but also at the same time about society and community. I propose to draw again on Callicott's work to support this point. In his comments on Leopold's Land Ethics, he provides more insight into the metaphysics of deep ecology. He shows that in Leopold's ecology the natural environment is represented as a community (p. 23). Ethics, then, is about ensuring social cooperation by differentiating social from antisocial conduct: 'if one is a member of a cooperative group, community, or society, then one is subject to ethical or moral-like limitations on his freedom of action' (p. 64). The scope of ethics reflects the (perceived) boundaries of society. By extending 'community' to non-human natural entities, Leopold also extends moral status to these entities and, more generally, the scope of morality is extended. If we perceive the land in terms of a biotic community, a correlative land ethic will emerge (pp. 81–82). What matters, then, is the social representation of nature. Only then is an environmental ethic possible (p. 83).

In this way, Callicott does not only show that there is a 'communitarian' aspect in Leopold's thinking – and more generally in deep ecology – but also opens the door to a subjective, *phenomenological* understanding of ethics and of moral status not based on objective properties: an ethics in which 'moral value is not identified with a natural quality objectively present in morally considerable beings; instead, 'it is, as it were, projected by valuing subjects' (Callicott 1989, p. 85). This thought is useful for freeing up a phenomenological avenue for thinking about moral status, since it helps to shift the focus from object to subject. Moreover, while Callicott's interpretation of Leopold, which we could see as a new kind of communitarianism (an 'environmental' communitarianism), may still be vulnerable to the dangers associated with communitarianism and with holism (collectivism and totalitarianism), it attempts to be radically *relational*. (Ecological) relations now have primacy rather than objects (p. 87). In metaphysical language: 'Relations are prior to the things related' (p. 110). For Callicott, this implies that we cannot draw hard boundaries between ourselves and the environment. We come to see ourselves as involved within the living terrestrial environment. We are not a collection of bodies within a 'logico-conceptual order', as Aristotle thought. Rather, the world is our body.<sup>1</sup>

This 'metaphysical' view has ethical implications. For Callicott, ought follows from is (p. 127). If the 'is' is no longer an atomistic picture of the environment (a collection of things) but an understanding of the environment as a community, then we *ought* to preserve the environment, perhaps in the same way as we ought to preserve our body.

For moral status, this means that value is not an objective natural or non-natural property, that there is no 'intrinsic value' if that means 'belonging to the essential nature or constitution of a thing' (p. 160). Yet according to Callicott non-human entities are 'inherently' valuable as members of the biotic community. Value or moral status, in this view, are not properties of an entity but emerge from membership of a community – here the *natural* community. His use of the term 'inherent' seems to refer to being-in-community rather than 'having a moral or property that belongs to the entity'. (This is why Callicott argues that his ethics would have nothing to say about the moral status of extra-terrestrial life forms, at least if they were part of the biotic community.)

Callicott's view, therefore, can be interpreted as an attempt to move beyond the properties view. On the one hand, it retains 'life' as a criterion for moral status. On the other hand, in Callicott's interpretation of deep ecology the argument for moral status is not put in these terms, but is understood as a social, quasi-communitarian argument: morality is related to the social dynamics of a living community (or a community of the living), not to an abstract moral order in which properties are attached to entities. However, understanding the natural environment as a community – identified by Callicott as the justificatory basis of deep ecology – seems still problematic. How *social* are our relations with other entities? We are used to reserving the term 'social' or 'community' for relations between humans. Can we simply equate social with natural relations? Therefore, before elaborating the phenomenological–relational dimension of his view, we need to further analyse the relation between the social and the natural.

#### 4.2. Benton's Marxism: social relations and natural relations

Since ecology is usually concerned with 'nature' and 'natural relations', it remains mysterious how it can say anything about the question of moral status as a question about the boundaries of *society*. Various attempts have been made to reconcile natural and social relations. It seems that the solution proposed by the natural sciences (and ecology as a natural science), and by deep ecology, is simply to subsume social relations under the heading of natural relations. In this view, there is no fundamental difference between social relations and natural relations. Humans are understood as human organisms (science) or as members of

a biotic community (deep ecology); the 'social' is not a separate sphere, since everything is *natural* and all relations are natural. But, while the project of trying to reconcile the natural and the social is valuable, something seems to be missing in this *natural* mono-relationalism: a deeper and richer understanding of the specific way *humans* relate to other humans and their environment as *social* beings. One way to cater for this need is to resort to one of the most powerful theoretical tools we have to understand social relations: Marxism. In this section, therefore, I shall discuss Benton's Marxism, to which I will add a Foucaultian complement.

Benton's approach is a unique attempt to bring together the natural and the social. In *Natural Relations* (1993) Benton argues against views that foreground human powers and abilities over against those of non-human species: he emphasizes that humans and animals have much in common. Benton subscribes to what he calls 'human/animal continuism' (Benton 1993, p. 17). This view does not imply that there are no differences between humans and other species, but objects to ways of thinking about human–animal relations that 'ontologically and morally foreground human-definitive powers over against needs, powers, and liabilities of humans which they share with many other species' (p. 17). Benton endorses a 'non-reductive' naturalism, according to which both humans and other animals are seen as 'part of the order of nature, rather than as ontologically privileged beings' (p. 17).

However, for Benton nature is not opposed to the social. Animals and humans are both part of 'nature', but they are also materially–socially interdependent. Animals are social beings and 'many species are capable of social relations with humans' (p. 15). This might be taken to mean that we engage in relations with pets and other domesticated animals. It may also refer to the fact that even 'wild' or 'natural' habitats are the objects of rights, protection, maintenance, and so on, and that 'wild' animals are in this sense already standing in social relations with humans (p. 67). However, there is a deeper sense in which humans and animals are mutually dependent: they depend on one another for their well-being. Benton draws attention to the moral significance of embodiment and ecological interdependence, for example the need for food:

One aspect of human embodiment – our requirement for food – engages us in social relations and practices which inescapably include animals: as partners in human labour, as objects of labour, and of consumption, as well as competitors for habitats and common sources of food. (Benton 1993, p. 18)

In this deeper, social–material and ecological sense, then, animals are part of the social: ‘animals figure not just marginally but quite centrally within the domain of human social life’ (Benton 1993, p. 18).<sup>2</sup>

In order to elaborate this argument and to further reconcile the natural with the social, Benton develops an interpretation of Marx that highlights the naturalist side of Marxism. He draws attention to the manuscript ‘Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic and Philosophy as a Whole’, in which Marx asserts that human beings are *natural* beings, which means that they do not only exercise active powers, but also suffer and stand in need of a nature outside themselves for satisfying their needs (Benton 1993, p. 45). Like animals, humans are natural, needy creatures (pp. 45–46). They share birth and death, growth and decline, sexuality, need social order, and so on. Of course each has species-specific ways in which these needs are met, but they share the needs.

Moreover, as indicated previously, animals and humans (already) have *social* relations. We use animals to replace human labour, to meet bodily needs, to entertain us, to learn, to make profit, to harm other humans, and so on. For example, in his sociology of human–animal relations, Franklin discusses use of animals in leisure and theory (the ‘zoological gaze’), pets or companion animals, hunting and angling, and animals in meat and livestock industries (Franklin 1999). Thus, humans and animals already stand in social relations to one another, and this means they are socially and ecologically interdependent (Benton 1993, p. 68).

This view allows Benton not only to attend to, and distinguish between, the variety of human–animal relations, but also to *criticize* existing particular social human–animal relations, in particular the practices and structures of these relations and their specific *moral* significance. According to him, intensive stock rearing and animal experimentation constitute ‘systematic abuses of animals’ that deserve our moral concern (p. 69). In itself, this concern is well known. But his social–ecological approach allows Benton to express and justify the concern in a novel way: he makes an argument from social relations rather than an argument from (moral) ontology. As I have shown in Chapter 1, the standard approach relies on properties, on ontological features of the entity in question. Benton, instead, focuses on relations. He explicitly responds to standard animal ethics by contrasting his relational approach to Regan’s (animal rights, see Chapter 1):

Regan proceeds as if the moral status of animals were a function of the kinds of beings they are, independently of the diverse relations in which they stand to human moral agents and their social practices. (Benton 1993, p. 92)

This view is in line with my arguments against the properties view. From his Marxist angle, Benton pays particular attention not only to human needs, but also to the contextual and historical side of morality. He criticizes the liberal tradition that stresses universally valid moral principles and the autonomy of the (human) moral subject, but forgets the Marxist lesson that ‘moral concepts and principles arise in the context of specific, historically transitory social forms’ and that, since dominant moral concepts express the interest of the dominant group in society, it is likely (but, according to Benton at least, not *necessary*) that ‘morality as such has a conservative, order-maintaining, oppressive social function’ (Benton 1993, p. 99–100).

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Note that communitarians would agree with Benton’s contextual and social approach: both socialists and communitarians reject the view of society as a collection of self-sufficient individuals with properties independent of social relations. In Benton’s view, ‘abilities such as language use, reasoning, moral action, and attributes such as personal autonomy have complex social-relational and cultural presuppositions’ (p. 122). This is an interesting divergence from the properties-based view: the morally relevant properties themselves are not ‘natural’ but have social and cultural presuppositions, that is, they are *historical*. (In Part II I will use a different language and claim that the morally relevant properties depend on social–cultural conditions of possibilities.)

This view has implications for the problem of moral change and motivation. For example, Benton employs his view to argue against modern intensive stock rearing. A major problem with the rights approach, he argues, is that an appeal to rights is unlikely to succeed given the organization of the labour process. He writes that the ‘ecologico-socio-technical organization of the labour process’ (Benton 1993, p. 156) puts pressure on us to treat animals as instruments, as things. From this point of view, the organic, psychological and social requirements and needs of the animals appear as obstacles: some needs have to be fulfilled, of course, but only to make sure that the animals do not become ill or destroy themselves. The problem is that in this specific labour process the relation between humans and animals is shaped in such a way that ‘quasi-personal relations’ are obstructed. This is partly an affective, not a rational matter. We cannot simply change the situation by convincing people who work in these farms that they should treat the animals better:

Even if an argument in favour of the rights of animals subjected to these regimes could be made rationally convincing to the human

moral agents involved, the affective conditions under which such a conviction might issue in relevantly altered conduct are liable to be missing. In the absence of long-run, quasi-personal, communicative relations between humans and animals, the affective ties of trust, loyalty, compassion and responsibility cannot develop either. (Benton 1993, p. 159)

Thus, the way the labour process is organized limits the emergence of communicative, trustful relations between these humans and animals. Moreover, the (human) division of labour and the hierarchy of authority ‘diffuses both the causal and the moral responsibility of the individual human agents involved’; individual workers have the feeling there is little they can do to change things (p. 159).

Benton’s social, relational approach allows us to attend to these ‘oppressive’ regimes, that is, to the social–economical dimension of animal ethics. An individual rights approach to animal ethics, combined with an ontological approach that makes strict distinctions between the human (social) world and the animal (non-social) world, obscures that dimension and prevents an analysis along the lines proposed by Benton.

More generally, a properties-based approach faces these limitations. Even a utilitarian focus on animal *suffering* à la Singer, which at first sight seems close to Benton’s Marxist focus on natural needs, views humans and animals mainly as individuals and neglects the social–relational dimensions highlighted by Benton. When it comes to the boundaries of the *social*, it maintains a strict distinction between humans and (non-human) animals, who are excluded from the social, and is therefore unable to promote the interests of ‘factory’ animals in so far as these interests depend on the organization of the labour process.

But the usual strict distinction between humans and animals is also problematic with regard to the interests of humans: humans too ‘have basic interests in virtue of their embeddedness in socio-cultural and ecological webs of interdependence, and in virtue of their embodiment. If these interests are marginalized to the point of exclusion in the main streams of liberal-individualist moral and political thought’ (p. 184), there is also a problem with the moral status of *humans*. Thus, the social and the physical–material are entangled, and this provides us with a different view of the moral status and the morality of humans and animals.

Benton thus applies the ‘classic’ socialist objections to individual rights (see for instance pp.168–193) and to particular ways of organizing

labour processes to animal ethics, but at the same time enriches the standard interpretation of Marxism by drawing attention to the natural dimension of social–material relations. He recognizes humans as ‘embedded’ but also as ‘embodied’ (p. 179). The upshot is that, in contrast to abstract ‘animal rights’ or utilitarian views, Benton is able to analyse the problem of moral status and its objects (e.g. animals) in context and offer a similar, compelling view of the *human* on the way.

Bringing into the account [...] the necessity for humans to conduct their organic need-meeting activity in social co-operation with others, under authoritative forms of normative regulation, and within affordances provided by their ecological conditions and contexts, calls into question the level of abstraction at which the individual of the liberal-individualist view is conceptualized. (Benton 1993, p. 179)

Thus, Benton’s answer to liberal individualism is not collectivism, as in socialist or communist interpretations of Marx, but relationalism.

Foucault allows us to refine and complement Benton’s Marxist analysis and hence the form of relationalism I try to elaborate: the reason why our relations with animals and with humans are structured in a particular way derives not only from explicit ‘macro’ structures related to class domination, capitalism, and labour processes in factories, but also from more subtle ‘micro’ forms of disciplining and self-disciplining. Benton’s analysis of the affective aspect of the organization of labour supports a step in this direction: the point is not that someone tells workers to abuse animals; instead, the psychology of workers is shaped by the social–material structures that are in place. (Place must be taken quite literally here, as I will also argue in Chapter 11: here the moral division goes together with a spatial separation between animals and humans, and between animals inside the factory farm and animals outside the farm.)

Foucault’s analysis of disciplining allows us to say more about what is going on here. He studied how people are disciplined in hospitals and prisons. For example, in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) he contrasts two ways of punishment: repression of the people by public displays of torture and executions versus a particular, modern form of disciplining: people are given the feeling that they are watched by professionals (the live under a gaze), which makes them exercise a form of self-disciplining. This is made possible by material structures, for example by Bentham’s Panopticon: a prison where guards can watch the prisoners from a central position but they remain invisible.

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More generally, modern society knows many invisible forms of control by professionals.

Applied to people working in intensive stock rearing, this means that the oppression of animals is maintained not by 'forcing' workers to abuse animals, but by systems of control that are at least partly invisible but nevertheless discipline the workers: they feel themselves being 'watched' by professionals inside and outside the farm. A farmer or a vet may be *told* by someone (not) to harm an animal but may also feel under pressure to do it without explicit command, or in spite of opposition against it, due to the social-material environment (s)he works in. (Therefore, those who, following Heidegger, compare factory farms and other parts of the food industry to concentration camps may be right in a double, perhaps unexpected sense: not only are the *animals* treated like prisoners in the camp, the *humans* who work in the factory farm are under a similar regime as we can assume the workers in concentration camps were: they were not only following commands but were also working under the more subtle *modern* forms of disciplining Foucault described so well. Their cruel acts often did not require explicit command.)

Benton's Marxism, however, remains modern and does not explore relevant insights offered by (other traditions in) twentieth-century thinking. It brings together the natural and the social, but remains within the categories of modern thinking. Let us now consider two non-modern alternative ways of defining the social. Both approaches are rooted in insights from anthropology.

# 5

## Relations: Hybrid and Environmental

### 5.1. Latour's amodernism: the collective of hybrids

A different way of conceptualizing the social as not exclusively human can be found in the work of Latour. In order to understand his ontology and epistemology, it is important to note that early in his career he had been doing research in anthropology, and then went on to study laboratory scientists, using the same method (ethnography). He showed how scientific 'facts' were socially constructed by the scientists. For Latour, there is no fixed reality independent of the actions that bring 'the real' into being (Latour 2005). Science involves – in the language of Part II we might say: presupposes – a network of people and things.<sup>1</sup>

Usually Latour's view is applied to science: scientists construct the facts, bring about that which is real, by using things in their lab, by collaborating with other scientists, and so on – much in the same way as people all over the world bring about their culture by means of their actions in a network of actors and *actants*: things that are part of the network and also 'act' to bring about the knowledge and the culture. But what does it mean for moral status? What would it mean to have a Latourian approach to moral status?

One way to proceed would be to start with a 'network ontology': moral status depends on the place of humans and non-humans in a network. This might give us a rather 'egalitarian' distribution of moral status, since actors and actants seem to be positions on the same, horizontal ontological level. Although some nodes may be more important than others in various ways, a hybrid network ontology puts humans and non-humans (animals, things) on the same plane. This would be one way of bringing together the social and the natural, since in this network it does not matter whether or not the object is natural

or artificial, and all relations are 'social' in some sense. However, this view is neither Latourian enough nor gets us much closer to a truly relational view that takes seriously the role of the subject. Of course, *networked* objects are 'related' to one another, and questioning the moral relevance of being 'natural' is an important step forward. But what is missing here is the dynamic, historical, *active* dimension: the bringing-forth (if I may use quasi-Heideggerian language already at this point). Moreover, a 'pure' network ontology puts too little emphasis on what Latour calls 'hybrids' and 'the collective'. Without rejecting the idea of a network of people and things, therefore, I propose to further elaborate the implications of Latour's approach for thinking about moral status by discussing *We Have Never Been Modern* (Latour 1993).

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Staying true to his anthropological research interests, Latour argues that pre-moderns did not make distinctions between nature and society, or between humans and non-humans. We moderns attach importance to these distinctions, but we forget that they are the result of 'works of purification' and that this work is never entirely successful. We have never been modern in the sense that we (continue to) bring forth a lot of hybrids: we mix politics, science, technology and nature – Latour even thinks there is a proliferation of hybrids, such as the hole in the ozone layer or global warming. According to Latour, this renders our modern distinctions untenable.

Crucial in this view is the work of purification, which created a divide between the natural world and the social world. The birth of the human required 'the simultaneous birth of "nonhumanity" – things, or objects, or beasts' while 'underneath, the hybrids continue to multiply' (Latour 1993, p. 13). The midwives who made this possible are the scientists and the politicians. While early moderns such as Hobbes and Boyle still simultaneously engaged in science, theology, politics, law, and so on, they also created the division: in politics there are spokespersons; in science the mediation of scientists becomes invisible: facts speak for themselves. This process goes on in history until nature and society become incommensurable: we get 'E.O. Wilson and his genes on one side; Lacan and his analysands on the other' (p. 59). Similarly, Habermas distinguishes speaking and thinking subjects (communicative rationality) from scientific and technical rationality. Technology is believed to be pure instrumental mastery. Moderns understand these distinctions as ontological separations and believe in 'the total division between the material and technological world on the one hand and the linguistic play of speaking subjects

on the other' (p. 61). They think there is a strict separation between nature and culture, and between humans and non-humans: 'It is the particular trait of Westerners that they have imposed [...] the total separation of humans and nonhumans' (p. 104). But according to Latour 'there are only natures-cultures' and humans and non-humans are not separated.

I disagree with Latour's view that this division came about in modernity; as I suggested before (and I will return to the distinction in Chapter 11), Aristotle already separated the sphere of human *logos* (the city) from the non-human sphere (the non-city). However, Latour is right about 'the work of purification' and about the belief in the extreme separation of the two spheres that has taken place in late-modern times. This divide explains how we look at other cultures:

'we are the only ones who differentiate absolutely between Nature and Culture, between Science and Society, whereas in our eyes all the others [...] cannot really separate what is knowledge from what is Society, what is sign from what is thing, what comes from Nature as it is from what their cultures require. [...] [But] we escape from the prison of the social or of language to gain access to things themselves through a providential exist gate, that of scientific knowledge.' (Latour 1993, p. 99)

The same way of thinking can be ascribed to the moral scientist of Chapter 1: she believes that moral science will give us the true moral status of the thing-in-itself: she can escape from the prison of 'folk psychology' which sees animals as companions, robots as more than machines, and so on. The moral scientist's belief is made possible by the assumption that there is a separation between science/reality and culture/appearance, and by a belief in a strict separation between the human and the non-human – and, indeed, between the humans who can fully use their capacity of *logos* (the moral status ascriber, 'us') and the humans who are captive of language and culture ('them').

What, then, is the way out of this modern predicament? How can society and nature be reconciled? Latour proposes that the human (the subject) should not be defined in opposition to things (objects). Rather, 'the share of things' is part of it:

'So long as humanism is constructed through contrast with the object that has been abandoned to epistemology, neither the human nor the nonhuman can be understood.' (Latour 1993, p. 136)

Latour calls for a new 'Constitution', in which nature and society are not separated but are produced together. He proposes a 'Parliament of Things', in which natures have their representatives and societies are present with their objects (p. 144). In *Politics of Nature* (2004), Latour elaborates this idea and defends a political ecology that is not about 'nature' and that no longer separates facts from values. Spokespersons speak for mute things and in this way constitute a collective of humans and non-humans.

Latour's analysis of modernity provides insights into the problem of moral status as a *modern* problem. To talk about the moral status of non-humans presupposes that one first separates subject and object, humans and non-humans, and culture and nature, society and science. Let me discuss two examples to develop the links between Latour's view and the relational-transcendental view I am trying to develop here.

The idea of *animal liberation*, for example, requires two kinds of purification and supposes two forms of hybridity. First, animals are constructed as 'natural', that is, non-social. They are also seen as being situated outside what Habermas and others would call 'the system', at least *initially*; as 'natural' entities, their 'lifeworld' is now colonized by humans. They now live 'unnatural' lives. To *liberate* those animals, then, means to re-naturalize them, to 'give them back to nature', to keep them out of the hands – and out of the hands extended by technology – of the factory farmers, those icons of evil modernity with its instrumental reason. But this view denies the intrinsic hybridity of nature-society. It turns out that animal liberation people share their modern outlook with the factory farmer they accuse. Both parties think in a way that makes possible both the oppression and the liberation of animals.

Note also that both the construction of animals as 'natural' and the Habermasian analysis of what goes wrong here are influenced by the romantic strand of Enlightenment: the 'natural' is set up as a pure sphere, unpolluted by, and opposed to, human culture and technological materiality. Latour could have strengthened his analysis if he had attended more to the flip side of the rationalist, Habermasian strand of Enlightenment.

A second process of purification in moral status ascription takes place when politics and science are separated, which denies that they are always mixed. It is assumed that on the one hand there is the scientist who tells us facts about the properties of an animal – for example, facts about the consciousness and sentience of the ape and of the fish. On the other hand there are the moral philosopher and the politician, who assign moral status and draw moral and political conclusions from this.

Letting the facts speak is the job of the scientist. Ascribing moral status to the entity is the job of the moral philosopher and perhaps of democratic deliberation. But this division of labour denies the hybridity at work here: in a sense the moral status of the animal is already decided and ascribed *in the lab*, while at the same time democratic deliberation is not only about values but also about *facts*.

A similar argument can be made about how the moral status of robots is ascribed. For example, in the discussion about care robots people usually assume a distinction between, on the one hand, the *political* and ethical question regarding the use of robots in health care and elderly care, and on the other hand the design of care robots by engineers, who do not deal with such normative questions but with *things*. In practice, however, this purification conceals that the future of health care and elderly care is also – *and perhaps mainly* – decided in the labs of the robotics engineers and that political decision-making in this area cannot take place without thinking about things. The ‘care robot’ and the relevant ‘patient’ are hybrids of moral–political and scientific–material (or scientific–bodily) elements. Similarly, to present the question regarding military robots – for example, drones – as an ethical question separate from engineering design is to conceal the techno-ethical ‘construction’ of the robot and the construction of the ethical question by means of a network of actors and things.

But let us return to animal liberation and factory farming. As I suggested, paradoxically these works of purification and denials of hybridity are also a condition of possibility for the very factory farming animal liberators oppose. By placing the animals outside society, by expelling them from the collective, we no longer have affective, communicative relations with them; we no longer experience them as companions or fellows. This allows us to see and treat them as ‘raw materials’, as natural material, as things, that is: as non-social. (Similarly, robots might be constructed as having nothing to do with society and with politics: as pure machines.)

To really ‘liberate’ those animals, then, we need to change our way of thinking. What is required, conceptually speaking, is the reconstruction of the nature–society as an explicit acknowledgment of hybridity: a reconstruction of *our* non-modern natural–social lifeworld with its technologies and its things, in which animals have been drawn and ‘made’ by means of domestication – which always required things and technologies. If we adopt this approach, we can still talk about how to treat animals better, for example by using the argument that they are part of our ‘mixed community’, but without assuming the nature–society and

nature–technology splits of romantic Enlightenment. The point is not that humans and non-humans are both ‘natural’, but that they are, as natural–cultural entities, part of the same collective.

In such a collective, one can then have spokespersons who speak for the ‘mute’ animals – although this idea still seems imprisoned in dualist thinking (humans who can speak and non-humans who are mute). Moreover, since Latour focuses on the *collective*, it remains unclear how relational his account is. How can he avoid the totalitarianism he accuses Marxism of? And to what degree does he avoid the position of the scientist–anthropologist who, after coming home from the tropics, then looks upon *Western* nature–culture from the outside, from an external point of view? On the whole, his own approach looks more like a *scientific* one than – as he claims – a *philosophical* one: although he often explores the limits of different ways of thinking, he himself seems to retain the *overview*. Can we have a more *engaged* philosophy and a thoroughly relational view, which does not hesitate to corrode the modern view of the human further, but without becoming postmodern?

## 5.2. Ingold’s ecological anthropology: dwelling and skill

Let me introduce Ingold’s work by indicating some contrasts with the thinkers discussed in the previous pages, which will also help me to articulate my own position.

In his efforts to cut through the natural/social distinction Ingold seems close to Benton, but he also criticizes Marxism’s modernism, for example the assumption that humans are engaged in a ‘transformation’ of nature. For Ingold we ‘grow’ artefacts; I will soon make clear what he means by this.

In contrast to Latour’s focus on the collective, Ingold’s approach is perhaps more *relational* (although actor-network theory is also about relations and their structure, of course) and somewhat less abstract. In spite of his references to empirical cases, Latour’s writings are full of conceptual play, whereas Ingold combines conceptual work and reviews of anthropological studies in a way that seems more relevant to concrete living practice. Both anthropologists also cover different domains: although Latour’s early work was concerned with non-Western cultures, he now focuses on laboratories of scientists (in ‘the West’), whereas Ingold tries to learn from non-Western cultures, in particular, but not exclusively, circumpolar peoples. Finally, an important difference from Latour, and also the main reason why I use Ingold’s work in

addition to Latour's, is that Ingold's thinking is (even) more in line with the phenomenological and transcendental orientation of my argument: like Latour, he does not aim to provide a new, alternative relational ontology that is to replace the naturalist one, but rather goes beyond the nature/social dichotomy. But, unlike Latour, he stands much closer to the phenomenological tradition: he seeks to move beyond the reality/appearance dichotomy characteristic of the sciences (including anthropology as a science) and is sympathetic to non-modern views that see the relational character of the world as 'an ontological "a priori" against which the "naturalness" of beings [...] stands out as unstable and problematic' (Ingold 2000, p. 107). Indeed, what we need is neither a new science of relations (e.g. an actor-network *theory*), nor a rejection of modern science, but an understanding of science and of moral science as practices that are only *possible* on the basis of an ontological-relational *a priori*, which Ingold characterizes as a 'poetics of dwelling' (p. 110). In this sense, Ingold's relations are pre-scientific, pre-ethical; they do not themselves constitute a new scientific ontology or a new ethics. This way of thinking fits with my transcendental argument in Part II. And with his 'poetics of dwelling' and his emphasis on 'being-in-the-world' he is closer to Heidegger (see Part II) than Latour.

In order to make sense of these claims, let me summarize what I take to be (the development of) Ingold's thinking in the essays collected in *The Perception of the Environment* (2000).

Like Benton and Latour, Ingold sees the modern Western distinction between the social and the natural as highly problematic. For him, humans are not half organism and half person but 'organism-persons within a world that is inhabited by beings of manifold kinds, both human and non-human'. For thinking about relations, this means that there is no categorical distinction between social and natural relations. Social relations, he argues, are 'a sub-set of ecological relations' (Ingold 2000, p. 5). We are all nodes in a field of relationships. But his view implies not only an alternative (relational) anthropology, but also an alternative biology: an organism is no longer seen as a discrete entity 'relating to other organisms in its environment along lines of external contact that leave its basic, internally specified nature unaffected' (p. 3), as in mainstream modern biology. Instead, all entities have to be understood in relational, ecological and developmental terms. Life history is not the writing out of a programme of construction, a *bio-logos* given in advance, but is active, 'creative unfolding of an entire field of relations within which beings emerge and take on the particular forms they do, each in relation to the others' (p. 19). A proper ecological approach,



according to Ingold, should not set up organisms and their environment as mutually exclusive entities, but takes as its point of departure 'the whole-organism-in-its-environment' (p. 19).

Referring to Dreyfus (see also Part II), Ingold understands this being situated in an environment as a necessary *a priori* for knowledge: not formal detached knowledge, but intuition, skills, sensitivities. Such knowledge, according to Ingold and Dreyfus, 'constitutes a necessary foundation for any system of science or ethics' since we depend on these pre-objective and pre-ethical (perceptual) skills and relations.

In order to develop his view, Ingold engages with many anthropological studies of pre-modern cultures ('hunter-gatherers') and non-modern cultures, in particular circumpolar cultures but also aboriginal culture and others. In his work he criticizes the idea of nature as a cultural construct, which sets up a dichotomy between nature and culture, and between nature that is really natural and nature that is culturally perceived (Ingold 2000, p. 41; see also Latour). He shows that hunter-gatherers do not approach their environment as an alien, 'external world of nature' that has to be represented and conceptualized in one's detached mind and that has to be transformed; instead, they are 'immersed from the start, like other creatures, in an active, practical and perceptual engagement with constituents of the dwelt-in world' (p. 42). He rejects the separation between humans as meaning-makers and a physical environment as raw material for construction. Construction is replaced by engagement, enculturation by *enskilment*. What hunter-gatherers did and do, then, is not the 'natural' way of living untouched by civilization, but is a particular way of coping with the world that is as much exemplary of the human condition as our way of coping with the world. The hunter-gatherer, therefore, is not a 'savage' but a human being in a more than biological sense.

Moreover, we can also learn a lot from hunter-gatherers by studying their relations to other beings, in particular animals. In order to illustrate his claim that we should not separate humanity and nature, that 'the domain in which human persons are involved as social beings with one another cannot be rigidly set apart from the domain of their involvement with non-human components of the environment' (p. 61), Ingold studies how hunters and gatherers relate to their environment. He shows how people's commitments to one another are intrinsically linked to commitments to, and relations with, the non-human environment. For example, Woodburn has shown that in a delay-return system, in which people invest in tools and storage rather than immediate hunting and consumption without much effort, people are more

committed to particular people, animals and natural resources (Ingold 2000, p. 66). In this way of living, there is no strict distinction between, on the one hand, 'ethics' as concerned with people and independent norms and, on the other hand, how people relate to their environment, what skills they develop, and so on. For example, Ingold shows that trust can only develop if we are at the same time dependent on the entity we trust (human, animal), but at the same time also allow sufficient autonomy to that entity. This means that trust can develop in hunter-gatherer communities, but not in pastoral systems of domination and domestication, which are not only metaphorically related to practices of (human) slavery (pp. 69–75). Ingold's point is again that 'nature' and 'culture' should not be strictly distinguished, that the ways in which we shape human–human relations and human–animal relations are closely related. Histories of such relations (for example scientific ones) can only be made on the basis of existing relations and engagement: in order to construct a narrative, 'one must already dwell in the world and, in the dwelling, enter into relationships with its constituents, both human and non-human' (p. 76). Ingold wants to rewrite the history of human–animal relations 'taking this condition of active engagement, of being-in-the-world, as our starting point' (p. 76).

This view of the relation between the natural and the social implies that there is no longer a separate 'natural' world as opposed to a 'social', human world:

'we can no longer think of humans as inhabiting a social world of their own, over and above the world of nature in which the lives of all other living things are contained'; instead, 'both humans and the animals and plants on which they depend for a livelihood must be regarded as fellow participants in the *same* world, a world that is at once social and natural. And the forms that all these creatures take are neither given in advance nor imposed from above, but emerge within the context of their mutual involvement in a single, continuous field of relationships.' (Ingold 2000, p. 87)

Ingold even extends his ecological, developmental view to man-made things. For technology and artefacts, his view implies that there is 'no absolute distinction between making and growing' (p. 88), since the forms of artefacts are not given in advance but 'are rather generated in and through the practical movement of one or more skilled agents in their active, sensuous engagement with the material' (p. 88). Hence Ingold criticizes Marxism and other modern currents of thinking that

view humans as transcending and transforming nature. Nature is not a raw material which we then transform and domesticate, a means to human ends. Rather, the world transforms itself: 'nature is not the surface of materiality upon which human history is inscribed; rather history is the process wherein both people and their environments are continually bringing each other into being' (p. 87). Therefore artefacts, like the forms of living beings, are not made but 'emerge [...] within the relational contexts of the mutual involvement of people and their environments' and making things is 'a process of growth' (p. 88).

Ingold's unificatory view does not only reconcile the natural and the social; it also cuts through the reality/appearance dichotomy. The best way to show this is to consider his work on how people relate to animals in non-Western, non-modern cultures, but also in Western cultures. It is well known that in the West and elsewhere some animals are related to as if they were fully human. Through the eyes of Western science, this illustrates 'anthropomorphism': ascribing human properties to non-human beings. Ingold gives the examples of pet-keeping and fables in our culture (Ingold 2000, p. 91). He also mentions Ojibwa stories about metamorphosis, for example about humans who can be turned into a bear. From a scientific point of view, all this is about projection of a world view onto 'reality': people 'personify' natural objects. This presupposes a distinction between appearance (coloured by one's world view, one's particular culture) and reality (nature as it really is). It is said that the natural object or living being is 'constructed' as a person by the 'primitive' people. But Ingold wants to take seriously the experience of these non-Western peoples in their *lifeworld*. The Ojibwa do not 'personify' natural objects. They do not 'envisage the world of nature as made up of a multitude of discrete objects, things, each with its own integrity and essential properties' which are then 'grouped into classes of varying degrees of inclusiveness on the basis of selected properties', as we do since Plato and Aristotle (p. 96). In this sense, in the Ojibwa world *there are no 'natural objects'* to classify; the nature of things is not given in advance but is 'revealed' (p. 97). Ingold suggests a different epistemology: knowledge is not about accumulating of mental content or propositions or beliefs. One gets to know the world by moving around, by watching, by listening and feeling; it is a skill (p. 99). Similarly, mind is not outside but in the world; we are involved beings (p. 101). If this is true, it makes no sense to distinguish sharply between appearance and reality: we cannot know 'reality-as-it-really-is', we can only know the world by being-in-the-world, by experiencing and engaging with the world.

Ingold's view supports Latour's claim that we have never been modern. It is also in line with Szerszynski's critique of modernity (Szerszynski 1996). Like Latour, he poses the question: How modern are we really? Looking at pre-modern cultures, he first evokes a world that was already ordered and suffused with meaning and purpose. The subject was participating in the world. There was no clear distinction between the world of words and the world of things. There was no gulf between morality and social structure. Ethics was not divorced from the formation and dissolution of social relations in the 'flow' of culture. Is this really different in modernity? According to Szerszynski, the answer is negative: we are always already part of the world. Our knowledge of the world is shaped by the social. In order to overcome postmodern nihilism (self-assertion in an alien world), romanticism (achieving authenticity), communitarianism (re-embedding in concrete communities and substantive traditions), and ecology (Szerszynski criticizes ecology for not abandoning the nature–culture dichotomy), we should turn to a different view of the human condition. Rather than trying to secure a 'real' behind the phenomenal world or embracing nihilism, we should learn from Wittgenstein and Heidegger that the world is constituted through language. Language, however, is not a human construction but is interfused with the world we inhabit (p. 133; see also Part II). We are involved in the world. This 'ecological' view has implications for ethics:

'Instead of the impossible project of securing discourse's transparency to moral realities through its purification and formalization, ethics becomes a recognition of our always already implicatedness in the world.' (Szerszynski 1996, p. 111)

Ingold's and Szerszynski's approach solves the epistemological problems of the properties-based account of moral status, since the modern mystery of how we can know the properties of the entity no longer makes sense. If there are no discrete entities with properties but only a lived world, then the question is no longer "What is the moral status of entity x given its properties p1, p2, and p3?" or "How can moral status ascription become a perfectly transparent representation of moral reality, a formal code purified from the phenomena?" The new question is: "How should we relate to other beings as human beings who are *already part of the same world* as these non-human beings, who *experience* that world and those other beings and are *already engaged* in that world and stand already in *relation* to that world?" What we call the appearance of an

entity and the reality of an entity are the outcomes of different ways of experiencing and engaging with the world (for example, a scientific way or a 'folk' way), and *both* non-scientific and scientific knowledge and practices presuppose lived experience and relations with other entities. This is why, with Ingold, we must learn from the animistic view, which 'takes the relational character of the world as an ontological *a priori*, against which the 'naturalness' of beings [...] stands out as unstable and problematic' (Ingold 2000, p. 107).

Therefore, I infer from Ingold's analysis, for a truly relational theory of moral status it is not sufficient to replace traditional Western non-relational ontologies by a relational ontology understood as 'the true view of reality' or 'the true view of the nature of reality' as opposed to mere appearance. To replace the properties dogma with the relational dogma would deny the *a priori* character of the relational world-in-which-we-are-already-engaged which makes *possible* moral status ascription, rather than giving a predefined and fixed answer to the question of moral status. 'Relations' should not get the same function in the theory as 'properties'; if we made that substitution, we would need a science of relations (compare with a science of appearances, a science of properties, etc.) and this would give us – finally! – moral knowledge as a set of propositions concerning the moral status of entities. Moral status would be justified by resting it on a firm ontological *basis* or *foundation*. But, if Ingold is right, there is no such firm foundation in this sense. Instead, we have 'only' (!) our lived experience, our engagement with the world, which is a *condition of possibility* for asking the question of moral status and for trying to answer it; it is not itself the answer. Answers – moral status ascriptions, for instance – are not and cannot be produced as if they were the *products* (output) of a logical machine that takes in ontological propositions (input) (industrial metaphor). They are more like *produce* that grows (agricultural metaphor) or like animals that show, *reveal* themselves to the hunter (hunter-gatherer metaphor) in the ever-changing field of relations, in the hybrid and changing world in which we dwell.

In the next part, I hope to further analyse the conditions of possibility for moral status ascription. I start with a condition that figured so prominently in many philosophies of the past century and which has always been the main tool of philosophers: language. But let me first say something about Diogenes the Cynic to conclude this part of my book.

AQ3

## Conclusion to Part I: Diogenes's Challenge

Diogenes the Cynic, also known as Diogenes of Sinope, was an ancient Greek philosopher, probably an ex-banker, who was famous for his antisocial behaviour. For example, he is said to have urinated on people and masturbated in public. Long before Rousseau wrote his romantic philosophical works, Diogenes' lifestyle was a way of showing that a more simple and 'natural', dog-like (cynic) way of living was possible, independent of society's norms. He was the first to call himself a *cosmopolites*: a citizen of the world. Interesting for the argument of this book is the reason why he taught by example: Diogenes believed that wisdom and virtue are not a matter of theory but of living. Therefore, he scorned the abstract philosophy of Plato – he scorned *academic* philosophy.

In his *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, Diogenes Laertius tells us an anecdote about Diogenes' response to Plato's definition of man as 'a bipedal featherless animal': Diogenes plucked a cock and brought it into Plato's school, saying "This is Plato's man." After which the definition was extended to 'with broad flat nails'.

What Diogenes teaches us here is not so much that 'broad flat nails' or 'bipedal' and 'featherless' are inessential properties and that instead we should look for other, essential properties. Rather, he shows that it makes little sense to define an entity by reference to its properties at all, that is, it makes little sense to define an entity in such an abstract way; what a human or a cock is, is something that becomes clear in real-life contexts. It needs to be shown; it is not a knowing-that but a knowing-how. If we want to teach a young child what a human is (as opposed to other entities), it needs to live with humans to learn in practice and in context how we relate to different entities in different ways. What

matters is how we relate to entities in practice, how we treat them, what name we give them, and so on.

In the previous chapters I have taken distance from the individualist properties view and explored an alternative, relational approach to moral status. In this way, I hope to have taken the animals, robots and cyborgs out of Plato's school, out of the dissection theatre, and out of the lab of the moral scientist. With reference to Rembrandt's painting *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicholaes Tulip*, we may say that the anatomy lesson taught by the moral ontologist is over now. We have now explored and developed a relational approach to moral status, which does not have the disadvantages of the moral science approach. However, there is always the danger of a relapse: we might give in again to the Platonic temptation and understand the relational approach as constituting a new ontology, perhaps with entities having relational properties or with relations as the new entities. Or we might understand phenomenology as a science of phenomena, in which case we would have an ontology of phenomena. None of these avenues is very promising: it looks as though they would amount to bringing new objects to Plato's table (entities with 'relational properties', 'relations' or 'phenomena') and to inviting once again the moral anatomist and moral classificationist to do their work. But we do not want to know the properties of the new cocks of our time; we want to know how to relate to them.

Moreover, from a moral–philosophical point of view, we do not only want to answer this direct normative–ethical question; we also want to know whether and how it is possible to take distance from social norms in this respect. If we wish to move towards a more 'relational', 'ecological' way of living, to what extent is this possible? Can we be a Diogenesian cynic with respect to fossilized ways of relating to animals, for example? The question about treating entities then becomes: Can we be a philosophical dog in a Diogenesian sense, that is, can we treat a particular entity and live with it in a different way than 'one' always has done? What about new entities such as robots and cyborgs? And, more generally, can we think about moral status in a different, more relational way? What would need to be the case for this change to happen? Can we create a different moral language? Can we change society? Can we live a different moral life? Can we do this without being regarded as an outcast? Do we need new philosopher–dogs and perhaps new artist–dogs, new cynics, to show us the way? To what extent can we really take distance from received views?

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To these meta-ethical questions I now turn. In the next part of this book, I will further develop a critique of moral status ascription, with 'critique' understood as involving a transcendental-phenomenological argument. This can be seen as a rather theoretical, academic, indeed not very dog-like (cynic) means of *reviving* thinking about moral status, that is, of returning to where Diogenes wanted to have us: life. However, I hope the reader will find it a worthwhile detour.



**Part II**

**Moral Status Ascription and  
Its Conditions of Possibility:  
A Transcendental Argument**

# PROOF



# 6

## Words and Sentences: Forms of Language Use

The transcendental claim that language is a condition of possibility for moral status ascription is, like all transcendental claims, a two-sided coin: conditions of possibility are at the same time *enabling* (in this sense they are a transcendental *ground* – see also Chapter 9) and *limiting*. On the one hand, the language that is given to us and that we use enables us to ascribe moral status to entities. Without language, we could not talk or write about moral status, we could not *a-scribe* it at all since we would miss our main tool. Words and grammar are the stuff and the laws that allow us to build our moral–linguistic universe, that make possible ‘moral status talk’ (or ‘moral status chatter’, if you wish). On the other hand, language is also limiting in the sense that thinking (in so far as it is thinking) cannot move *beyond* or *outside* language. As Heidegger and Wittgenstein knew, we live in language (see also Chapters 7 and 8) and our thinking is also limited by the *particular* language(s) we (can) use. In these two senses, language is the vehicle of our thinking about moral status. Wrathall writes:

For Heidegger, the key feature for understanding language is to focus on [...] the way that it shapes and guides our understanding of ourselves and the world around us “*before* we are speaking”. (Wrathall 2005, p. 89)

This is a transcendental argument, not a causal argument. If it is true that the moral order in which we believe ourselves to live is possible only on the basis of language, it is important to keep in mind that this language does not cause or determine that order, and *is* not itself that moral order; rather, as its condition of possibility it shapes its structure, its forms, and its boundaries. The properties approach to moral status,

in spite of its claim to ascribe objective moral status, equally relies on such linguistic–hermeneutic conditions of possibility. The entity in question already appears to us in a certain way ‘in’ language ‘before’ we ask the explicit question concerning moral status. This way of seeing is not ‘neutral’ in any way; language – including scientific language – is already normative. It lets the world appear in a certain way and not in another way. It shows us what is of value. It already brings forth a moral world. To quote Wrathall’s interpretation of Heidegger again:

When we decide what a particular object *is*, and thus decide what its essential properties are [...] we need to have a prior sense for what matters to us and concerns us – we need, in other words, to be disposed to the world in a particular way so that something will appear relevant and important while other things will seem trivial. (Wrathall 2005, p. 92)

Thus, in so far as moral status ascription relies on the properties of objects, it depends on our ways of seeing the world: on the kind of *world* we have (in the Heideggerian sense of the word), which depends on the language we use. *Before* we ascribe moral status to an entity we are already disposed to it in a particular way, and this disposition is at least partly a matter of language. The entity already matters to us and appears to us in a particular way. Whether or not there is a ‘thing-in-itself’ (Kant), the entity can only show up to us (appears to us, is disclosed to us) in language; language prestructures whatever we can say and think about it. In this (Heideggerian) sense, not I ascribe moral status but *language* does.

In this chapter I distinguish between, and discuss, two ways in which language is a condition of possibility for moral status ascription, which accord with two well-known dimensions of language: moral status ascription depends on the *words* that are available to us in a particular language (the semantic dimension of language, having to do with *meaning*) and on the forms of language *use* that frame *how* we ascribe moral status (the grammatical, in particular syntax, dimension of language, its *structure*).

Since meaning is related to use and context (the pragmatic dimension of language) and since grammar is *not* a free-floating abstract and universal realm of forms, there is no strict distinction between the semantic and syntax dimensions of language and moral status ascription (as there is no strict distinction between forms of language and other conditions of possibility). This will become clearer in the following

pages. I will make three claims. First, meaning is not entirely fixed and context-less: I will argue in this chapter against the ‘dictionary’ view of language and moral status in this chapter. Second, any ‘moral grammar’ is itself dependent on the social, relational lifeworld: I will argue against the contractarian view of morality. Third, therefore, I will show that forms of language are related to forms of life (see end of this chapter and the next two chapters). However, before discussing these interrelations, I will begin with the words/sentences and meaning/grammar distinctions in order to show how enabling and limiting language can be, how much it really *is* a condition of possibility, and then sketch a more adequate picture.

The structure of this chapter also reflects a second important distinction: one between moral status *receptivity* (how things appear to us, how we perceive things as implying the perception of moral status) and moral status ascription as *activity* (how we ‘construct’ things as implying the constructing of moral status). This chapter can be regarded as proposing a ‘linguistic turn’ in thinking about moral status – although the turn is not *merely* linguistic. Both the perception and the construction of moral status are mediated by language. In order to show this, moral status is first understood as moral status ascription in the sense of construction. It is, to apply Austin’s famous phrase, about ‘doing things with words’ (Austin 1962). Sentences about moral status do not state ‘facts’ about moral status, but perform something, do something: they are ‘speech-acts’ that construct moral status. Here we enter the theatre of moral status ascription. However, I will also argue that what happens in this theatre is not only the result of our acts of ascription; next to the active dimension there is also the receptive dimension: language, including moral language, also happens to us, is ‘given’ to us in various ways. This receptive side of the ‘linguistic’ argument (which, I repeat, is not merely about language) will be continued in the next chapters, for example in the Wittgensteinian section on ‘forms of life’ in Chapter 8.

### 6.1. Words, meaning and the construction of moral status

Some of the most important ‘building blocks’ of language, including moral language, are words and their meaning. They allow us to say what we want to say (at least, in the best case), but they also preconfigure the very content of our thoughts: they ‘make us say things’ in a particular way, a way we do not fully control. They co-shape what we

think and how we think; they also limit what we *can* think. Words are not just *representations* of the world (e.g. the moral world order with its distribution of moral value and status) or *expressions* of thoughts (e.g. what we think about the moral status of a particular entity). Rather than functioning as a mirror of the world, words co-shape the world and our thinking about the world.

For example, the word ‘robot’ is entangled with a cloud of meanings that frame how we use the word and how we think about ‘robots’: they are machines, slaves that work for us and obey us. The moral status implied is clear: like herd animals, they belong to a moral category that licenses us to dominate them and exploit them. Hence, if we want to see some robots differently, for example as companions, we have to forge new words (or word combinations) and meanings (e.g. “artificial companions”). Another example: the very word “animal” has traditionally been used to set it apart from humans in terms of moral status. If someone wishes to stress commonalities between humans and animals, she has to use a term like “non-human animal”, which comes with a different world view – and a different way of experiencing, different practices, and so on. Therefore, we must agree with Wittgenstein that meaning and verbal expression are not separated:

When I think in words, I don’t have “meanings” in my mind in addition to the verbal expressions; rather, language itself is the vehicle of thought. (Wittgenstein 1953, §329, p. 113)

According to Wittgenstein, a sign by itself is ‘dead’; only ‘in use it lives’ (§432, p. 135). Language and its concepts are tools or ‘instruments’, which means that it *matters* which concepts we employ (§569, p. 159). Not because they correspond to some ‘inner’ state but rather because they do things (see again Ayer: we ‘do things with words’); concepts are words–thoughts. Wittgenstein criticizes making a distinction between ‘what you really wanted to say’ and what is being said, since that supposes that meaning is present in the mind ‘before’ there is an utterance or expression (Wittgenstein 1953, §334, p. 114). We can only think ‘in’ or ‘by’ language; it is our vehicle. (Even an intention is not merely ‘mental’, since it is ‘embedded in a setting, in human customs and institutions’ (§115, p. 115).) Similarly, if language is the vehicle of *moral* thought, then there is only moral language–thought instead of words on the one hand and ontological or moral meaning on the other hand. We are accustomed to talk–think about (other) entities in a certain way.

Another way of putting this is to say that the way we talk about non-humans already *presupposes* their moral and ontological status as embedded in a (customary) way of thinking (and, as we will see, *doing*). Therefore, making an argument about how to treat other entities in terms of moral status is philosophically naïve if this moral–linguistic dimension is left out. The words we use are already part of a way of seeing the world – including making moral distinctions. In other words, we must apply some Wittgensteinian therapy to the question of moral status.

In her classic article ‘Eating Meat and Eating People’ Diamond writes:

it is not “morally wrong” to eat our pets; people who ate their pets would not have pets in the same sense of that term. [...] A pet is not something to eat, it is given a name, is let into our houses and may be spoken to in ways in which we do not normally speak to cows or squirrels. That is to say, it is given some part of the character of a person. (Diamond 1978, p. 469)

Thus, meaning and morality are already ‘in’ the word we use. The same seems to hold for our talking about *humans* and human ethics, which are also preconfigured by the words we use. To quote Diamond again:

Similarly with having duties to human beings. This is not a consequence of what human beings are, it is not justified by what human beings are: it is itself one of the things which go to build our notion of human beings. (Diamond 1978, p. 470)

Thus, as I suggested before, to talk about ‘human beings’ already presupposes a distinction: we have set them apart from non-humans. Similarly, our word ‘non-humans’ is not morally neutral in this sense: we already have defined them in opposition to humans and all the moral meaning attached to this term. This is not recognized by the properties approach, which makes a strict distinction between morality and ontology, and between ontology and language. It assumes that we can separate moral and ontological meaning from the words we use. It assumes that ontological, and perhaps also moral, language functions as what Rorty called a ‘mirror of nature’ (Rorty 1979). But both our ‘ontology’ and our ‘morality’, including ‘moral status’, are already contained in our language, that is, in the way we view the world. There is no ‘objective’ way that would allow us to distinguish sharply between morality, language and world.

At this point we can pick up the phenomenological argument about appearance started in Part I. Consider the example of robots. Standard robot ontology supposes a sharp distinction between appearance and reality. It is said that a robot may *appear* human, animal-like, and so on, but *actually* it *really* is a machine. Hence what is needed, it is argued, is science: the work of unmasking, revealing, uncovering, stripping away the phenomena. In this realist, objectivist and dualist view, a strict distinction is made between what entities really are (e.g. machine, code, information), understood as ‘objective reality’, and what entities appear to be (e.g. social, emotional, human-like), which is understood in terms of ‘perception’, subjective perception (which can become the object of scientific study). There is the world of appearances and there is the world of reality. In the lifeworld, we unfortunately find ourselves in Plato’s cave and have to do the work of science to gain a view of truth and reality. Illusion is fine for entertainment; for example, robot designers can be seen as masters of illusion. But it remains illusion. According to this view, the truth is ‘behind’ or ‘underneath’ the appearances.

However, saying that a robot is a ‘machine’ is already a particular way of looking at the robot that has in itself moral consequences. For example, if it is constructed as a ‘machine’, then *of course* we can never have robot companions. Then *of course* it is mistaken to speak of such a thing. Moral distinctions such as human/non-human social/non-social come with the name. When our thoughts about moral status start flowing, there is already a river-bed that guides their course. And the river-bed becomes deepened when habits of thinking erode it. But there are many ways of seeing and many ways of talking, and there is not one that has what we may call ‘ontological priority’, at least if this means that we can find out this priority entirely independently of the lives we live. The priority depends on the context, on what one wants to achieve, on use, and so on. Moral status ascription has lost touch with the lifeworld if it practices a quasi-Cartesian isolationist thinking. Wittgenstein writes the following about seeing people as automata:

But can’t I imagine that people around me are automata, lack consciousness [...]? If I imagine it now – alone in my room – I see people with fixed looks (as in a trance) going about their business – the idea is perhaps a little uncanny. But just try to hang on to this idea in the midst of your ordinary discourse with others – in the street, say! Say to yourself, for example: “The children over there are mere automata; all their liveliness is mere automatism.” And you will



either find these words becoming quite empty; or you will produce in yourself some kind of uncanny feeling, or something of the sort. (Wittgenstein 1953, § 420, p. 133)<sup>1</sup>

Thus, people may appear as automata in one context (e.g. a philosopher's reasoning) but equally the sentence may be meaningless or *out of place* and deranged in a different context of use – and 'ontological' priority is given to what is meaningful and to what we feel at home with. Much of the philosophical, academic discourse on moral status is taken out of its daily, ordinary context of use.

Thus, the discussion about moral status is a dualist discourse if it retains a difference between 'what things really are' and 'how we see things' (or how we talk about things). Rather, there are different possible perspectives. A machine may appear as a machine, but in some contexts it may appear as a social other. Phenomenology attempts to go beyond dualism by acknowledging that there is more than one way of seeing, more than one meaning. There is, in Ihde's words, 'multistability' (Ihde 1990). Robots (sometimes) can appear to us as 'quasi-other' (Ihde) and, perhaps at different times, as machine. Consider the concept of Gestalt: the same 'physical' line can be seen as a vase or as two faces touching one another.

However, it would be wrong to conclude from this 'multistability' or Gestalt that therefore 'anything goes'. Not *all* meanings and perceptions are possible (you cannot make a cow from the vase), and, morally speaking, it *matters* which perspective you take. Although none of our ways of seeing has 'ontological priority' in an abstract, 'objective' sense, each perspective has different normative, moral connotations and moral consequences for how we treat the entity. If a robot appears to us as a quasi-other, we treat it in a way similar to treatment of human others (as 'an end in itself'). If it appears as a machine, we will treat it as a 'mere means' (to use Kantian language). Thus, moral status is already 'in' our ways of seeing, in the way things appear to us, and how we see them *matters* to us and the possibilities are not unlimited. (Note that the language of appearance stresses the passive, receptive side of experience. In the next section I will use the language of construction: robots can be *constructed* as machines, quasi-others, and so on.)

Since these ways of seeing cannot be disconnected from our ways of talking, the same argument can be construed as a critique of a representational view of language. One may object, for example, that we should distinguish between 'the thing itself' as designated by the word "robot" (e.g. the entity in itself, the robot in itself) and metaphors like

“slave” that are connected to it but that can also be *disconnected* from it. This is a common, representational view of language. It accepts that language is relational in a weak sense only: of course there are relations between words; metaphors are such a kind of relation. However, a truly *relational* view of language (and the world) is not content with relations between discrete entities; it holds that these entities (here: words) are *themselves* constituted by the relations. Thus, the meaning of words is entirely dependent on its relations and language is itself deeply ‘metaphorical’. There is no such thing as the word or the thing *an sich*. The meanings of words (nouns, verbs, and so on) are shaped and altered by their relations to the linguistic and non-linguistic environment.

This view allows us to *historicize* meaning: it implies that the meaning of words is not *fixed*, that meaning has a history. For moral status, this means that, while words and their meaning preconfigure the moral status of entities, this does not *determine* their moral status; there is always the possibility of change. Change in meaning is possible through different *use* of existing words and the creation of new words. However, it would be mistaken to see this as a matter of individual will or of *language* use understood in a narrow sense (that is, as a separate domain): meaning is also dependent on the extra-linguistic environment in which the language and the language user are embedded. Therefore, we can maintain that language (in this section: language as meaning) is a condition of possibility for moral status ascription: while *and because* it is not entirely fixed and isolated, *because* it does not dwell in an eternal, immaterial realm of abstraction, language (as meaning) enables and limits what we can say about the moral status of entities.

## 6.2. Moral grammar à la Searle: moral status functions and the moral–linguistic contract

As I said in my introduction, a second way in which language is a condition of possibility for moral status ascription has to do with its grammatical dimension. How we use words is not entirely free but *ruled*. Grammar rules the way we use language, and this gives language uses a particular form. We speak not only in words but in *sentences*. Using a language well requires not only knowledge of the words and their meaning-in-context (semantic skill) but also knowledge of grammar (syntax in particular), which is also a skill and is usually learned in context, but at least *seems* more suitable for formalization and idealization. Can we apply this to moral status? In order to show the conceptual

power of this approach, let me first follow this route and then divert from it in significant ways.

How we ascribe moral status has a particular grammatical form (at least if we assume a broad definition of syntax), which has social and moral consequences. I propose to elucidate and elaborate this idea by using the work of Searle, in particular his social ontology. First I will construct a model of moral status ascription à la Searle and point to the social-theoretical counterpart of this view. Then I will criticize both views. In this way, the structure but also the content of this chapter will mirror those of Chapter 1: both analyse non-relational views and their problems by connecting ethics to social philosophy. The other chapters will keep to this method, but there is an important difference: the chapters in the first part mainly discussed moral-ontological arguments in order to construe a relational view, whereas the chapters in this part discuss various views in order to construe a transcendental argument that modifies and further develops the relational view arrived at in the first part.

Before using Searle's theory, let me introduce the grammatical aspect of moral status ascription by means of the robot example. In the first section of this chapter, I have proposed a linguistic turn in philosophy of moral status, which – among other things – means that we must attend to how we talk about robots and *to* robots. This has implications for robotics and ethics of robotics. Traditional AI was focused on what the computer or the robot can say. But for the question of moral status, it is important to study how *humans* talk about robots and *to* robots. The words and sentences we use do not (merely) represent the robot; we also 'construct' it *as* robot – or as something else – by using language. This has a grammatical aspect. It matters a lot, morally and ontologically speaking, how we address robots. What is the linguistic form we use? Sometimes we take an impersonal third-person perspective; we use the word 'it'. This implies that we regard it as an 'object', a 'machine'. At other times we take the personal second-person perspective; we address the robot with 'you' (perhaps even with 'we'). This implies that we see the robot as a quasi-other, perhaps a companion or even a partner. How we address the robot makes a difference to how we will treat it and to how we will interact with it. It will also make a difference to how robots are designed, how they are sold, and so on. In this sense, our 'grammar' matters morally. The structure of our language is not a mere reflection (representation) of the robot or of what goes on in the human-robot relation, but co-constructs that relation and changes our practices.

The moral significance of linguistic construction can be further understood by discussing the work of Searle. Searle shares with liberal

contractarianism (e.g. Rawls 1971) and discourse ethics (e.g. Habermas 1983) the idea that society, together with its moral and political principles, is a rational construct, or at least can be rationally reconstructed by us.<sup>2</sup> It is assumed that society is created by *us*, by our speech, or can at least be reconstructed as such. For Searle, society is constructed by words. Austin and Searle developed ‘speech-act’ theory: communication is not just about getting across propositional content; we also ‘do things with words’ (Austin 1962). In this way, Searle argues, we create social reality by means of speech acts. According to Searle, such speech acts have the form of a *declaration*: we declare something to have this or that meaning or value. Searle gives the examples of promise, marriage and money; this is how we create social institutions.

Let me explain this in more detail and show how it can be applied to the study of the conditions of possibility of moral status ascription. In *The Construction of Social Reality* (Searle 1995) and in the article ‘Social Ontology’ (Searle 2006), Searle attempts to answer what he calls ‘the problem of social ontology’:

How can such animals as ourselves create a “social” reality? How can they create a reality of money, property, government, marriage and, perhaps most important of all, language? (Searle 2006, p. 13)

According to Searle, in contrast to physical facts these ‘social facts’ are not ‘observer independent’ (reality that exists independent of us) but ‘observer relative’ (p. 13). He sees his task as explaining the nature of the creation of such facts. Although others have tried such an explanation before, he says, classical discussions (for example in sociology) took language for granted. Searle, by contrast, understands the social as dependent on language. He argues that language has a constitutive role: it does not just categorize (as Bourdieu argued) or enable us to reach rational agreement (as Habermas argued); rather, it constitutes social reality itself.

This works in the following way: ‘collective intentionality assigns a certain status to [a] person or object and that status enables the person or object to perform a function which could not be performed without the collective acceptance of that status’ (Searle 2006, p. 17). Searle gives the example of money:

the piece of paper in my hand, unlike the knife in my pocket, does indeed perform a function, but it performs the function not in virtue of its *physical* structure but in virtue of *collective attitudes*. (Searle 2006, p. 17)

People collectively accept that the piece of paper has a certain status and this makes it possible that the piece of paper can perform a function. They *declare* that it has a certain status. Searle calls this 'status function' (p. 18). The logical form of the assignment of status function is as follows:

'X counts as Y in context C' (Searle 206, p. 18)

Searle has in mind social institutions. But, in preparation of my upcoming argument, we can shed his ontological dualism and apply his theory more widely to reinterpret what I have said before about meaning: we can apply the theory to things Searle would see as 'physical', non-social things. In other words, we can say that declarative status functions are not only the grammar of *social* ontology but of *all* ontology. Applied to robots, for example, the form becomes:

Robot X (physical reality) counts as a Y (e.g. machine or quasi-other) in this (quasi-)social context C.

Or applied to animals:

Animal X (biological reality) counts as a Y (e.g. pet or 'wild' animal) in this (quasi-)social context C (e.g. a home or a circus).

This offers us an interesting understanding of moral status ascription, which appears to take on the form of declaration. We may call it a *moral status function*. It seems that we are now able to formally describe how people ascribe moral status. It seems that we now have found the 'moral grammar' of moral status ascription, the holy grail of moral status science.

However, let us first return to Searle to understand what this declaration form implies, which can help us to further develop and critique it. Searle argues that status functions give us 'deontic powers': if I have a parking ticket, for example, I have the right to park here. Applied to the moral status of particular entities, say robots or animals, this argument implies that a particular status function gives us certain rights and obligations. For example, if a particular entity *e* counts as a "pet", then I have the right to live with it but also the obligation to treat it well. But if the same biological entity counts as an "experimentation" animal, then I have the right to use it in my experiments (a use which may be constrained by certain duties as well, depending on which institutional constraints are attached to the declaration "experimentation animal").

Which constraints are in place depends on agreement. Indeed, important in this view is collective acceptance; without it there is no status function and no power. This is a contractarian view of the social. In this sense, Searle's formula should read as follows:

We agree that X counts as Y in context C.

For example:

We agree that mice count as vermin in a home context and as useful experimentation objects in a lab context.

Or, in the robot example:

We agree that this (physical) thing is a machine and we therefore have the right to use it as a slave.

Note that, since Searle emphasizes the deontic power status functions make possible and collective agreement, in his view we can have status functions without physical objects (so-called 'free standing Y terms' (Smith 2003; Searle 2006, p. 22). This means that status can also be given to what we may call *virtual* objects. This is what happens with money: there is no longer a physical object. This is also the case with virtual bots on the internet: we agree that program X counts as a 'computer program' in this financial context, whereas we agree that program Y (which may be not very different from X) counts as an 'artificial agent' in this game.

We can conclude from this that Searle's view can be used to shed new light on the 'grammar' of moral status ascription, but remains a properties-based view *par excellence*. On the one hand, property is 'just' a social institution, which is ascribed by means of a status function: we agree that physical object X counts as property (Y) in context C (for example this country). On the other hand, status function ascription itself is *giving a property to a physical object*. Status function ascription just *is* property ascription.

On the basis of Searle's social ontology, we can say that with language we *create* social reality and – I infer – *moral* reality. Responsibilities, obligations, rights, and so on are as 'real' and 'factual' as other social facts. (However, for Searle social facts are not as real as *physical* facts: in Searle's view there is a strict distinction between an observer-independent physical world (physical reality or simply *reality*) and an observer-dependent social world. His view can be characterized as a

‘weak’ brand of constructivism or constructionism since it limits its constructionism to the *social*.) Thus, in so far as morals are social facts and institutions, they are, in Searle’s words, ‘the glue that holds society together’ (p. 29) and the glue is based on agreement and made in the factory of language and logic.

Applied to the question of moral status, this Searleian view means that moral status is *inscribed* into (or onto) physical reality. Physical things are ‘given’ a particular moral status by means of words. Words are the instruments by which we ‘coat’ or ‘dress’ physical reality with layers of value and status. From what we may call the *moral status function* then follow obligations, rights and other deontic powers.<sup>3</sup>

According to this view, moral status is like monetary value: we agree that entity *x* has moral status *s*. (Supposed) agreement is crucial. Indeed, the contractarian version of this argument is that society has to be understood *as if* it were the outcome of such speech acts. In Habermas’s discourse ethics, agreement is also important: it is seen as if it were the outcome of a *rational* intersubjective deliberation process, which takes place in the ‘Original Position’.<sup>4</sup> According to discourse ethics, people make validity claims inherent to their speech acts. For example, they make a claim of truth (truth about the propositional content: they claim that what they say is true). However, in a Searleian view, it seems that there is no assumption of rationality or truth; agreement suffices.

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Applied to moral status as a social construct, these contractarian and discourse ethics views imply that the moral status of entities must be understood *as if* it were the outcome of an ‘initial’ or ‘original’ process of deliberation: as if in an Original Position we ascribe moral status to non-human entities. Moral status is a kind of property given to *objects* by *subjects* engaged in an intersubjective dialogue. A Rawlsian version would stress the disinterested, disengaged attitude of the participants in the deliberation (and does not really need more than one subject). A Habermasian version of this view would stress more the *dia-logical* character of deliberation<sup>5</sup> and claim that this deliberation is done by *rational* subjects, who make truth claims and other claims with regard to moral status. Thus, in these views, the totality of moral status ascriptions must be understood as the outcome of a rational consensus reached by means of disinterested, disengaged deliberation. In Searle’s view, the consensus need not be rational, but disengaged agreement it is. Rational or not, dia-logical or mono-logical, a *logos* is inscribed by the subject on the surface of a world in which it is not engaged.

If moral status is a kind of ‘dressing’ that covers the physical-ontological ‘salad’, then it might seem that – in a Searleian version – it

is entirely up to 'fashion' which status we give to entities. There are different moral styles but there is no independent standard. It seems that we can arbitrarily change our agreements.

This relativistic implication might be avoided by claiming, like Habermas, that speech acts presuppose normative conditions of communications such as a truth claim and a rightness claim. In the case of moral status, this would then presumably mean that a claim is made that moral status *s* is true and appropriate given the physical–ontological status of the entity. Then the mirror of nature view returns. In this view, we are the moral tailors of physical reality, but this metaphor also implies that we have to make moral status 'cloths' or 'dresses' that *fit* the 'bodies' of physical–ontological reality. We are the moral 'chefs' that make a particular moral 'sauce', but we have to work with the ingredients we get from nature and the 'sauce' has to be appropriate, that is, accord with the *properties* of the object. In this interpretation of the rationality requirement, rationality refers to *ratio*: there should be a *relation* between the properties of the object and the moral status of the object.

Indeed, these views (including Searle's) are not radically constructivist: they leave physical nature intact as a reality that is *not* under discussion, a truth that miraculously escapes social construction. As suggested before, Searle's ontology is dualistic in the sense that he makes a strict distinction between physical reality, which is non-constructed, and social reality, which is constructed. Searle would apply his status function view only to the social world and would not accept my proposal to apply it to everything; his view remains a *social* ontology only. For example, he would make a strict distinction between what robots and animals really are (machines and biological organisms) and how we *construct* them (e.g. as companions). Searle's approach assumes that 'first' there is physical reality, 'then' there is construction. Similarly, contractarianism supposes that 'first' there are individuals, 'then' there is society. Contractarianism and discourse ethics also presuppose a strict distinction between subjects and objects, and both presuppose a disengaged subject. In order to rationally reconstruct the world and its social and moral (epi)phenomena, we must take distance from it.

### 6.3. Living language: towards a critique of moral status ascription

There is, however, an entirely different way of conceiving of moral status which involves a very different view of language and world, and which allows us to attend to the *conditions of possibility* for moral status



ascription and to the (inter)subjectivity – rational or not – involved in that ascription. In this section and in the next chapters, I will explore and develop a non-dualistic and *engaged* view. I will show that, if we take a phenomenological approach, there is no interpretation-free appearance of a ‘physical’ or ‘biological’ reality. As I already suggested when discussing the meaning of words in the light of Diamond’s remarks, the entity *already* appears in a particular way, is *already* interpreted (receptive aspect) and constructed (active aspect) ‘before’ we ascribe moral and ontological status. There is no morally or ontologically ‘neutral’ appearance of robots, animals or other non-humans.

Consider again Searle’s example of money. What is its ‘objective’ status? As Wittgenstein wrote, the institution of money only makes sense in a particular *Umgebung* (surroundings) (Wittgenstein PI §584) and within a ‘form of life’. The same is true for moral status: it makes sense to talk about it within a particular ‘language game’, which relates to a particular world view. It makes sense to talk about animals as ‘live-stock’ within a particular form of life and it makes sense to talk about robots as companions in a particular *Umgebung*. Even the scientific, ‘objective’ understanding of non-humans is possible only on the basis of a particular world view, which is connected to a particular form of life. Moreover, I will argue that interpretation and construction are not entirely within human control and have non-linguistic dimensions, related to bodies, materiality, activity, skill, spirit and place.

I will elaborate this Heideggerian and Wittgensteinian approach to moral status in the next chapters, but let me already briefly present a different view of *language* to begin with.

Let us take up Ingold’s anthropology (or, rather, meta-anthropology) again to explore a different, non-Searlean and non-contractarian view of language. According to Ingold, language is not so much a rule-governed system or ‘grammar’ as a skill, ‘the Skill of skills’ (Ingold 2000, p. 361). It is not ‘an objective system of rules and meanings – [...] something that people *have*, and can *use*’ (p. 393) but a skill or even an activity. Speaking is like practising an art (p. 401). Put in dualist philosophical jargon, one could say that language is not only *internally* relational (relations within language as a system of meaning and a grammatical system) but also *externally* relational: it grows, it is responsive to the environment, to various contexts. This gives us a very different view of language from the contractarian one: it ceases to be a construction tool and becomes something *living*, a kind of organism.

However, this way of putting Ingold’s point might still tempt us to assume that there is such a *thing* as language, separate from the human

subject. The notion of language as skill (and as activity) allows us to go beyond such a dualism. In Ingold's view, language involves imitation and improvisation in a relational environment:

Speaking is not a discharge of representations in the mind but an achievement of the whole organism-person in an environment; it is closely attuned and continually responsive to the gestures of others, and speakers are forever improvising on the basis of past practice in their efforts to make themselves understood in a world which is never quite the same from one moment to the next. (Ingold 2000, p. 401)

Similarly, writing is not the inscription of what is already 'in the head' (something mental), but is also a skill or an art which depends on context and environment, which, like all skills and activities, involves the body, feeling and the whole organism, and cannot be reduced to the 'imprint' or 'printout' of a given mental content. Ingold gives the example of playing a musical instrument: this is not the execution of a mental representation, a musical '*logos*'; the intention is 'in' the flow of the (embodied) activity itself (p. 413). As Dreyfus and Ingold argue, skilled practice is not the application of a body of expert knowledge (understood as rules and representations); that is only a starting point (pp. 415–416). (See also the next chapter.)

With Ingold we can liberate language from its strong connection with the technology of writing (consider the metaphors 'ascription' and 'inscription' used in connection with moral status) and related technologies (print), and give it back to the living body: it becomes voice and breathes again. In a sense, Descartes, in his triumph of modern solipsism and dualism, *forgot to breathe* (or at least forgot *that* he breathed): he cut off thought–language from its body–environment flow, denying its inherent relationality and embodiment. No wonder that modern philosophy ran out of breath soon. (See also my conclusion on philosophical yoga.)

More generally, anthropology teaches us that we (also in 'the West') are always already 'wholly immersed, from the start, in the relational context of dwelling in a world', a relational world 'already laden with significance' (Ingold 2000, p. 409). It is not so much the case that people first 'have' a language and *then* do things together. Rather, people can share in the same meanings if they do the same things, if they live in 'a common world of meaningful relations' (p. 409). A 'communion of experience' is only possible on the basis of a 'foundational level of

sociality' (p. 409). Only if we *disengage* and *dissociate* ourselves from this already meaningful world can we see the world ('nature') as meaningless. Ingold calls this world 'virtual'; it is a product of our imagination (pp. 417–418); yet even in this moment of imagination we remain situated in a relational context. For example, the scientist may see himself as 'objective' and detached, but 'were he in reality so removed from worldly existence he could not think the thoughts he does'; 'we [...] have to live in the world in order to think it' (Ingold 2000, p. 418; see also Ingold 1996, p. 118). We have to breathe in order to speak – and to write.

In the next chapter, I further discuss the Heideggerian view that we are always already involved and engaged in the world. According to this 'deep' relational view, the inner/outer distinction (compare mind/body distinction and person/environment distinction) is no longer useful, and perhaps even harmful to thinking. It is a highly problematic vehicle of thought. Moreover, language is not external to life, but emerges from the continuously changing ground of being (to use Heideggerian idiom). It is always language *use*; however, we do not use language in the same way as we use a thing. It is not a separate thing, but is deeply connected to a 'form of life' (as we may say with the later Wittgenstein – see Chapter 8). In this view, there is no strict separation between a 'symbolic' sphere and 'the real world', and the relation between language and world is neither one of representation nor one of construction. A language–world is given to us. However, 'the given' is not *external*. Word–things get their meaning only in an *Umgebung*, for sure, but this environment is *our* form of life and is fused with our activities and practices, with what we do and *how* we do it. Language is as 'worldly' as we are; it is what we do and it is the way we do things. In this Heideggerian and Wittgensteinian sense, we do not *use* language; we *are* language and we *live* language. Linguistic forms are dependent on forms of life: on our forms of living together, on our bodily experience and our technologies, on our religious thinking and practice, and on how we shape space. I will show in the following chapters that this view has important implications for thinking about moral status as moral status 'ascription'.

# 7

## Societies and Cultures (1): Forms of Living Together

### 7.1. Moral status, habitus and know-how

To say that 'culture' or 'society' is a condition of possibility for moral status may be easily misunderstood as assuming that there are, on the one hand, humans and their society and culture (including the art and culture of moral status ascription) and, on the other hand, uncultured 'nature' or 'wilderness'. It may also be taken to assume that on the one hand there are 'humans' and on the other hand there is 'culture', as a separate sphere which has to be constructed or appropriated. Both assumptions, which are in line with the Searleian view of moral status ascription I constructed and discussed in the previous chapter, are mistaken. Moral status is not something that we humans ascribe to natural, physical entities, a label that we give to them in addition to other efforts to *cultivate* and civilize them, colonizing the wilderness and bringing it into our sphere of culture. Moral status is not part of a separate sphere of 'society' or 'culture' which we construct (by means of language as a tool, not something in which we dwell), pass on (as DNA is passed on – a 'genealogical' view) and appropriate (make it one's property – again a property-based view). With Ingold, we can say that we do not first construct or represent the world before we can act in it (which he calls the *building* perspective), as Searle but also classical sociology, anthropology (for example Douglas) and classical AI and robotics assumed, but rather that we are already immersed 'in an environment or lifeworld as an inescapable condition of existence' – in other words, we *dwell* rather than build (Ingold 2000, p. 153). Cultural forms, forms of life (see the next chapter), 'only arise within the current of [our] life activities'; they remain 'under construction' (p. 154). These *living* forms make it possible that we ascribe moral status to entities, without

determining moral status, and also limit what we can say about the moral status of entities.

Moral status, like other meanings, is neither given to us nor made; it is neither a catalogue nor a layer or cloth with which we 'cover the world'; instead, it is 'immanent in the relational contexts of people's practical engagement with their lived-in environments' (p. 168). In other words, the traditional, ancient (Greek) view has it right that meaning and moral status are 'already there' *in* the world, are immanent, but they were wrong about the static and external character of that world, the nature of moral status, and the place of humans in it. Moral status is not attached by the mind to entities as labels are attached to objects in a museum collection or supermarket. Moral status is not already available to us, as *inscriptions* on a map that are fixed in advance; it is, rather, something that arises out of our engagement *with these entities* – with the world. As we 'feel' our way through a moving world (p. Ingold 2000, p.155) of humans and non-humans, moral status definitions *grow*.

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This assumes a different view of moral knowledge and of intelligence. Moral status depends on *habitus* (Bourdieu 1990), instantiated in ongoing activity, in practices; it is a skill (know-how) rather than propositional knowledge.<sup>1</sup> It cannot and should not be codified but has to be learned and lived in practice, like other human skills. Bourdieu writes that what he calls 'practical sense' is 'a quasi-bodily involvement in the world which presupposes no representation either of the body or of the world, still less of their relationship'; rather, people have a 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu 1990, p. 66). However, whereas one enters, for example, a board game by means of 'a quasi-contract' (p. 67), a conscious act, one is born into a society and its conditions of existence. Practical sense is not abstract knowledge but is *incorporated*, embodied. Bourdieu: 'It is because agents never know completely what they are doing that what they do has more sense than they know' (p. 69).

In robotics, artificial intelligence and cognitive science, this distinction accounts for the difference between, on the one hand, the view that a robot should first try to *model* the world, represent it, before it can act (classical artificial intelligence: the artificially intelligent computer or robot needs a *mind* with codes and a symbolic system; this is the view Dreyfus has criticized, as I will explain below), and, on the other hand, the much more recent, emerging view that in artificial intelligence one should focus on giving the robot a *body*: if mind is necessarily embodied, then in a sense robots should not be 'built' but 'raised'; they should learn skills as 'bodily' machines.

This new view of robots and robotic ‘cognition’ is directly linked to a view of *humans* as embodied beings, as developed in cognitive science (Varela *et al.* 1991; see the next chapters) and phenomenology (Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty; see below). Moreover, not only is ‘mind’ intrinsically connected to ‘body’; humans should also be understood as constituted by their relation to their environment. There are not first schemata or categories which allow us to build a picture of the world; gaining knowledge is about continuous perception and experience (see also Gibson, as summarized by Ingold 2000, p. 166). The aim is practical knowledge, know-how.

This can be read as a criticism of mentalist interpretations of Kant’s transcendentalist argument, which assumes that categories are ‘in’ the mind. Instead, the transcendental ground for perception and knowledge – including *moral* perception and knowledge – is as much ‘in’ us as it is in the world; it is in lived experience, in relations perceived, in the forms of life that cannot be disconnected from the humans and non-humans that *live*. To understand the conditions of possibility for moral status in social–cultural terms, then, means to understand that moral status is made possible by a culture and a sociality that are not represented or constructed, but that are instead ‘given’ from the start, *prior* to the objectification of experience in cultural categories, in the direct, perceptual involvement of fellow participants in a shared environment’ (Ingold 2000, p. 167 – see also Jackson 1989). It is on this soil that the language of moral status flourishes and *proliferates* – sometimes with the excesses, spills and uselessness characteristic of life itself.

This is a *relational* view once again, and contrasts with traditional metaphysics and with contemporary constructivism, which separate and counterpose humans and their world, humans and non-humans, culture and nature, the real and the perceived. Compared with the transparency and clarity of models, pyramidal structures, tree diagrams, maps and genealogies of traditional morality, this may indeed feel as if we have to find our way in the *dark*. However, it is not the darkness of death or of the nihilism which Nietzsche rightly feared – it is the darkness of the forest, it is the ramble of sweating, breathing, smelling *human* moral life, weaving uncertain treads and footprinting paths knowing neither origin nor destination. (This is about moral imagination, surely, but imagination as improvisation and flow, not as representation.)

The theoretical source of this view must be located in phenomenology, in particular Heidegger’s work, which, together with the later work of Wittgenstein, also inspired Dreyfus, colleague of Searle in Berkeley, in his objections to Searle’s view. To Heidegger and Wittgenstein we

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turn now in order to better understand society and culture as a condition of possibility for moral status ascription. Aided by interpretations offered by Dreyfus, Ingold and others, I will interpret Heidegger and the later Wittgenstein as offering a *transcendental* argument (hence as standing firmly *within* the Kantian modern tradition on this point) and as supporting the relational view of moral status that emerges here. In this chapter I start with Heidegger.

## 7.2. Heidegger's transcendental approach: being-in-the-world and dwelling

In *Being and Time* (1927), Heidegger clarifies his transcendental approach in a way that will guide my discussion of moral status ascription in this chapter:

The question of being thus aims at an *a priori* condition of the possibility not only of the sciences which investigate beings of such and such a type [...] but it aims also at the condition of the possibility of the ontologies which precede the ontic sciences and found them. (Heidegger 1927, p. 9)

In so far as moral status ascription rests on ontology, it is crucial therefore to clarify its *a priori* conditions of possibility. The properties view is based on an ontology that defines entity X as a being of 'such and such a type' to which then a particular moral status is ascribed in virtue of its ontological (Heidegger would say: ontic) status. But what makes possible this properties ontology itself? What makes possible the 'moral science' of the properties approach?

Heidegger's transcendental view can be further clarified by the terms being-in-the-world, dwelling and *Mitsein*.

### Being-in-the-world

For Heidegger, we are beings-in-the-world. The world, including entities with their 'properties', can only appear against the background of involved, engaged practice. The properties view and the scientific world view it is related to are particular ways of looking at the world. In our daily lives, for example, we often experience the world differently. Wrathall explains the phenomenological view as follows:

When a physicist tries to persuade you that what you *really* see are light waves [...] she is confusing two different things – one is the

causal interaction of our bodies and objects in the world, the other is what it is actually like to experience the world. (Wrathall 2005, p. 9)

But even the scientific way of viewing depends on practical experience. As Brinkmann puts it when interpreting Heidegger's *Being and Time*:

In everyday life [...] we do not have a sense of the world as a large collection of value-neutral 'things'. In fact, it takes a lot of philosophical imagination to see the world in this way [...]. So the disenchanting world is *not* the world of everyday, practical life. [...] The objectifying attitude, where entities turn up as discrete *things*, is only possible given a background of practical involvement and concern. (Brinkmann 2004, p. 63)

Thus, a 'things ontology' – for example, the one used by the moral scientist – is only possible because there is already a more 'primordial' being-in-the-world that is not reflective but practical.

The meaning of anything (and any *thing*) must be understood against the background of activities and practices, and the totality of these activities and practices is what Heidegger called *the world*. (Brinkmann 2004, p. 64)

'World' is not objective reality but, as Wrathall puts it, 'the unified and coherent whole that structures our relations to people and things around us' (Wrathall 2005, p. 75). 'World' refers to the practical and *relational* whole that forms the background of understanding. We have already an intuitive understanding before science organizes the world in a particular way. When we think and talk about the moral status of entities, therefore, we can only do that on the basis of a world. Other entities are part of the practical and relational whole and are revealed to us in a particular way as parts of that whole. In Heidegger's own words: "These other beings can only "meet up" "with" Da-sein because they are able to show themselves of their own accord within a *world*" (Heidegger 1927, p. 54). The scientific world view lets entities show up in a particular way (as objects, facts etc.), but this particular way of unconcealment should not be mistaken for *the world*, if this means that one way of seeing takes epistemological priority. More generally, for Heidegger we are in the mode of 'knowing the world', which has led astray our understanding (p. 55). When we describe 'innerworldly beings', "'world" is already "presupposed" in various ways' (p. 60). For



Heidegger, 'world' does not refer to the objective totality of beings or to the scientific universe; it is, rather, the transcendental ground that makes possible talking about these things at all. Similarly, romantic talk about 'nature' presupposes a world (p. 65).

Moreover, world is always relational. Even before Heidegger writes about *Mitsein* (see the next section), he defines 'world' in a relational way and in a way that (in contrast to *Mitsein*) does not exclude non-humans but instead relates humans to non-humans. Other beings can only show up to us on the basis of everyday being-in-the-world defined in terms of *association*:

The phenomenological exhibition of the being of beings encountered nearest to us can be accomplished under the guidance of the everyday being-in-the-world, which we also call *association in the world with innerworldly beings*. (Heidegger 1927, p. 62)

Before I say more about the relational dimension of Heidegger's view, let me first emphasize and clarify the novelty of Heidegger's version of the transcendental approach. This is a kind of paradigm shift in the history of philosophy, a 'Copernican turn'. In this view, there are not first 'facts' which we then have to make sense of, but the other way around: the world already appears to us as meaningful and to construct it as a collection of facts takes *work* – the work of science. As Ingold puts it, in a way that is very relevant to my argument about moral status:

Cartesian ontology, which takes as its starting point the self-contained subject confronting a domain of isolable objects, assumes that things are initially encountered in their pure occurrentness, or brute facticity. The perceiver has first to make sense of these occurrent entities – to render them intelligible – by categorising them, and assigning them with meaning or functions, before they can be made available for use. Heidegger, however, reverses this order of priority. [...] To reveal their occurrent properties, things have to be rendered *unintelligible* by stripping away the significance they derive from contexts of ordinary use. This, of course, is the explicit project of natural science [...]. (Ingold 2000, pp. 168–169)

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Thus, 'even' science can only be done against the background of being-in-the-world. Heidegger shows that science's disengaged approach is a 'fiction', since even science 'takes place against a background of involved activity' (Ingold 2000, p. 169).<sup>2</sup> We are always already in the world.

We are familiar with it. Growing up and learning is getting familiar with a world, is learning to live in a world. Things only make sense against the background of a world. Thus, our engagement and immersion in the world is a condition of possibility – or *transcendental* condition – for experiencing ourselves as ‘entities’ and other entities as ‘entities’, that is, as detached objects, separate from the world.

For the discussion about moral status, this approach helps us to formulate a more thorough critique of moral status ascription as a moral science, a more in-depth critique of moral status reason(ing). The properties-based approach to moral status is only possible on the basis of the transcendental ground, which makes it possible to encounter other entities as meaningful and as (possibly) having a moral status in the first place. We do not first experience ‘neutral’ entities and then assign moral and other properties to them. They already appear to us as part of a world of meaning which is at the same time a moral world. World, as the background that prestructures our experience, both enables and limits how entities can appear to us and how they *relate* to us and to one another. Understanding my world means that I have ‘a grasp of the possible ways that the various objects and people around me relate to me and each other’ (Wrathall 2005, p. 44). To understand human being in terms of being-in-the-world is to recognize the relational character of existence.

Recognizing this relationality means rejecting the Cartesian epistemology on which moral status science is based. If in experience and practice we are already related to one another, there is no Cartesian problem of ‘other minds’ and there is no need to provide proof of an ‘external world’. According to Heidegger, to demand such proof (not its lack) is the real ‘scandal of philosophy’ (Heidegger 1927, p. 190). If one wanted to construct such a proof, one would have to construct ‘an isolated subject’ (p. 191), as Descartes did, but this would be to forget that we are always already in the world *and* that our being-in-the-world is already a being-with others:

The clarification of being-in-the-world showed that a mere subject without a world “is” not initially and is also never given. And, thus, an isolated I without the others is in the end just as far from being given initially. (Heidegger 1927, p. 109)

The Cartesian subject or ego as well as the ‘external’ world are constructions that themselves depend on a social-transcendental ground. Others are always already there with us, and it is only on this basis

that we can construct ourselves as individuals that stand apart from the world – a world which is always already social (see also my discussion of Heidegger's term *Mitsein* in the next section).

Thus, on the one hand, Heidegger's approach is opposed to *objectivism*. But, with its emphasis on our practical engagement with the world, it is also opposed to *subjectivism* if this means 'being concerned with the mental' or the 'mind' as an 'inner' realm. Thinking is always dependent on the body, on experience, on our relation with the 'outside' – if such a dichotomy still makes sense at all. Understanding is not so much cognitive (understood as 'mental') but is *social* and is, as we will see later, a way of doing, a *skill*. Even interpretation is not cognitive in this sense but is a matter of use – a matter of knowing how to use (see below).

If this is true, action should also be reinterpreted. Heidegger's view implies that we should question the view that action concerns a relation between 'inside' and 'outside', between a mental command and something that happens in the external world. Let me make the point in terms of intentionality. According to Dreyfus, Heidegger wanted to go beyond views that explain action in terms of mental states. Authors such as Searle analyse action as a kind of 'bodily motion caused by a reason' (Dreyfus 1993). Heidegger, by contrast, showed that there is also a different kind of intentionality, which does not involve experience of intentional content. With Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty (1962), Dreyfus argues that in everyday activity we are absorbed:

According to Merleau-Ponty, in everyday absorbed coping, there is no experience of my causing my body to move. Rather acting is experienced as a steady flow of skillful activity in response to one's sense of the environment. (Dreyfus 1993)

Such a kind of activity does not require mental representation. According to Dreyfus, philosophers usually stick to describing 'the conceptual upper floors of the edifice of knowledge' but ignore 'the embodied coping going on the ground floor' (Dreyfus 2006). For the latter, we do not need representations but 'nonconceptual embodied coping skills we share with animals and infants' (Dreyfus 2006, p. 43).

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In their influential article 'Towards a phenomenology of expertise' (1991), Dreyfus and his brother have argued that moral expertise, like any other expertise, requires *skill* rather than rules or principles alone. In particular, they hold a *developmental* view of morality: novices may need rules or principles, but experts have the skill to cope with (moral) problems without relying on rules or principles.

Dreyfus has argued that therefore the project of artificial intelligence is bound to fail, at least if it focuses on representation rather than skill. In *What Computers Can't Do* he argues that the aim of the initial AI project was Platonic: the search for explicit definitions and instructions (Dreyfus 1979, p. 67), 'a total formalization of knowledge' (p. 69). This was also the dream of Leibniz, Turing and 'classic' AI. But, as Dreyfus shows, this AI project rests on false assumptions: the brain does not process information by means of discrete operations (biological assumption), the mind does not operate by means of formal rules (psychological assumption), not all knowledge can be formalized in terms of logical relations (epistemological assumption), and not all relevant information about the world is analysable as 'a set of situation-free determinate elements', a set of independent facts (ontological assumption) (p. 156). What is missing here is bodily and situated experience. Dreyfus argues that, in contrast to what Plato and Descartes taught, the body is not 'getting in the way of intelligence and reason' but is 'indispensable for it' (p. 235). Our ability to respond to new situations depends on 'our ability to engage in practical activity', our ability to experience and engage with the world as embodied beings: with our 'involved, situated, material body' (p. 236). Moreover, meaning is – to use Ihde's words – 'unstable'.<sup>3</sup> Dreyfus uses Gestalt theory to argue that objects have different aspects and that we respond to the whole object (pp. 240–241). Our experience is holistic. Furthermore, our world is prestructured. There are no pure objects; they always embody our concerns and values (p. 261). The situation is organized from the start. Human experience is 'being-already-in-a-situation in which facts are always already interpreted' (p. 290). Otherwise they would be 'meaningless, isolated data' (p. 262). This is why usually we feel at home in the world. It is a personal and social, public world, not a collection of brute data and hard facts.

My personal plans and my memories are inscribed in the things around me just as are the public goals of men in general. [...] My plans and fears are already built into my experience of some objects as attractive and others as to be avoided. (Dreyfus 1979, p. 266)

The rule-model abstracts from this being-in-the-world and engagement with the world. It is our world: 'We are at home in the world and can find our way about in it because it is *our* world produced by us as the context of our pragmatic activity' (Dreyfus 1979, p. 272).

In his introduction to the MIT Press edition of *What Computers Still Can't Do* (1992), Dreyfus argues that the problem of AI is not how to

represent knowledge, but how to give to the computer ‘the everyday commonsense background understanding that allows us to experience what is currently relevant as we deal with things and people’ – in other words: ‘a kind of know-how’ (Dreyfus 1992, p. xi). Background understanding is not ‘a system of implicit beliefs’, as representationalism thinks (xvii), but know-how that cannot simply be represented as knowing-that. Storing context-free facts and using meta-rules is not enough.

Dreyfus gives the example of knowing how to give an appropriate gift, which requires ‘cultural *savoir faire*’ that cannot be provided by factual knowledge. Even knowing ‘the facts of nature’ such as the behaviour of water requires learning from experience: ‘For natural kinds like water, then, as well as for social kinds of gifts, common sense seems to be based on knowing-how rather than knowing that’ (Dreyfus 1992, p. xxvii). We already have a kind of familiarity.

In general, human beings who have had a vast experience in the natural and social world have a direct sense of how things are done and what to expect. Our global familiarity thus enables us to respond to what is relevant and ignore what is irrelevant without planning based on purpose-free representations of context-free facts. [...] Our everyday coping skills and the global familiarity they produce determine what counts as the facts and the relevance of all facts [...]. (Dreyfus 1992, p. xxix)

If Dreyfus is right, what is needed in robotics and AI – at least if we care to build human-like systems at all – is *skill* and its related sensibilities. I take contemporary social and humanoid robotics, in so far as it tries to build learning robots that learn not by means of representing the external world, but by what we may call ‘coping’ with that world, to *attempt* precisely that.<sup>4</sup>

With regard to the problem of moral status, this emphasis on expertise and skill means that relating to other entities in a good way is not a matter of representing their properties and *ascribing* moral status, but, rather, requires a kind of skilled coping with these entities based on experience and practice. There must be a background understanding. Whereas a ‘moral novice’ would use rules, a ‘moral expert’ relies on her skills, involving the whole body. Hence this approach redefines the problem of moral status: instead of a problem of representation, ascription or declaration, it has become a problem of coping, of improvising, of fine-tuning. If anything, it has become a (moral) *art* rather than a (moral) *science*.

More generally, this Heideggerian approach implies that value and moral status should not be objectified. Heidegger writes the following about viewing value as a property:

The addition of value predicates is not in the least able to tell us anything new about the being of goods, *but rather only again presupposes for them the kind of being of pure objective presence.* (Heidegger 1927, p. 92)

The same can be said for all kinds of entities to which we ascribe a moral status: it is only because the entity shows up to us as an objective presence that we then can attach that status to it. Its status comes as no surprise, so to speak, since it already appeared as a thing. To ascribe moral 'status' presupposes that the entity has the kind of being of pure objective presence, a thing, to which we can then attach moral status. The properties approach to moral status ascribes moral status to it in the same way as Heidegger says value is ascribed to goods: it objectifies entities. Talking about moral status is like talking about values, which, according to Dreyfus, is an outcome of the same philosophical tradition on which classical AI is based.

Although talk of values is rather new in philosophy, it represents a final stage of objectification in which the pragmatic considerations which pervade experience and determine what counts as an object are conceived of as just further characteristics of independent objects [...]. (Dreyfus 1979, p. 274)

In the end, Dreyfus argues, we risk objectifying *ourselves* as humans. If the 'computer paradigm' becomes stronger, we will think of ourselves as 'digital devices' and we may become 'progressively like machines' (p. 280). The result of objectification and formalization is that 'people have begun to think of themselves as objects able to fit into the inflexible calculations of disembodied machines: machines for which the human form-of-life must be analysed into meaningless facts, rather than a field of concern organized by sensory-motor skills. Our risk is not the advent of superintelligent computers, but of subintelligent human beings' (Dreyfus 1979, p. 280).

Combining these observations with the developmental approach Dreyfus argued for, we may view the habit of defining moral status as a *property* and using *rules* for moral status ascription – indeed, the activity of moral status ascription itself – as reflecting morally *immature*

ways of relating to other entities. Moreover, this habit of thinking is an exception rather than the default mode of thinking. In everyday dealings with other entities, we do not first think about their moral status and then act; instead, ideally, and in difficult cases where rules are of no help, we cope with them *without* thinking (viewed as mental representation). They do not even appear as 'entities' at all – let alone entities with a 'status'. Thinking of them in terms of moral status, then, is not very successful when it comes to the problem of coping with other entities; we need a different kind of expertise. With Dreyfus, we should reject the Platonic project, the 'myth of the mental', and the Cartesian dualism this view presupposes, and develop an alternative approach to moral knowledge and moral status based on skilled and embodied engagement.

With regard to this point about the importance of (non-conceptual) skill, embodiment and non-dualism, Dreyfus is close not only to Merleau-Ponty but also to contemporary currents in cognitive science that stress 'embodiment', in particular as developed by Varela, Thompson and Rosch (1991) and Lakoff and Johnson (1999).

Varela *et al.* have argued against representationalism: according to them, cognitivism has failed to do justice to situated, embodied thinking. Instead, they propose the 'enactive' approach. Cognition is not rule-based information processing but active shaping of environments. We (humans, artificial intelligent robots, etc.) do not need models that represent the world, but bodies and dynamic interaction with the world. There are no realities in themselves; if we would achieve *mindfulness* there is no little watcher of experience 'inside the head' (Varela *et al.* 1991). Similarly, Lakoff and Johnson have argued that there is no 'fully autonomous faculty of reason separate from the independent of bodily capacities such as perception and movement' and that 'our bodies, brains, and interaction with our environment provide the mostly unconscious basis for our everyday metaphysics, that is, our sense of what is real' (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, p. 17).

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For moral status, this implies that, for what philosophers call 'moral status ascription', we usually rely on this unconscious 'everyday metaphysics'. We categorize, of course, but according to Lakoff and Johnson categories – including moral categories – are 'not a product of conscious reasoning' but something that emerges from our bodies, brains and ways of interacting with the world.

Living systems must categorize. Since we are neutral beings, our categories are formed through our embodiment. What that means is

that the categories we form are *part of our experience!* [...] Categorization is thus not a purely intellectual matter, occurring after the fact of experience. Rather, the formation and use of categories is the stuff of experience. It is part of what our bodies and brains are constantly engaged in. We cannot, as some meditative traditions suggest, “get beyond” our categories and have a purely uncategorized and unconceptualized experience. (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, p. 19)

This insight is in line with Heidegger’s transcendental point. According to Heidegger, both kinds of activities (intentional mental representation and everyday coping) rest on a transcendental ground. As Dreyfus says, ‘both modes of intentionality presuppose being-in-the-world, which Heidegger calls originary transcendence, and which he claims is not a kind of intentionality at all but the condition of the possibility of both active and contemplative intentionality’ (Dreyfus 1993).

Thus, we rely on a kind of background familiarity with things, which enables us to act and cope. Coping is neither purely conceptual nor purely perceptual or bodily. As Johnson and Lakoff say about their embodied-mind hypothesis: this view ‘radically undercuts the *perception/conception* distinction’ (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, p. 37). It is non-dualist, not in the sense that we go beyond all categories, but in the sense that it refuses to cut up experience and activity into an intentional conceptual part (mind) and an unconscious perceptual part (body).

For the question concerning moral status, this view implies that moral status ascription is something we do consciously and deliberately, but that this kind of thinking is only derivative of everyday coping, when we do not question the moral status of other entities. We act upon them or with them in particular ways, without considering the ‘moral status’. We have a kind of competence or *skill* (see also Chapter 9) to cope with them. This kind of ‘background’ understanding of entities is already presupposed when we start to think about entities, when we represent them, when we ascribe moral status, and so on. What Heidegger writes about meaning is also applicable to moral status: ‘Meaning is an existential of Da-sein, not a property which is attached to beings, which lies “behind” them or floats somewhere as a “realm between.”’ (Heidegger 1927, p. 142)

The problem of moral status, like that of meaning, is about how things appear to *us* and should appear to us (and about what makes it possible that things appear to us in a certain way); moral status is not itself a property of these things. Therefore, with Dreyfus we must



criticize and reject Searle's view that we impose meaning on 'brute facts'. For Dreyfus, such a view is incompatible with the Heideggerian view: 'the *logic* of both constitution and of rational reconstruction conflicts with the *experience* of our everyday involvement with already meaningful things' (Dreyfus 2001, p. 181). In the first view, 'meaning must be brought into the meaningless universe, from outside as it were, by *meaning-giving minds*. Existential phenomenologists claim that human beings are always-already-in a meaningful world' (p. 186). The social world is not constructed; we are always already in a social world:

As Heidegger points out, we normally are not first detached minds confronting meaningless material objects to which we subsequently assign functions. Rather we are from the start socialized into a world in which we cope with equipment. (Dreyfus 2001, p. 187)

Thus, the concept of a 'moral status function', which I construed by using Searle (see the first sections of the previous chapter), is misguided, since it rests on a misguided epistemology. In everyday experience, other entities do not appear *as* entities. They do not appear as entities with particular properties that allow us to give them a particular status. Their 'moral status' is already part of our experience, of how they appear to us, *prior to* any (conscious, deliberate, intentional) scientific description or moral status ascription. We simply cannot experience a 'brute' entity, which then needs to be given a status. With a Wittgensteinian phrase (Wittgenstein 1969, §141, p. 21e), we could say about moral order and moral value that they are not imposed or declared, but rather resemble light that 'dawns gradually over the whole'.

Interestingly, this approach also leaves room for different cultures and different 'forms of life' (see the next chapter on Wittgenstein), each of which implies different experiences of 'moral status' – if this term is used at all. At most, there are different *ex post* moral status ascriptions (if this is done at all) and indeed different moral 'styles', since there are different *a priori* ways of experiencing entities.

These different cultural forms are part of a more primordial being-in-the-world that is universal, that is, a particular *human* way of being. With Heidegger, we could name this 'dwelling'.

### Dwelling

Ingold's distinction between building and dwelling, which was implicit in the relational view I have articulated so far, is based on Heidegger's

essay 'Building Dwelling Thinking' (Heidegger 1971; Ingold 2000, pp. 185–187). For Heidegger, to occupy a building does not necessarily involve dwelling (in it). Dwelling is not the occupation of a house; it is much more than that. Building is part of dwelling rather than the other way around. A building is not the result of a preformed plan but a continuous process. But what is dwelling? Heidegger relates the meaning of dwelling to the form of (human) being.

The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans *are* on the earth, is *Buan*, dwelling. To be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. It means to dwell. (Heidegger 1971, p. 147)

Cultivation and construction are part of dwelling, but dwelling is much broader: it is 'the basic character of human being' (p. 148). This means that, whatever cultural differences there may be in the way we regard other entities (and indeed other humans), our *human* way of being in the world is something that we share.

This sets limits to the range of possible moral status ascriptions: they are limited by dwelling as a transcendental condition of possibility. We can only relate to other entities *as dwellers*: our human being-in-the-world constrains how we can relate to other entities. There are different ways of experiencing entities, but we cannot go beyond *human* experience.

This experience is shared. Both being-in-the-world and the 'universalism' implied in Heidegger's notion of dwelling should not be interpreted in an individualist way, as being about how we *as individuals* can experience and relate. Dasein is not 'individual'. Let me explain this in the next section and draw conclusions for moral status ascription.

### 7.3. Moral status as given in a *Mitwelt*

Much of *Being and Time* gives the impression that Dasein is individual. Heidegger's view of the social seems to be limited to 'Das Man' or 'the one': like other philosophers of his time, he emphasizes the danger of conformity, mass existence. Thus, it seems as if we have the choice between either extremely individualist existence (as promoted by Sartre, for instance) or anonymous mass existence. However, if we attend to Heidegger's analysis of *Mitsein* and its relation to being-in-the-world, we can highlight a different view of the social that can still be called Heideggerian and that allows us to further develop a relational–transcendental approach to moral status.

*Mitsein* can be translated as being-with. What does Heidegger mean with this term? Consider his argument against isolationist interpretations of subjectivity (and against what we might call individualism, solipsism or even contractarianism). If we start from an isolated subject, 'a transition from this isolated subject to the others must then be sought' (Heidegger 1927, p. 111). But, according to Heidegger, this is a misunderstanding. We are always already social. What does this mean? Heidegger employs a transcendental argument again: it is not a scientific claim (e.g. about the social nature of humans as proven by evolutionary biology and psychology, or a factual claim about others being present), but a claim about the conditions of possibility of experience and a claim about human existence. Of course we might construct others as 'objectively present', as 'individuals' or as 'everybody else but me'. However, in Heidegger's view even such constructions are only possible on the basis of a deeper 'existential' ground: I already share the world with beings that are like me. Being-in-the-world is being in a *Mitwelt* (with-world).

On the basis of this *like-with* being-in-the-world, the world is always already the one that I share with the others. The world of Da-sein is a *with-world*. Being-in is *being-with* others. (Heidegger 1927, pp. 111–112)

Heidegger himself has stressed the transcendental meaning of *Mitsein*. The point is not that there are others (present), but that being-with structures my existence.

The phenomenological statement that Da-sein is essentially being-with has an existential-ontological meaning. It does not intend to ascertain ontically that I am factually not objectively present alone, rather that others of my kind also are. [...] Being-with existentially determines Da-sein even when an other is not factually present and perceived. The being-alone of Da-sein, too, is being-with in the world. The other can be *lacking* only *in* and *for* a being-with. (Heidegger 1927, p. 113)

This has implications for thinking about empathy. The problem of empathy is not one of an individual mind which then needs to (imaginatively) build a bridge to another individual mind. In the same way as the experience of loneliness is only possible on the basis of a social–transcendental ground, empathy is made possible by it. Empathy

does not construct the social but presupposes it. What we call empathy is only possible on the basis of *Mitsein* as an *a priori*. Heidegger writes: “‘Empathy’ does not first constitute being-with, but is first possible on its basis’ (Heidegger 1927, p. 117).<sup>5</sup>

Here too Dreyfus’s interpretations of Heidegger are helpful in order to further develop this analysis of being-with and to apply it to thinking about moral status. In *Being-in-the-world* (1991) Dreyfus understands *Mitsein* (being-with) as an aspect of being-in-the-world. ‘Dasein’s familiarity with significance’ is a kind of ‘background familiarity’ that must be understood as

an agreement in ways of acting and judging into which human beings, by the time they have Dasein in them, are “always already” socialized. Such agreement is not conscious thematic agreement but is prior to and presupposed by the intentionalistic sort of agreement arrived at between subjects. (Dreyfus 1991, p. 144)

Thus, Dreyfus criticizes Searle’s contractarianism, which involves a view of the social that comes about as a result of intentional agreement between rational subjects. Instead, there is already a background familiarity; there is already a society: ‘Society is the ontological source of the familiarity and readiness that makes the ontical discovering of entities, of others, and even of myself possible.’ (Dreyfus 1991, p. 145)

This transcendental argument has interesting implications for thinking about the conditions of possibility of moral status ascription. It implies that ascribing status to entities is ‘social’ in the sense that entities (human or non-human) can only appear to me *as* particular entities on the basis of a background familiarity that is inherently social. In other words, it is because I am already socialized in a world – a *social* world – that I can talk about the moral and ontological status of entities. Neither ‘I’ nor ‘we’ intentionally *give* moral status to entities. They already appear to us ‘with’ their moral and ontological status. The social already includes these categories. Even before I encounter other entities, as a social being I already have ‘a readiness of dealing with them’ (Dreyfus 1991, p. 149). How I cope with them and how I treat them is part of my (way of) dwelling, which is always social.

In Heidegger’s idiom, this means that *Mitsein* is an essential constituent of being-in-the-world. Being-in-the-world is always a *Mitsein* as the condition of possibility for being-with-others. Because Dasein is *already Mitsein*, it is possible that we can be with others and even that there can be others for us at all, that others appear *as* others to us, that the world

discloses itself to us as a social world. According to Heidegger, we can only care for others – ‘authentically’ or not – on the basis of *Mitsein* as an existential structure. We are social–relational beings and this preformats our understanding of the world and our acting in the world – including understanding other entities and acting towards other entities. We are nurtured into our way of experiencing. Wrathall writes:

Before we ever really begin thinking or making decisions for ourselves, the people with whom we live have introduced us to a particular understanding of ourselves and the world around us. This means that I am never in a position to decide for myself how I will understand things from the ground up, or to invent my own way of being in the world independently of any relationship to other human beings. Every innovation, every act of rebellion, every independent decision is shaped by our shared understanding and norms of behaviour. (Wrathall 2005, p. 52)

For moral status, this means that changing moral status, that is, changing our relation to other entities, changing our *world* – including our moral world – is not possible as an individual act of will. I cannot *invent* a different moral order because I *decide* to do so. If Heidegger is right, reinventing moral status means to reinvent the world, which is always a social world. This task is bound to fail if it is conceived of as a modernist revolutionary project – if it could ever succeed at all.

The point is not that moral change is impossible, but rather that this change and the possibility of this change depend on a transcendental ground that both enables and limits moral experience and action.

But is *Mitsein* exclusively human? Let me discuss this issue by responding to Olafson’s study of *Mitsein*. He understands *Mitsein* as the ‘ground’ of ethics (Olafson 1998). According to his interpretation of Heidegger, human beings are in the world together in a way that ‘discloses other entities and themselves’ (Olafson 1998, p. 8). Olafson says that ‘there is a relationship in which we stand to one another that is in some sense prior to all the substantive ethical rules under which we live’ (p. 11).

Olafson, like Heidegger, focuses on *Mitsein* as the ground of *human* ethics and does not consider the possibility of a sociality that includes non-humans. However, we need not be bound by this limitation. I propose to modify his Heideggerian thesis in a way that includes non-humans in several ways. To understand *Mitsein* as the ground of ethics then implies that other entities (including human beings) can only

appear to us as such (that is, as the particular entity and being we think they are) on the basis of *Mitsein* as the social ground of appearance or disclosure. This *Mitsein* can be interpreted as being exclusively human, but it can also be extended to non-humans.

Let me first stay close to Olafson and start with the first option: *Mitsein* as exclusively human. What is, in this view, the relation between *Mitsein* and moral status? As human sociality, *Mitsein* is also the ground of moral status ascription and of the (related) ethics of how to treat non-humans. If such ascriptions and norms have any authority at all, it is because they are grounded into human sociality. According to Olafson's interpretation of Heidegger, 'the first and primary milieu of human life must be constituted, not as a self-contained system of objects, but as what Heidegger calls a *Mitwelt*' (p. 20). This implies, among other things, that the question of 'other minds' – and, I would add, similar questions about the properties of non-human entities – already presupposes this social world: 'we are in effect trying to call into question something that has enabled us to reach the point at which we can pose the question' (p. 25). Similarly, the contractarian view of the social, according to which we live side by side, presupposes a social, transcendental ground that is much more *relational* than the views that grew out of it. Thus, expressions of naturalist, objectivist, individualist and contractarian accounts of the social and their ethical counterparts turn out to depend on a sociality that is very different in nature.

This view also calls into question the famous is/ought distinction, which, as Olafson points out, supposes the existence of brute and individual facts (p. 43), whereas to call something a fact is itself dependent on a transcendental relational ground that is *already* normative. Olafson:

our life with other like beings constitutes a relation between us that has a normative character, and it is that relation that finds expression in the "ought". (Olafson 1998, p. 97)

I disagree with Olafson on the requirement that the relation and life must be with 'like beings' if that is taken to mean 'humans'. I draw the following, more radical implication for moral status: the 'ought' that is connected to moral status ascriptions has its roots in a more basic sociality which includes non-humans, a relational transcendental ground that is already normative. If we say that a particular animal has moral status and that we have obligations to that animal, for instance, then these ascriptions of moral status to the animal and of obligations to humans are only possible since there is already a relation between

humans and animals, a being-with-animals. By this I mean a relation that is part of dwelling, of our human way of life, but also a particular relation between particular humans and particular animals, a particular being-with – all of which act as conditions of possibility of moral status ascription to that animal. (The same could be said about robots or other artificial entities, at least *if and to the extent that* our relation to them would constitute a *Mitsein*, a being-with.)

Thus, there are two ways to fashion a transcendental argument about moral status ascription to non-humans: either moral status ascription is taken to presuppose an exclusively human *Mitsein*, which then enables and limits what we can say about other entities, or this *Mitsein* is understood as being itself – *in principle* – open to relations to other entities. The two ways are not mutually exclusive: we can consistently claim that moral status ascription is made possible by a being-with-humans and a being-with-animals. We can construe being-with as a hybrid of both kinds of *Mitsein*. Answering the question of moral status of another entity then means to answer the question about the relation to that entity, which is ultimately the question about being-with that entity: we want to know if it is-with us and, if it is-with, then we want to know *how* to be-with it.

But, in so far as *Mitsein* is human being-with, how does this kind of *Mitsein* relate to Heidegger's *Das Man*? Does this approach to moral status imply that we have to treat animals like 'others' do and because "others also do it like that"? For example, do we have to regard animals used for food production as animal resources and treat them as things because 'they' also see those animals in this way and treat them as such? Can we continue to eat a lot of meat because 'they' also eat a lot of meat? With the term *das Man* (the 'one' – as in "what one does"), Heidegger referred to inauthenticity in the public sphere, where we do what others do, what 'one' (German: *man*) does, and subject ourselves to the gaze of others. Like Kierkegaard, Heidegger regarded the public sphere as the tyranny of opinion and disengagement. It is also the sphere of inauthentic being as 'busyness' (Heidegger 1927, p. 166). Is this what *Mitsein* amounts to? Is this emphasis on the social dimension of being-in-the-world a plea for 'inauthenticity' conformity to society, for example conformity to society's definitions of moral status of non-human entities and society's norms concerning the treatment of non-human entities?

In order to answer this question, it is instructive to review a discussion between Dreyfus, Olafson and Carman in the mid-1990s in *Inquiry* about how to interpret Heidegger on *Mitsein*. In what we may regard

as a conversation between ‘Berkeley’ and ‘San Diego’, Olafson accused Dreyfus of equating *Mitsein* with *Das Man*, which, according to Olafson, must rather be defined as ‘a deformation of *Mitsein*’ (Olafson 1994, p. 59). He accused Dreyfus of ascribing ‘cultural determinism’ to Heidegger (p. 60). If *Mitsein* means *Das Man*, then individual agency and choice disappear. Instead, Olafson argued, Heidegger described ‘a *Dasein* that awakens out of this tranquilized state and reclaims its responsibility and power of individual choice in a very radical way’ (Olafson 1994, p. 63). Elsewhere Olafson interprets Heidegger in a way that brings him close to Sartre: *Das Man* ‘relieves us of the necessity to choose’, whereas we should not hide from ourselves and ‘choose choice’: we must will to have conscience and this is what ‘constitutes authentic responsibility’ (Olafson 1998, p. 47). Thus, Olafson affirmed an individualist–existentialist interpretation of Heidegger against what he takes to be Dreyfus’s social–cultural determinism. Carman then replied to Olafson that he has an over-individuated notion of *Dasein* and that *Das Man* can also have a constitutive role. According to him, Heidegger’s view must be distinguished from the individualism of Kierkegaard and Sartre (Carman 1994, p. 205). If I call myself an individual, then this is only possible ‘against a background of collective social existence that makes individuality itself intelligible’ (p. 216). The same is true for authenticity: ‘although existence is always my own, authentic selfhood is not ontologically basic. I start out with a self-managing practical orientation in the world, but I do not necessarily have any determinate conception of myself as an individual subject or agent’ (p. 216). Carman gives the example of eating: I manage to eat without having a description of myself. I have a skill. More generally, we do not need a conception of ourselves in order to engage in practical activities. Thus, if we identify ourselves as individuals, this is only possible on the basis of ‘the prior intelligibility of the world itself’ (p. 218). If we talk about ‘*Das Man*’ or make other ethical claims (e.g. moral status ascription), these claims only make sense against that background, which already has a normative dimension.

What makes ethical phenomena possible in the first place is this kind of normative social understanding that governs our everyday impersonal dealings with one another. (Carman 1994, p. 219)

This interpretation is in line with what I have said on the previous pages. However, Carman then interprets this transcendental ground in ‘deterministic’ terms. *Das Man* ‘determines’ how we experience



the world, and this is the way Heidegger's claim that we are 'given' to ourselves in terms of *Das Man* must be understood. Carman: 'I am never in a position to have a fresh encounter with the socialized world of *das Man* since my own understanding is itself already an embodiment of the understanding of *das Man*' (Carman 1994, p. 221). This makes it appear again as if we must choose between, on the one hand, total determinism and conformity (Carman) and, on the other hand, absolute freedom and authenticity (Olafson).

Dreyfus's reply to Carman and Olafson first confirms Carman's transcendentalist interpretation: the 'background familiarity which underlies all coping' is something in which human beings are 'always already socialized' (Dreyfus 1995, p. 425). Therefore, *Mitsein* is not something that must arise on top of an individualized Dasein (as in contractarianism) but refers to the social world, the world I share with others, out of which all understanding arises – including Olafson's individualist interpretation and Carman's determinist interpretation. We need that social world – even if we revolt against what 'one' expects. The social-relational ground carries us as experiencing and active beings. In this sense, we need a good deal of conformity in order to carry on with our daily lives. As Wrathall interprets Heidegger:

It would be a disaster if you constantly had to decide on every little thing that you were going to do (what to wear, what to eat, which side of the road to drive on, etc.). By organizing our common world, conformity provides the basis upon which we are free to make important decisions. (Wrathall 2005, p. 56)

This means that even 'authentic' Dasein must at least act 'in conformity with public norms of intelligibility' (Dreyfus 1995, p. 426). Thus, even a 'new', 'authentic' proposal with regard to moral status always takes place against, and depends on, a social background and must be rendered intelligible if it is to be heard at all. Moreover, I cannot question my relations with other entities (their 'moral status') all the time; as Wrathall suggests, conformity has its benefits. This is especially true if we consider how children are raised and necessarily must be raised: what they learn and what they have to learn is how 'one' does things, how 'one' names things, and how 'one' thinks of things.

This is also true for moral status: if we want that our children become part of the (shared, social) world, that they become *worldly* in a Heideggerian sense, then they have to learn how 'one' relates to particular kinds of animals, robots, and so on. For example, young

children learn that there is a difference in ‘moral status’ between plants, animals and humans by looking at what ‘one’ – that is, their parents and others – does with plants, animals and humans and by imitating this. They learn, for example, that it is OK to kill a fly in certain situations, but that it is usually ‘not done’ to kill a cat or a dog, let alone a human being (‘one’ does not do that; in German: *Das macht man nicht*).

Dreyfus’s (and Carman’s) interpretation seems to be well supported by Heidegger’s text, which qualifies the everyday self as the ‘they’ (the ‘one’):

The self of everyday Da-sein is the they-self [...]. *Initially*, “I” “am” not in the sense of my own self, but I am the others in the mode of the day. Initially, Da-sein is the they and for the most part it remains so. (Heidegger 1927, p. 121)

And also:

the self is initially and for the most part inauthentic, the they-self. Being-in-the-world is always already entangled. (Heidegger 1927, p. 170)

However, if we follow Dreyfus’s interpretation, these statements should not be taken as meaning that we are *determined* by *Das Man* (the one) or that there is only one ‘Das Man’ (our culture is more diverse), but, rather, that the way we are in the world is always a social way. Even the discourse of authenticity depends on this transcendental ground, is made possible by being-with. Thus, Dreyfus’s interpretation, which is in tune with the later Wittgenstein’s private language argument (see the next chapter), is a *transcendental* argument.

Let me further clarify this point in order to fine-tune my argument concerning moral status. Dreyfus helpfully distinguishes between two positions. If Heidegger is taken to make a claim about the danger of conformism, then this is an ‘ontic’ position, criticized by Olafson. I also take Carman’s point about determinism to be an ‘ontic’ point. But Heidegger’s claim is ‘ontological’, that is, concerned with the social as a transcendental (back)ground that makes possible the ontic (Carman’s position). (Although elsewhere in this book I did not use this distinction between ‘ontic’ and ‘ontological’,<sup>6</sup> since there was no need for it, here I think the distinction does some work.)

According to Dreyfus, which interpretation of Heidegger we choose – ontic or ontological – depends on what we want to do, on our goals

(Dreyfus 1995, pp. 428–429). Since I want to bring out how moral status ascription depends on the way the world is already disclosed to us ‘before’ we ascribe moral status, I go with the ontological interpretation and emphasize the social as a background condition that makes possible moral status ascription. This implies that the ‘danger’ associated with ‘*Das Man*’ – the danger of conformity – is given less attention here. I do not say that Olafson is *wrong* when he attributes a Sartrean individualism to Heidegger – I accept that there are passages that warrant such an interpretation. And it may be *true* that there is a danger in following received views of moral status or about anything else (although I am sceptical about expressing these concerns within a discourse of *authenticity*), as it may also be true that we should be more care-full (have more *Sorge*) concerning our relations to other entities and perhaps try to *change* them. But these claims remain at the ontic level. Rather, given my aim here, I endorse and emphasize Dreyfus’s and Heidegger’s transcendentalism and argue that such ontic claims and the ontic language game with its criteria for truth that belongs to it – that is, the ontic claim that entity X has moral status S, which comes with criteria that refer to particular properties P of the entity that justify the claim – *presuppose* the ontological structure of the social. The social is the background against which ontic claims can be foregrounded, the transcendental ground on which the ontic grows as the disclosure of entities and their status from within a particular world view or way of doing – from within what Wittgenstein called a ‘form of life’.

Indeed, Dreyfus’s transcendentalist interpretation of Heidegger links his thinking to the later Wittgenstein and some of his most insightful interpreters, to whom I now turn. However, in contrast to many of Heidegger’s and Wittgenstein’s interpreters, I will not employ the transcendental argument to re-enforce a sharp distinction between the human and the non-human, but rather to call that distinction into question. The social transcendental ground, I will argue, is much more hybrid than Heidegger and Wittgenstein supposed.

# 8

## Societies and Cultures (2): Forms of Life

A different way of making the argument in the previous two chapters would be to say that moral status ascription presupposes 'a form of life'. What does this mean, and what can be gained by using this term? Wittgenstein's concept 'form of life' (*Lebensform*) lends itself to different interpretations. Here I will respond to what we may call Gier's 'pluralist' interpretation, which takes 'form of life' to have linguistic, behavioural, cultural and biological aspects. But let me start with Wittgenstein's own words.

### 8.1. Moral status as given in a form of life: using Wittgenstein

In the *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein 1953), Wittgenstein introduces the term as follows:

to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life (§19, p. 11)  
*speaking* of a language is part of an activity, or of a form of life (§23, p. 15)  
 it is in their *language* that human beings agree. This is agreement not in opinions, but rather in form of life. (§241, p. 94)

In his *Philosophy of Psychology* (also known as part II of the *Philosophical Investigations*) he adds:

What has to be accepted, the given, is – one might say – *forms of life*. (§345, p. 238)

These passages must be related to Wittgenstein's so-called 'private language argument' in §§243–271 (and following) of the *Philosophical Investigations*. Wittgenstein asks if it is 'conceivable that there be a language in which a person could write down or give voice to his inner experiences [...] for his own use?', that is, in a language which another person cannot understand (§243, p. 95). His answer is negative. If we use ordinary language, that language is *already* shared, public. Of course we could emit 'an inarticulate sound'. But even such a sound 'is an expression only in a particular language game' (§261, p. 99). Otherwise it is not meaningful. Thus, there is no 'private language' if this means that it can be known only to the speaker; if an utterance is to be meaningful at all, it must be subject to public rules and shared understanding. Wittgenstein's concept 'form of life' can be taken to refer to such a kind of shared background understanding, which is 'given' – not constructed. Speaking of a language is part of an activity; it should not be isolated from life.

Moreover, Wittgenstein moves from agreement in a contractarian sense ('agreement in opinions') to agreement 'in form of life'. If he says that when we speak we must presuppose a shared background understanding, this 'sharing' should not be understood as a rational agreement among rational subjects. Rather, we have grown into it by learning the use of words, by learning how to do things (with words and with things), by growing up in a world of things and people, by what Heidegger would call being-in-the-world: *before* we speak, we are already engaged in the world and we already live in a language. We live in what we may call a 'language-world'.

Applied to moral status ascription, this means that, when we ascribe moral status, this presupposes a language – it is a *moral* language if you wish – which in turn depends on something *given*: an activity or a 'form of life'. What we can say about the moral status of entities is both enabled and limited by this 'given'. In this sense, moral status ascription is already 'in' language, that is, it is given 'in' a particular form of life. This view contrasts with the contractarian view of moral status ascription as agreement: we must not suppose a moral–linguistic contract but a form of life, in which moral status ascriptions are given and shared.

On the basis of my interpretation so far, we could say that moral status ascription is a language game, which presupposes a form of life. Consider some of the examples of language games provided by Wittgenstein: giving orders, reporting an event, making up a story,

telling a joke, cursing (§23, p. 15). When you tell a joke, for instance, this joke will only ‘work’, that is, make sense, if the participants in the game share a form of life. This is why some jokes do not work when they are translated; telling jokes may well be a ‘universal’ language game but telling and understanding a *particular* joke always presuppose a shared form of life and becomes meaningless when this precondition is absent. Similarly, moral status ascription is a language game that presupposes a form of life, in the absence of which the words would become meaningless. Perhaps the particular moral status ascription game played in Western modern philosophy does not make as much sense in other cultures, at least in so far as it presupposes the Western scientific attitude and a way of relating to things which Heidegger described in terms of ‘*Gestell*’ and ‘standing-reserve’. It is only because we already live and experience in a way that presupposes a world of bare facts and naked entities that do not stand in relation to one another that we can play the game of moral status ascription or that we can ask, as contractarianism does, which principles should guide society, how society should be constructed.

Thus, there is moral agreement not in opinions but in a ‘form of life’, an agreement that is given, that must be presupposed before we can speak, before we can express any moral opinion, for example any opinion about moral status, about the environment or about how to build and structure society. But what, exactly, are ‘forms of life’? When I use the term ‘language-world’ and give the examples of translating jokes – do I mean a ‘culture’?

In order to answer this question, we need to clarify Wittgenstein’s epistemology. Wittgenstein emphasizes a skill-oriented conception of knowledge, and this has influenced Dreyfus (see the previous chapter). According to Wittgenstein, knowledge is an ability or competence: ‘One has already to know (or to be able to do) something before one can ask what something is called’ (Wittgenstein 1953, §30, p. 18). Asking about the name of something (that is, attaching a name-tag to the entity) is a language game, which belongs to a form of life. Learning a language is growing into a world. As I will further argue in the next chapter, knowledge is not a matter of representation, but is a kind of know-how. Wittgenstein writes:

The grammar of the word “know” is evidently closely related to the grammar of the words “can”, “is able to”. But also closely related to that of the word “understand”. (To have ‘mastered’ a technique.) (Wittgenstein 1953, §150, p. 65 – compare also §205, p. 88)

Applied to moral status, this means that any questioning concerning the moral status of an entity and indeed any ascription of moral status to an entity, if it is to be *meaningful*, presupposes that we already know the entity, or, rather, that we already *able to do* what is morally required – that is, that there is already a form of life that enables us to (meaningfully and morally) relate to the entity. The entity has already a name – its ontological *and* moral status is already preconfigured in language, so to speak, it is already part of our world – and we have already our ways of relating to it in experience and activity. Both are intrinsically connected; learning a language is learning a form of life. Moral status ascription requires moral know-how; it requires that we master the *technique* of relating to the entity. Coping with the entity has already been *shown* and *done* before we can speak about it. If we forget this and ‘naively’ play the game of moral status ascription in a very abstract way, for example as being about moral status functions or about the relation between ‘the truth about this object’ and the ‘moral property of this object’, then our ‘language goes on holiday’ (§38, p. 23). *In itself* (uttering) a moral status function is meaningless; it implies that – to say it in a Wittgensteinian way – ‘nothing has been done’ (§49, p. 28), unless the utterance is embedded in a context of meaning, an activity, a practice and a background of meaning – a form of life. Highly abstract moral status functions are ‘inarticulate sound’; they are meaningless.

This background cannot easily be formulated; it is more tacit or implicit knowledge. We may refer here to Polanyi, for sure, but also directly to Wittgenstein. Consider Wittgenstein 1953 §75, p. 40, his remark about tacit presupposition in the *Philosophy of Psychology* §31, and, of course, Wittgenstein 1953, §89, p. 47, where Wittgenstein quotes Augustine’s famous words in the *Confessions* about the definition of time: *si nemo ex me quaerat scio; si quaerenti explicare velim, nescio*: when no-one asks me, I know; when I want to explain it I do not know. Compare also the text Wittgenstein added to §138, p. 59: ‘Don’t I also sometimes *think* I understand a word [...] and then realize that I did not understand it?’ We do not know language in the form of propositional knowledge; rather, the know-how is presupposed. This know-how acts as a condition of possibility for speaking about moral status. Wittgenstein’s transcendentalism (see also later in this chapter) shows itself when he writes:

Thinking is surrounded by a nimbus. – Its essence, logic, presents an order: namely, the a priori order of the world; that is, the order of *possibilities*, which the world and thinking must have in common.

But this order [...]. It is *prior* to all experience, must run through all experience; [...]. But [it] does not appear as an abstraction, but as something concrete, indeed, as the most concrete, as it were the *hardest* thing there is [...]. (Wittgenstein 1953, §97, p. 49)

In the following pages of this book I hope to develop a notion of moral status ‘ascription’ as *skill* that presupposes a form of life, understood as an *a priori* ordering of the world that is very concrete and practical. I will say more on the notion of skill and its relation to morality in the next chapter. But at this point we first need to know more about what Wittgenstein means with a ‘form of life’, that is, which will allow us to further explore the landscape of the conditions of possibility of moral status ascription. Let me discuss different interpretations of Wittgenstein’s term ‘form of life’ – its ‘family of meanings’, so to speak – and apply them to the problem of moral status (ascription).

## 8.2. The cultural–social interpretation

Peter Winch has offered a social–cultural interpretation of the concept ‘forms of life’. In *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy* (Winch 1958), he re-enforces Wittgenstein’s private language argument and says that languages are ‘based on a common life in which many individuals participate’ (Winch 1958, p. 33). Language use makes sense only within a social context. According to Winch, then, elucidating the concept of a form of life equals understanding ‘the nature of social phenomena’ (p. 42), which in turn depends on understanding the relation between social relations and language. He criticizes sociology and social psychology for neglecting the question of what it means to use and to have a language.

The impression given is that first there is language (with words having a meaning, statements capable of being true or false) and then, this being given, it comes to enter into human relationships and to be modified by the particular human relationships into which it does so enter. What is missed is that those very categories of meaning, etc., are *logically* dependent for their sense on social interaction between men. [...] There is no discussion of how the very existence of concepts depends on group-life. (Winch 1958, p. 44)

In light of the relational arguments in Part I, we need to be critical of Winch’s restriction of social interaction to inter-human interaction.<sup>1</sup>



But Winch's main point is clear and supports what has been said in the previous chapter: words, concepts and their meaning – including *moral* words and concepts, we may add – are not independent tools by which we can give an (objective) account of social relations but *presuppose* the social life.

In order to develop this claim, let us consider again Wittgenstein's stress on language use, which he relates to *habit*, (social) institutions and technique:

To follow a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are *customs* (usages, institutions). To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to have mastered a technique. (Wittgenstein 1953, §199, p. 87 – compare also §205, p. 88)

Thus, language games are inherently social. The emphasis is on habit and (social) practice. According to Wittgenstein, following a rule (which one does in a language game) cannot be done privately but is a matter of practice: 'otherwise, thinking one was following a rule would be the same thing as following it' (Wittgenstein 1953, §202, p. 88).

For Winch, even the criteria of logic depend on the social: they 'arise out of, and are only intelligible in the context of, ways of living or modes of social life' (p. 100). Formal systems presuppose the social relations and activities from which they have been removed. But, as Winch says, 'like any abstraction not recognized as such, this can be misleading. It may make one forget that it is only from their roots in this actual flesh-and-blood intercourse that those formal systems draw such life as they have' (p. 126).

Note that this is a much broader 'linguistic turn' than that promoted by early analytic philosophy. In contrast to many of his twentieth-century followers, Wittgenstein moved from an 'atomistic' and 'representational' view of language (in the *Tractatus*) to a non-objectivist view, 'rejecting the idea that the function of language was primarily to provide a description of the world' (Easton 1983, p. 132). As Rubinstein remarks in *Marx and Wittgenstein*:

Wittgenstein's suggestion that philosophical problems are deeply rooted in social life has not been followed up by philosophers attempting to use his methods. Instead, philosophical inquiry has been focussed on linguistic usages narrowly defined. (Rubinstein 1981, p. 137)

Instead, for Wittgenstein language is ‘inconceivable apart from social life’ (Rubinstein 1981, p. 173). Like Benton and Easton (Easton 1983), Rubinstein goes as far as to link Wittgenstein to Marx. Both thinkers ‘contend that human consciousness implies a human body’, they think that ideas, actions and meaning must be related to their social context, and they share ‘a social conception of the person’: they hold that ‘the human individual is inconceivable apart from the history of participation in a human community’ (Rubinstein 1981, p. 186). Benton also ascribes to Wittgenstein the view that language use is ‘inseparably tied to social practice’ (Benton 2002, p. 150). But, whatever the relation to Marxist thought, Winch’s, Gier’s, Rubinstein’s, Benton’s and Easton’s interpretations of Wittgenstein bring out the *social* aspect of language use.

I infer that moral status ascription, understood as a form of language use, depends on social relations, on the social context which renders the sounds we make *meaningful*. If ‘principles, precepts, definitions, formulae – all derive their sense from the context of human social activity in which they are applied’ (Winch 1958, p. 57), then moral status ascription and its principles must be understood as inherently and deeply *social*. Knowing how to ascribe moral status, then, is not about knowing the right formula or principle, but is itself a way of doing, a know-how in a social context in which it makes sense. And learning how to do things is what Dreyfus would call learning a *skill*.

**AQ1** This does not mean that we (should) all do the same thing, but that learning a skill is always social learning. Like Dreyfus, Winch makes a distinction between different levels of expertise when he distinguishes imitation from rule-following:

Learning how to do something is not just copying what someone else does; it may start that way, but a teacher’s estimate of his pupil’s prowess will lie in the latter’s ability to do things which he could precisely *not* simply have copied. (Winch 1958, p. 58)

Thus, when raised in a particular culture, a person will learn that an entity X counts as Y in a particular social context. That person will learn a rule. But, with Dreyfus, we can say that, if the person is to become a ‘moral expert’ with regard to moral status, (s)he will have to acquire a level of know-how that relies on intuition rather than rule-following. For example, when the person encounters an entity she has never encountered before, rule-following may not suffice. Moreover, both the rule and the ‘expert’ intuition will always depend on forms of

life understood as the social life. As said, moral status ascription only makes sense within a social context. For example, ascribing moral status to animals is only meaningful in a context of specific human–animal relations, which have become problematic (for example when vegetarians argue that it is not necessary to eat meat or when new methods of farming or slaughtering are proposed). But dealing with these problems cannot be done from a ‘view from nowhere’; there is already a form of life within which the problem and the entity show up in the first place. In this sense, moral status ascription presupposes the social institutions and ‘ways of life which give [...] acts their meaning’ (p. 83). Its rules, AQ2 ‘like all others, rest on a social context of common activity’ (p. 84). We have learned to do things in a certain way; what we do – for instance, eating meat or not eating meat – is part of a common way of doing things. As Dreyfus puts it in his interpretation of Heidegger’s view of technology:

The shared practices into which we are socialized, then, provide a background understanding of what counts as things, what counts as human beings, and ultimately what counts as real, on the basis of which we can direct our actions toward particular things and people. (Dreyfus 1997, p. 44)

For moral status ascription, this means that the moral status we ‘give’ to animals and things – and indeed to humans – depends on existing practices and our socialization into these practices. In this sense, moral status ascription presupposes a whole culture (for instance, a ‘meat culture’). Therefore, when we question and try to change the concepts, principles and rules related to moral status ascription, we do not challenge a particular moral status or (better) way of ascribing moral status; we are challenging a way of life. This is why Diogenes was an outcast and why Socrates was sentenced to death. To challenge a form of life is usually regarded as a scandal.

Today our societies tend to be or become more tolerant. However, even if we now have more freedom to challenge accepted social norms, the transcendental–phenomenological view that emerges here teaches us that we have to learn to accept the limits of what moral status ascription can do. The limits meant here are not visible or explicit political restrictions on our freedom, but, rather, invisible, salient constraints on our thinking and our ways of doing that have to do with the form of life ‘in’ which we live. These borders of (moral status) thinking can be as constraining as other borders and we cannot simply change them.

From a Heideggerian point of view, there is a ‘clearing’ in which things and people appear, but we do not produce the clearing; rather, ‘it produces us’ (Dreyfus 1997, p. 44). Can we really change our way of life, that is, can we change our culture or is it something that *happens* to us? Perhaps we should ‘await’ a new culture?

Even if we reject this Heideggerian fatalism (or at least a fatalistic interpretation of Heidegger), we ‘first’ have to understand what we are doing before we can try to change our way of ascribing moral status (for example, proposing a relational theory). What we can change with regard to the moral status of non-humans is limited by existing social relations among humans and between humans and non-humans. Our way of thinking is constrained by our way of seeing and doing; this makes it so hard to change. Moral change requires us to get rid of bad *habits* (habits of thinking and doing), which cannot simply be changed because they are part of a larger form of life. Changing thinking and changing doing are entangled. Introducing new ideas, a new way of *looking* at things, goes hand in hand with ‘the adoption of new ways of *doing* things by people involved’ (Winch, p. 122; my emphasis). Developing a new *habitus* is difficult. Our ways of thinking are embodied in social institutions, but these institutions are themselves rooted in practices and social relations. Therefore, changing views about moral status requires changing society, changing culture, changing forms of life understood as ‘cultural forms, styles, and structures’ (Gier 1980, p. 253).

If we wish to come up with a new way of moral status ascription, therefore, we will always have to answer those who say: “This is what one does” or “This is what we do” – as humans and as members of a particular society and culture, maybe also as inhabitants of a particular village or community. In the end, changing moral status ascription means changing our world view (*Weltbild*), the life form at its most general level, which, according to Gier, constitutes an ‘inherited background’ (p. 254), the background against which we ascribe moral status and make other conceptualizations, distinctions and categorizations. Introducing a different way of talking about non-humans, therefore, means introducing a different way of viewing the world. And this would require creating a different *world* that rests on different practices – with ‘world’ being understood in a Heideggerian and Wittgensteinian sense.

If this can be done at all, it cannot be a matter of ‘individual’ action alone – doing things with things and doing things with words. If cultures are ‘made’ at all, they are not made by ‘individuals’. And, if we *could* propose something new, we would most certainly incur the risk that the persons we address do not understand us or see us as ‘dogs’.

A new culture has to *grow*, and at most we (as ‘individuals’) participate in that process of growth. Our ways of seeing reality and moral order cannot be transformed but must grow.

### 8.3. The biological–material interpretation

However, Wittgenstein’s concept ‘form of life’ must not be interpreted in social–cultural terms only. This interpretation is not ‘wrong’, but our analysis needs to be broadened. In preparation of the argument in the following chapter, which discusses bodily and material conditions of possibility, let me draw the reader’s attention to the *biological* interpretation of Wittgenstein’s concept ‘forms of *life*’. This interpretation has initially been proposed by Hunter, but in this section I shall follow Gier (1980; 1981; 1990) and Benton in their efforts to make this interpretation compatible with the social–cultural interpretation. They claim that language (use) does not only depend on our social–cultural ways of doing things, but also presupposes our ways of *living*, by which they mean our ways of being and doing as biological organisms reacting to our environment. Having a form of life is not only about having a culture but also about having a body. Thus, using a language – including ascribing moral status – is not just something ‘mental’ but involves the *whole* body. As Gier summarizes Hunter’s view on this:

Learning a language [...] is a type of tacit knowing that involves very little cognition. It is more akin to training and practice, training that is not different in kind from training an animal. Furthermore, the language of pain, for example, is integrally connected with facial expressions and other reactions of the bodily organism. Therefore, humans, because of the natural history of their species, speak a universal language of pain. (Gier 1980, p. 247)

Applied to moral status ascription, this implies that ascribing moral status to a particular non-human is not just a ‘mental’ matter, something that goes on in the ‘head’, or a matter of (ways of) doing things in relation to social–cultural norms alone (i.e. how we act and how we use to act in a particular culture); it also depends on how we bodily, physically *re-act* to the non-human. As a bodily being, we react differently to a stone than to a highly developed animal. Our response is partly entrenched in bodily patterns that have evolved in the course of natural history. For example, humans can respond empathically to humans and to some ‘categories’ of animals (those called “pets”), but

this process does not generally take off in relation to other entities. Another example: we use particular gestures when we deal with pets, whereas our body does different things when we deal with 'wild' animals. We have certain ways to deal with particular animals; we have embodied know-how.

This does not mean that 'morality is in the genes', but rather that moral status ascription presupposes concrete flesh-and-blood interactions in which humans as mental–bodily–cultural beings respond and react to the entities they encounter. Nature and nurture go together. We *learn* to express our (bodily) feelings; our experience is mediated by the culture in which we live. This insight also entails that our response, in so far as it is both 'biological' re-action *and* 'cultural' response, escapes our full intentional and individual control. It means, for example, that, while we *know* that a particular robot is not human (propositional knowledge), we may still react in a social way as if the robot were human or show confusion about how to react (in need of different know-how or lack of know-how) due to our common biology and due to the way we are raised in a particular culture. Another example: someone who was raised in a family with a dog will most likely respond to dogs in a different way than someone who has little experience with these animals, and both will *react* to it in a way that is not fully under their control – even if they *know* things about dogs or about that particular dog that is supposed to justify another reaction. Our (moral) language use, and our language as a whole, depends on these bodily–material conditions, which are at the same time biological and cultural. Perhaps this is how we should interpret Wittgenstein's sentence:

Giving orders, asking questions, telling stories, having a chat, are as much part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing. (Wittgenstein 1953, §25, p. 16)

Similarly, dealing with other entities is as much part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking and playing. Moral status ascription and other language games depend on what we do as biological, natural beings; for example, how we experience other entities and act towards them as embodied beings. Moral order does not belong to a separate domain 'culture' that is inscribed on a bare 'nature', like ink engraved into a blank piece of paper; it grows out of social–natural activity and experience (see also the next chapter). Forms of life are forms of *life*.

This argument does not amount to an absolute *naturalization* or materialization of the concept 'forms of life'; rather, it seeks to go

beyond modern, Cartesian dualism. The body should not be construed as something entirely separate from the mental or from (social) activity and (social) practice. Therefore, as Gier rightly argues, this biological interpretation of forms of life should not be viewed as an alternative to the social-cultural interpretation. The biological is entangled with the cultural. At the level of activities or skills, both aspects are relevant. They involve learning of rules as well as physiological changes. As Gier says, 'there is as much sociology in such activities as biology' (Gier 1980, p. 249).

When Wittgenstein tells us to observe how in fact our common lives are structured, he is not only exhorting us to look at ourselves as an animal species, but also to look at our inherited cultural ways of viewing things. (Gier 1980, p. 251)

Culture is natural to humans (Gier 1980, p. 254) and – I would like to add – there is no 'pure' nature apart from our cultural ways of seeing (see also the next chapter). Hence, unless the socio-logical interpretation by Winch is revised to include a *bio*-logical dimension, it is too one-sided a definition of Wittgenstein's concept.

But does this stress on biology mean that we should exclude the 'artificial' and the technological from our analysis? Certainly not: to emphasize life means also to emphasize our technological, material relation to nature. To argue why this is so, it is useful to turn to Marx again, in particular Benton's interpretation of Marx. The concept that links biology and technology here is *needs* (this chapter) but also *skill* (see especially the next chapter).

Let us start with needs. Bodily beings have needs and forms of life, and respond to, and are shaped by, those needs. Like Gier, Benton criticizes Winch's neglect of the biological, bodily, material dimension of forms of life – with a focus on the latter. From his Marxist perspective, he observes that Winch failed 'to grasp the "metabolism" between human societies and their naturally given conditions of existence" (Benton 2002, p. 154). In Marx's view, the social life is always engaged with nature 'in order to derive the material requirements of individual and collective life', an engagement with nature which in turn requires cooperative activity (p. 159). Benton describes the relation between the natural and the social as follows:

Humans are themselves materially embodied, while forms of social life persist at all only insofar as they have social organisation,

technical skills, and so on sufficient to sustain the bodily functions of their members, as well as the material and energy requirements of their social life through continuous interchange with nature. (Benton 2002, p. 154)

In his Marxist interpretation of Wittgenstein, playing language games (and I add: playing what we may call ‘the moral status game’) is only possible on the basis of ‘certain facts about our own nature and that of material objects, media and substances’ (Benton 2002, p. 155). Here Benton comes close to a transcendental argument:

These features of both ourselves and the natural world are, for Wittgenstein, preconditions for meaningful social interaction, and for language itself. They are therefore prior to and independent of the language-games they enable us to play, the meanings they allow us to express. (Benton 2002, p. 155)

This view also opens up the idea that there may be a shared natural basis for ‘cross-species understanding’ (Benton 2002, p. 158). Benton even suggests the idea of engaging in ‘serious study of the forms of life of non-human species’ and encourages us to think about ‘human commonality with other species’ (p. 158).

There are further commonalities between Marx and Wittgenstein that bring out the biological dimension of forms of life, and its entanglement with materiality and with sociality. For example, Schatzki has interpreted the later Wittgenstein as a ‘natural historian’: Wittgenstein stressed activity and activity is ‘inherently social’ (Schatzki in Kitching and Pleasants 2002, pp. 57–59). But, as I said, this does not exclude the biological: Schatzki suggests that Wittgenstein and Marx did not assume an opposition between nature and society. Both thinkers see society as a part of nature and vice versa (p. 60); our ‘evolved sociality’ is transformed through its ‘entanglements’ with nature. Rubinstein even notices ‘hints of an evolutionary psychology in Marx and Wittgenstein’:

The rooting of language-games in “natural, instinctive” reactions resembles the claim that culture is built around evolved dispositions. And, contrary to Marxist critics of evolutionary psychology, Marx himself described humans as developing in relation to the natural environment, seeing nature as “the inorganic body of man” [...]. (Rubinstein in Kitching and Pleasants 2002, p. 71)



However, Rubinstein immediately adds that neither Marx nor Wittgenstein believed that this implies that our practices are controlled or constrained by biology – by which Rubinstein probably means: our practices are not *caused* by ‘biology’. In other words, while culture depends on nature (and on materiality), they do not *determine* our practices or our societies. Indeed, Rubinstein proposes to read Marx and Wittgenstein in a non-deterministic, non-reductionist way:

Marx is inclined to exaggerate the rootedness of culture in material existence and Wittgenstein its autonomy. But both ultimately back away from the reductionism of those who believe that one or another factor “ultimately” drives behaviour. (Rubinstein in Kitching and Pleasants 2002, p. 74)

This position also implies that the natural and the material are not free-standing or autonomous either. Cultural practices also mediate the material. Rubinstein interprets Marx and Wittgenstein as making ‘the argument that we cannot say what a machine or an ox *is*, except in relation to a “form of life”’. Rubinstein concludes that neither culture nor nature is more ‘basic’ (Rubinstein in Kitching and Pleasants 2002, p. 75).

These are interesting ideas in the light of the question of moral status. First, as I argued, moral status – initially defined as dependent on ontological status – can only be defined in relation to a ‘form of life’. Moral status ascription, if we must use this term at all, does not make sense outside such a form. However, instead of viewing this relation in terms of a (Marxist or Hegelian) ‘dialectic’ of culture and nature, which presupposes a divide between language/thought/culture on the one hand and biological/natural life on the other hand, I propose a transcendental argument, which I take to be more in tune with Heidegger and Wittgenstein: forms of life are conditions of possibility for moral status ascription, and they are at the same time cultural and biological.

Second, the concept of forms of life, to the extent that it has a biological dimension, may be applied to other biological entities and perhaps even material entities. The concepts *Mitsein* and forms of life are usually only applied to humans. Heidegger and Wittgenstein viewed human beings as having their own specific way of being (their way of being-in-the-world), their own form of life. They did not apply the term to non-humans. But, if we take seriously the biological dimension of forms of *life*, there is a lot humans and animals share – not only in terms of properties but also and more importantly in terms of *activities* and ways of doing – and hence their forms of life merge to some extent.

We may use Gadamer's term *Horizontverschmelzung* (merging of horizons) to name this merging of forms of life – however, then we use the term not in the sense of mutual 'interpretation' but in the sense of doing and thinking things in a similar way.

On this account, we can conceive of the possibility of a merging of horizons between humans and robots, at least *if and to the extent that* human and robotic ways of doing overlap. This interpretation would require us to emphasize the social-cultural aspect of forms of life, but it is not incompatible with the material interpretation. I do not know if in the future we might come to witness a form of human-robot *Mitsein*, which is neither purely 'cultural' nor purely 'material'. But it is plausible that if, and to the extent that, humans and robots share a way of doing, *some* kind of being-with might emerge, or at least this is how it may appear to the human subject and how it may shape the lives of the humans involved.

For moral status of animals, this approach would imply that we replace (alleged) context-free discourses on the moral status of animals by the recognition of their preconditional basis in relations between humans and other species, shared natural-existential features and species-specific forms of life – forms of life which have material and biological aspects. Again, some forms of being-with can be said to emerge in specific contexts, especially if we consider not only shared needs but also what some humans and animals *do* together in these contexts – partly to meet those needs.

This approach implies that we accept that our 'moral status game' is limited by the forms of life we can imagine – 'singular' and 'mixed' ones. If, for instance, we try to ascribe moral status to imagined extra-terrestrial aliens, then such an exercise is futile and meaningless, unless there is some (imagined) similarity in form of life between humans and these aliens. But the situation is different and much less complicated with many (known) animals, whose forms of life partly overlap with human forms of life in both a biological and a social-cultural sense.

We can conclude from Benton's theory that, if someone strongly resists ascribing *any* moral status to animals, that person unjustly denies shared natural-existential features and similarities in form of life – and therefore denies not only the nature of the other being but also a part of her own nature. This is a moral-epistemological failure. However, I resist Benton's apparent scientific-objectivist form of naturalism here: the mentioned similarities in natural 'features' and forms of life cannot be viewed from an 'objective' point, a view from nowhere; we always already interpret these features and similarities

from our human point of view. Moral status ascription is a *human* language game, which presupposes a human form of life – even if this may never be a ‘purely’ human form of life but always already ‘mixed up’ with animal forms of life (and perhaps even robotic forms of life). In this sense, but in this sense only, moral status ascription must remain ‘anthropocentric’.<sup>2</sup>

To accept the existence of ‘mixed’ forms of life or overlap between forms of life between different kind of entities, human and non-human, is not to deny that there are (parts of) forms of life (Wittgenstein) or ‘existentials’ (Heidegger) that are specifically human. For example, I agree with Wittgenstein that animals cannot hope (Wittgenstein 1953, p. 229), at least in the *human* sense of the term, since they do not have human language. Thus, ‘emotions talk’ as a language game is specifically human. But this does not exclude the fact that humans and some animals share the possibility of having feelings and expectations, which has to do with our shared evolved biological make-up. (Perhaps some species can have a species-specific form of ‘hope’.) More: ‘emotions talk’ as a language game is itself dependent on this condition of possibility: our human language and our knowledge of emotions are not (merely) propositional knowledge but an embodied kind of know-how. We learn to hope as an embodied being in relation to specific people, things, animals and gods; in this way we become skilled at hoping, we develop a hope *habitus*.<sup>3</sup> But some animals can have a similar experience and habit, even if it cannot experience it *as* “hope”. In humans and (particular) animals, both experience (for example emotional experience) and its conditions of possibility *partly* overlap.

Note also that ‘hope’ is a good example for how the cultural and the biological merge in the concept of form and life-form. Emotions are neither merely biological (a matter of feeling) nor merely cultural (a matter of belief, cognitive); their specific form depends on our ways of doing things and our ways of life – biological and cultural. Therefore, I prefer not to call ‘hope’ itself a form of life. The language of hope depends on forms of life as its condition of possibility (but not its *cause*).

A good way of taking distance from the vocabulary of causation, facts and objectivity is to use the term *appearance*. Life-forms render it possible that things appear in a certain way. Let me briefly return to the discussion about Marx and Wittgenstein in order to clarify this point.

Andrews writes of what Marx called ‘commodity fetishism’: ‘under a system of commodity production, commodities appear in fact to be crystallised labour’ (Andrews in Kitching and Pleasants 2002, p. 89). What

happens is that labour gets objectified, but this is only possible under a system of commodity production, that is, under what Wittgenstein called a form of life. Andrews generalizes this point:

Value, then, is a social relation which appears as an objective property of objects, as exchange-value; this objectivity is grounded in an activity, a form of life. (Andrews in Kitching and Pleasants 2002, p. 91)

Applied to moral status, this means that the value of entities appears as an objective property of these entities, which appear as objects only because there is an activity or form of life that makes them appear as such. This is not imposed from 'above', but occurs as a result of the very activity itself. Our ways of doing – for example, certain ways of treating animals, such as factory farming – make it possible that these animals appear as objects with a certain value and with certain properties, for example as material resources or 'commodities'. These appearances then re-enforce and perpetuate the form of life in which they are rooted, which makes it hard – but not completely impossible – to imagine and live different forms of life. In this sense, moral appearances are neither 'illusion' nor 'real'. We must take appearances seriously, not as a new type of 'objects' ('phenomena'), but as emerging from a relation between ways of seeing and forms of life (understood as ways of doing). As Read remarks about 'capital' as a construction: 'Because we are *living* this illusion, and because while we live it it is not only illusion, it is in us, and all around us.' (Read in Kitching and Pleasants 2002, p. 277). And, as Andrews notes: 'The value language-game is one that continues to have relevance in the capitalist world today' (p. 93). Moral status ascription, then, in particular if it is construed in a Searle-like way, belongs to a bourgeois language game obsessed with objects and properties. But this game does not constitute mere 'beliefs' about moral status, if that means they belong to an ethereal 'cultural' sphere that has nothing to do with bodies or matter. They are not 'illusionary' or 'fantastic'. Instead, these ways of seeing and ways of talking are firmly rooted in widespread bodily-material practices, which make them pervasive and vibrant throughout the world at hand, and indeed shape that world: the practices and habits create and *sustain* that 'value' world and its dualist assumption that objects 'have' value (the discourse on intrinsic value) or that we ascribe value to 'naked' objects (Searle-style moral status ascription). As I will conclude, to get beyond moral reification and to foster a *relational view* of 'moral status' instead (that is, one

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which does not fall into the trap of *objectifying* relations) requires not more or less than changing our *world*.

Perhaps we should not be too pessimistic about the possibility of such a change: if ‘illusions’ have to be lived in order to remain ‘real’, then changing to a different ‘illusion’ requires changing our lives – *our* lives. If and to the extent that *that* is possible, we can grow into a different world. The ‘system’ – capitalist or not – only exists if we live it. On the other hand, is there *anything* more difficult than changing one’s form of life? Life-forms are not like products on the shelves of the supermarket; we cannot simply switch to a different one if we are not satisfied with it and if we rationally decide to choose another one; life-forms are all around us and in us. It is the form of sociality (and personality) itself, with its ‘cultural’, ‘material’ and ‘bodily’ aspects. We are formed *by* it as much as we contribute to its perpetuation.

#### 8.4. Conclusion: Wittgenstein’s transcendental argument

In sum, using Wittgenstein, Gier, Benton and others we can understand moral status ascription as a linguistic activity that is dependent on forms of life, which have biological–material and social–cultural dimensions and which make moral status ascription possible and at the same time constrain it.

If we emphasize the cultural dimension, moral status ascription is viewed as dependent on *human* life-forms (which have a biological but *human* biological dimension). But, if we really take seriously the biological–material dimension, we can conclude that moral status ascription to non-human entities presupposes not only exclusively human life-forms that constrain the ascription, but also ‘mixed’ life-forms: forms of relations between humans and non-humans which are always already normative.

The relation between moral status ascription and forms of life can be described with the term ‘transcendental’. I agree with Gier, therefore, that we must take forms of life to ‘perform a transcendental function’ as the ‘existential equivalents of Kant’s *Bedingungen der Möglichkeit der Erfahrung*’ (Gier 1980, p. 257) or, as Gier says elsewhere, as Heidegger’s transcendental “existentials” in *Being and Time* (Gier 1990, p. 280).

Benton, too, suggests that Wittgenstein’s illustrations can be ‘represented in the form of transcendental arguments’ (Benton 2002, p. 155). However, whereas Benton says this with a view to bringing Wittgenstein closer to his own naturalism and realism, Gier rightly concludes that

Wittgenstein was doing phenomenology. Indeed, Wittgenstein explicitly wrote in the *Philosophical Investigations* that his investigation was directed ‘not towards *phenomena*, but rather, as one might say, towards the “possibilities” of phenomena’ (Wittgenstein 1953, §90, p. 47). Whereas the early Wittgenstein was close to (early) Husserl, the late Wittgenstein was closer to Heidegger’s existential phenomenology: ‘both Heidegger and Wittgenstein preserve phenomenology’s transcendental method, one directed at forms of life rather than facts of life’ (Gier 1990, p. 285). This means that, if we take Wittgenstein’s approach seriously, the concept ‘forms of life’ cannot be used as a scientific concept.

The concept of *Lebensformen* is not to be taken as a *factual* theory, one dealing with certain biological, psychological, or cultural facts. Forms of life are the formal framework that make society and culture possible, but they cannot serve any sociological theory. *Lebensformen* do not answer any “why” questions; they have no explanatory power. [...] Wittgenstein is concerned with the meaning of life and the concepts we use, not their causes, empirical content, or ontological status. (Gier 1981, p. 31)

For the purpose of giving meaning to our lives and understanding relations to human and non-human others, it is not useful to resort to scientific atomism and essentialism in order to establish a moral status science, in particular if we borrow their habits to try to uncover the underlying reality, to strip off appearance in order to see underlying reality, to make visible what is invisible. As Pleasants writes about his brand of Wittgensteinian Marxist social criticism:

What is needed is description that promotes change in their way of seeing that reality, not explanation that “reveals” its hidden essence. For the purposes of radical social criticism, “nothing is hidden” (Wittgenstein [PI] §435) – that is, not hidden in the way that the molecular, atomic and sub-atomic universe is hidden from scientifically unaided thought and perception. (Pleasants in Kitching and Pleasants 2002, p. 177)

Instead, we need to *show* the forms of life. For example, if we want to understand the moral and ontological status of robots and information technology in a critical way, it is of little use to us to ‘reveal’ the computer programs (the code; compare to DNA or to cultural codes) or to ‘reveal’ the material parts of the robot or the computer as a material

object. Instead, we should attend to how these technologies appear to us and how this appearance is related to forms of life that make that appearance and ascription possible – forms of life that are so familiar to us that we might easily overlook them, since we always live *in* a form of life (for example, a scientific form of life).

Thus, forms of life must be understood as transcendental conditions, forms that make ascriptions of ontological or moral status possible. They do not themselves *explain* moral status, but they allow us to *make sense* of moral status ‘ascription’ and of the activities and practices related to the ‘object’ of moral status. These forms of life cannot be explained in a scientific way, since that way is itself (part of) a form of life.

Pleasant’s use of the term ‘description’ is a little misleading here, since it may suggest to scientifically minded persons (and today we *all* are such persons to some extent – philosophers and others alike) that there is an ‘object’ to describe. But Wittgenstein talks about *form*. We cannot *describe* the forms of life that make moral status ascription possible – we cannot describe any form of life. It can only be shown. As Wittgenstein noted in his *Philosophical Remarks*: ‘A form cannot be described: it can only be presented (*dargestellt*)’ (Wittgenstein 1975, p. 208). We have a *Weltbild* and a *Weltanschauung* (world image and world view), which make particular moral status ascriptions possible and exclude others. A form of life is not a “fact” or a collection of “facts”, but a form of *experience* and *praxis*, a way of seeing and a way of doing: a way of life. Therefore, changing thinking about moral status would require changing our world view and our way of life: it is a world, a social–biological *Umwelt* (Husserl, Heidegger) or life-world in which we live, our *a priori* horizon that makes possible and limits experience and praxis.<sup>4</sup>

In this sense, we may infer, Wittgensteinian philosophy is always necessarily ‘environmental’ philosophy (*Umweltphilosophie*) and ‘philosophy of life’ (*Lebensphilosophie*). This is ultimately why, as Gier remarks, in Wittgenstein’s concept of the life-world (*Lebenswelt*) nature and culture merge (Gier 1981, p. 124). To conclude, with Gier we must read Wittgenstein as a ‘philosopher of life’ (*Lebensphilosoph*), not only a philosopher of language (Gier 1990, p. 285).

In addition to the reasons already given, it must be noted that Wittgenstein also stressed lived experience (*Erleben*) and what Polanyi called ‘tacit knowledge’ as opposed to acquiring knowledge (*Erkennen*), which brings him close to Spengler and even Goethe (Gier 1981, p. 61). And Wittgenstein might have borrowed his term ‘form of life’ from Spranger, a student of Dilthey, who wrote a book called *Lebensformen*.

Gier suggests that Wittgenstein might have read it (or at least heard of it), given his Viennese background (Gier 1981, p. 55). But, whether or not there were direct biographical connections to ‘philosophers of life’ and their works, Gier’s comparisons with *Lebensphilosophen* (Gier 1981) are convincing, and the bio-cultural interpretation summarized above gives us good reasons to call Wittgenstein a *Lebensphilosoph*, a philosopher of life.

As said, Wittgenstein can also be understood as a phenomenologist, since he used phenomenology’s transcendental method, which he distinguished from the scientific method. Phenomenology is about possibility and meaning, not about truth or falsehood. For example, in this book I am concerned with the question of whether moral status ascription is meaningful and with what makes moral status ascription possible. With Wittgenstein, I can say: ‘Our investigation, however, is directed not toward *phenomena*, but [...] towards the “possibilities” of phenomena’ (Wittgenstein PI §90, p. 47).

Thus, a form of life must be understood as an ‘*a priori*’. This transcendentalism renders Wittgenstein somewhat Kantian, although Wittgenstein held that what mediates experience is not categories but ‘grammar’ and related forms of life. But this should not be understood as a move from the ‘mental’ to the ‘external’, cultural and biological. Forms of life are neither ‘external’ nor ‘internal’. As Gier writes in *Wittgenstein and Phenomenology* (1981):

Wittgenstein does accept the Kantian idea that we do not have any direct apprehension of things-in-themselves, but he rejects Kant’s assumption that there are innate categories of the mind which insure the universality and objectivity of knowledge. [...] We shall see that both Wittgenstein and phenomenology have overcome the traditional distinction between an interior mental realm and an external nature. (Gier 1981, p. 13)

According to this non-dualist, phenomenological view, there is no distinction between two realms, but a stream of life; there is experience.<sup>5</sup> In this chapter and in the previous chapter I suggested that the way dualism can be overcome is by means of notions like *skill* (Dreyfus) or ‘lived experience’, which draw together ‘inner’ experience and mind and ‘outer’ activity and matter to such an extent that the distinction collapses. I will further articulate this idea in the next chapter and use it to elaborate my analysis of the conditions of possibility of moral status ascription.



Finally, note that in using Gier's interpretation of Wittgenstein I have downplayed the aspect of Wittgenstein that emphasizes *rules* and instead focused on the 'forms of life' aspect understood as a transcendental argument. This use of Wittgenstein is also in line with Dreyfus's use of (the late) Wittgenstein and, more generally, with the stress on implicit knowledge (know-how, skill) and transcendental analysis in this part of my book.

I conclude that forms of life are not the *causes* of moral status ascriptions, but that they structure what we can say about other entities and their moral status; they are the transcendental ground of moral status ascription. In the next chapter, I shall further discuss the bodily, material and indeed *technological* dimension of this transcendental ground.

Note that by calling a form of life a 'ground' I do not suggest that it is the absolutely stable epistemological fundament traditional philosophers have always looked for. With Heidegger and Wittgenstein, we must construe it as a *social* ground, which is not fixed in the sense of being a basis of absolute truth in an eternal sphere, but which is stable enough for what we do, for beings like us. Hence we must revise the Nietzschean problem definition I started with in this book. Nietzsche and his followers are right that we need a kind of ground, that without it we lack orientation. But this ground is not a fixed moral and ontological order; it is the social order – broadly defined. When we lost the idea of a moral and ontological order, therefore, we did not fall into an abyss. There is a social, transcendental ground that carries us. It is what Dreyfus calls a 'nonground' in *Being-in-the-world*:

Philosophers seek an ultimate ground. When they discover there is none, even modern philosophers like Sartre and Derrida seem to think that they have fallen into an abyss [...]. Whereas Wittgenstein, and Heidegger in Division I [of *Being and Time*], see that the nonground is not an abyss. Counting on the shared agreement in our practices, we can do anything we want to do: understand the world, understand each other, have language, have families, have science, etc. (Dreyfus 1991, p. 156)

What is *really* problematic, then, is not the denial of moral order by nihilism, but the denial of the social: the transcendental, *relational* ground that allows us to live – including 'ascribing moral status' to other entities and treating them as if there were a 'moral order'. Even those who think that we are thrown into a moral desert as individuals and that we have to do everything ourselves, that we have to create the

world, that we have to try to become *Übermenschen* or gods, even those unfortunate beings (and perhaps we all are such unfortunate beings to *some* extent, in so far as we are modern beings) can only make this claim safely from within the womb of the social–relational world that feeds their thoughts and allows them to grow.

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Acknowledging this social–relational ground also has implications for the use of reason – by ‘reason professionals’ or others. On the one hand, we need to do the work of construction, which is always a construction of relations. If philosophers use their *logos* in order to understand the world, then, it is not logic they must use but what Gier (inspired by Heidegger’s analysis of the term) calls “broad reason”: their ‘capacity to “put together” a world that makes sense’ (Gier 1981, p. 196). *Verstehen* (to understand, the aim of hermeneutics) is always *verbinden* (to connect). As philosophers, and perhaps more generally as *thinkers*, we should be connectors and *gatherers*. The point of thinking is not to gather facts but to relate. As Gier writes, the ‘rough ground’ of lived experience ‘will not yield clear and distinct ideas or answers’, but we can try to get an overview, *Übersicht* (Gier 1981, p. 228). But, on the other hand, with Heidegger and Wittgenstein we should stress that we can only connect and gather what is already given to us. The forms shown in the overview emerge from what we already experience, from what we already do and from what we can do (know-how). Keeping in mind the transcendental argument, the following paradox makes sense: *we can only relate what is already related*. The social–linguistic–cultural–biological forms we construct in our language games as philosophers are already experienced, practised, lived. They have grown. The challenge for thinking – if thinking can ever constitute a *real* challenge at all – is to form what has already been formed, to connect conceptually what has already grown. The *practical* challenge is to make it flourish, and to flourish ourselves.

However, in contrast to what many Heideggerians and Wittgensteinians tend to believe, the ‘already related’, the social transcendental ground that makes growth and flourishing possible, the social–relational world-soil, *is not exclusively human*. It includes relations with and between other entities. Influenced by Ingold, I will further question the human/non-human, natural/cultural and natural/artificial distinctions in the next chapters.

## 9

Bodies and Things: Forms of  
Feeling and Making

A discussion of linguistic and cultural conditions may be misinterpreted as implying that the transcendental ground of moral status ascription is a matter of 'higher' symbolic forms that have nothing to do with 'lower' bodily and material factors. Wittgenstein's work in particular may give rise to that misinterpretation, given his emphasis on framing philosophical problems as problems of *language* – an emphasis that has been maintained by most twentieth-century analytic philosophers, who defined themselves as philosophers of language. However, as I have argued in the previous chapter, the 'forms of life' are not just linguistic in nature – they are at the same time social-cultural *and* biological-material; they are forms of *life*. Language and culture are firmly connected to the bodily and material-technological.

It is important to repeat that this connection is not causal: (moral) language and culture depend on the body and on technology, but not so much since the mind is dependent on the *brain* (on neurons etc.) and since we need tools to sustain the 'hardware' on which our 'software' depends, as naturalism has it. Rather, the linguistic-cultural and the bodily-material are interdependent because forms of speaking and doing depend on forms of bodily experience and perception and on forms of techno-human growth; at the same time, forms of speaking and doing also form and re-form the body and bodily experience. In other words, the point is not that there are *causal* relations between mind and brain or between technological transformations and bodily functions, but rather that there are *formal* relations between, on the one hand, what we say – for example moral status ascription – and, on the other hand, lived, bodily experience of the world and engagement with the world. My purpose in this chapter is to further show the significance of these conditions of possibility, not the 'causes' of moral

status ascription. What we can say about the moral status of entities is limited by the bodily, material and technological (back)ground that makes possible our (moral) language. Hence, I will argue that answering the question of the moral status *of* technology (understood as ‘artefacts’, for example robots) depends on ‘technology’ itself. In order to make sense of this paradox, I will need to elaborate an alternative conception of technology: technology as skill. I will use Ingold’s and Dreyfus’s work again for this purpose.

As I will show, this different orientation implies that the very idea of ‘ascription’ or ‘inscription’ must be abandoned. To ascribe status to something or to inscribe status into something presupposes that there is a real, natural world independent from us in which we inscribe our civilization and culture, that there are entities independent from us to which we ascribe status and onto which we inscribe culture (domestication). But the relational–phenomenological view I am developing in this book rejects these assumptions.

However, let me first further discuss the bodily, material and technological conditions for moral status ascription by outlining some conditions of possibility for human–animal relations.

### 9.1. Human–animal relations: social and material–technological conditions

The form human–animal relations take, and the corresponding moral status that is given to animals, are dependent on (but not caused by) social–cultural and material–technological existential conditions, which are themselves interdependent and make up a transcendental ground for the form of human–animal relations and for moral status. Consider the following brief and tentative overview of possible forms, which have been developed in the course of human history, or, rather, human–animal history.

In a *hunter-gatherer society* the animal is hunted in what we would now call “the wilderness”; the animal is still “untamed” and “wild”. As Ingold shows (see Chapter 5), however, the hunter-gatherer would consider them to be part of the same life-world. In this sense it is neither ‘tame’ nor ‘wild’; this suggests too much human control. It is ‘up to the animal’ to show itself, to reveal itself. Humans have no full control over the animal. Hence its status is high; there is something sacred about it. It is up to the animal to give itself to humans. The animal itself is seen as a spiritual being (animism, for example Shinto) or seen as engendered by the vital, spiritual force of the land (totemism, for example

Aboriginal societies).<sup>1</sup> Spirituality is distributed over the world; there are many spirits and gods. It is up to the god to reveal himself. These are not 'beliefs' in the sense of independent propositions; they are part of the form of the human–animal relation, which depends on hunting as a material–technological condition of possibility. The material–technological constrains the way people live their lives and think their world.

In an *agricultural–pastoral* society, we find different material–technological conditions. The animal is now tamed and part of the economy, that is, part of the household. A difference is made between tamed animals and wild animals. Only the tamed animals are considered to be part of the life-world. They still have a relatively high status, since humans know they are dependent on them, but the human–animal relation changes now. Animals have to be taken *care* of. The human becomes the care-giver, the shepherd. Moreover, the animal is no longer killed by hunting. Rather, it is slaughtered. The human is the master who determines when the time of the animal has come. He is the judge of life and death. And, if the animal is a work animal, he is the animal's lord and master. Similarly, in monotheism the human–god relation is a sheep–shepherd relation. Consider, for example, the famous Psalm 23, with its explicitly pastoral imaginary: 'The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters', and so on. The monotheistic god is the central controller, the master who takes care of his slaves, the lord who takes care of his servants, the farmer who takes care of his cattle. But the slaughter still has something sacred: it is an offer and it is *ritual* killing. The animals are offered to the god, that is, *presented* to them (and in Christianity God offers His Son: Christ is the 'Lamb of God'). These animals are a kind of gift, not a product.

This changes with the rise of *industrial* society and industrial *production*. Animals leave the sphere of the house and the household. They no longer live in or near the house (with the humans), but are reared in industrial complexes. Animals become products: they are produced; that is, the animals – or rather their meat – are the output of a production process, or they are turned into production units themselves (e.g. "milk cows"). Humans no longer dwell with animals.

In one of his Bremen lectures in 1949 ('Das Ge-Stell'), Heidegger compared the industrial production of animal meat to the production of (human) corpses: 'Agriculture is now a motorized food-industry – in essence, the same as the manufacturing of corpses in gas chambers and extermination camps' (Heidegger, translated in Sheehan 1988, pp. 41–42). Whether or not this comparison is entirely appropriate,

Heidegger manages to capture the industrial character of contemporary agriculture, and indeed of the related human–animal relation. Animals become products and the humans involved become producers and controllers. Here we are far removed from hunting spirituality and pastoral sacrifice. The status of the animal is that of a ‘raw material’ for the production of meat or that of a ‘machine’ or ‘robot’ for the production of milk. God is death; humans take over the role of god–creator, but without the promise of salvation. They make and take, they produce and consume.

In the *information* society, finally, meat production becomes *information processing*. The animal is tagged, linked, connected, *bluetoothed*, embedded. It becomes a node in a network. It becomes a (bar) code or a DNA code that is manipulated. It becomes *an information object*. Disembodied, it becomes an element within a production system and a logistic system. In other words, in our perception the animal becomes bloodless. Gone is the blood of the hunted animal, the blood of the sacrifice, and even the blood that was streaming down the production lines of the industrial farms and slaughterhouses. We have filtered out the red colour from our moral screen. We are arriving at the provisional climax of the progressive de-sacralization and disembodiment of the animal. At the same time, the status of the *human* becomes that of an information processor. The ‘farmer’, who was already a (production) manager, now becomes a *user*, a webmaster and a system supervisor, a system controller. The consumer ‘downloads’ milk or meat from the system; newborn animals are ‘uploaded’ to the system. The status of humans is always coupled with the status of animals: both statuses evolve simultaneously.

In response, we try to *re-naturalize* the animal – and the humans. This can take at least two forms. A first option is the romantic re-naturalization of the animal we can observe today, which must be interpreted as a form of “re-wilding”. In an attempt to give it back its high moral status, the animal is *liberated* from the system and ‘given back’ to nature. At the same time, the human tries to liberate herself from the system and wishes to return to nature. However, this ‘solution’ is problematic, since it comes too late: we already have left the common life-world; we have left what we now consider as ‘wilderness’. The decisive step away from a hunter-gatherer society, which constituted the simultaneous *domestication* of animals and the humans related to them, cannot be turned back. The only way to ‘re-naturalize’ the animal, therefore, is, paradoxically enough, to *socialize* it. Instead of searching for a pure nature, we can understand the natural *as* the social, and the social *as* the natural.

To understand the natural as the social means to show that the ‘wilder-ness’ was a common life-world, was already social: full of human–human but also human–animal relations. To understand the social as natural means to see animals too as *fellows* and companions. But this has a biological basis. Being a companion originally means: eating the same bread. In other words, we can include animals in the social by recognizing our shared biological basis. ‘They’ too have (the same) needs; they too have a (similar) body. Again we can borrow Shakespeare’s words here, which I already quoted in Chapter 1, and let the choir of animals sing:

If you prick us, do we not bleed?  
 If you tickle us, do we not laugh?  
 If you poison us, do we not die?

However, this argument for giving animals (a higher) moral status should not be confused with Singer’s utilitarian argument based on the property of sentience; this would be to relapse into the properties approach. The body I refer to here is a different kind of body: not the body of properties or the body as property or instrument to feel pain and pleasure, the body we can ‘have’; I mean something else. In the next section, I will clarify my claim that moral status depends on ‘bodily’ conditions of possibility.

## 9.2. Moral status and the body: Merleau-Ponty and embodied cognition

Although in ‘traditional’ modernity the properties-based approach to moral status tends to focus on mental properties such as consciousness, free will and so on, there is no reason in principle why the body could not play a role within such an account. More: its properties can be seen as highly relevant for determining the ontological and moral status of the entity in question, for example when the ‘sentience’ and ‘ability to suffer’ criterion is used (as Singer did), or when it is argued that the entity should be capable of feelings. However, in this role the body is mainly seen as a carrier of properties and is itself the property of the entity (or of the mind of the entity). Entity *x* is said to have a body *b* which has morally relevant property *p*; therefore, or so it is argued, entity *x* has moral status *s*. For example, a pig can be said to have a body that is capable of suffering and robots are said to lack such bodies. The properties-based approach may even require a combination of bodily and mental properties. Various ‘mixed’ versions are possible.

What is problematic about this Cartesian approach to moral status ascription is not that the body plays a role (or not), but rather that it is given the wrong kind of role. People who use the properties approach make the body appear as if it stood in the same relation to an entity (or the mind of that entity) as the owner of a car relates to her car: the body appears as the vehicle of the entity (or of the mind of the entity), which allows the entity to move about. The body appears as the property of the entity, in the same way as a car is the property of its owner. And the car itself has certain properties. The car can transport you; the body too. The car has the function of giving you pleasure, but it can also give you pain when it breaks down or when it crashes; the body has similar functions. But this form of appearance, this kind of experience of the body, is only *one* form, *one* particular way of experiencing the body – a very modern one. There are other possibilities, other ways of relating to ‘your’ body, other ways of *being* (a body), of bodily being.

Let me turn to Merleau-Ponty to explain this and to reinforce the point I already made in the previous chapters. The relation of entities to their body is assumed to be what Merleau-Ponty calls ‘having a body’ (Merleau-Ponty 1962; see also my previous discussion of Dreyfus and Heidegger). Instead, we and (other) animals usually experience our body not only as something we ‘have’, as if it were an object, but also as *us*. This is what Merleau-Ponty calls ‘being a body’. I am my body rather than I ‘have’ it. In daily experience and perception, in so far it is not framed by an objective–scientific outlook, we usually do not see and treat our body as a thing, but we *live* and *are* our body.

If we nevertheless see our body as a vehicle – or indeed as a robot-body we control – it is because we are now used to forming our bodily experience in a ‘motorized’ and ‘robotic’ way, because we live in a modern age that since Descartes (and to some extent already since Plato) has split us into two parts: body and mind. If we have become the captains, pilots and drivers of our own body, the controllers of our ‘own’ robot-body (including our brains as the CPU: the Central Processing Unit), it is because we not only started to ‘believe’ the Cartesian myth, but also and especially because we have perceived and transformed our world and ourselves accordingly. The industrial revolution and the information revolution were made possible by Cartesianism and its corresponding mechanization and robotization of the body. The latter completes the process of alienation from our body. Once we view ourselves as the controllers of our robot-body, it is a small step to imagining enhancing, rebuilding and *remote*-controlling our



robot bodies, or even disconnecting from them altogether by means of ‘uploading’ ourselves to a virtual world or to another body, as some transhumanists imagine.

What is the alternative? Varela *et al.* (1991) might be helpful here. They continue Merleau-Ponty’s thinking, although they emphasize the compatibility of the two ways of seeing. They view the body as physical and at the same time as lived, experiential; according to the authors, these ways of seeing are not opposed, but are two sides of ‘embodiment’ (Varela *et al.* 1991, p. xv). More interestingly, however, they use this insight in order to develop a new theory in contemporary cognitive science, moving from cognitivism to ‘enaction’, which they connect with a Buddhist view of the self.

What does this mean? As I already explained in the previous chapters when referring to Varela *et al.*, cognitivism is based on representation and its central metaphor is the computer that works with symbols as representations (see also Dreyfus). Cognitivism and early AI understand the human mind in these terms. Instead, enaction stresses ‘context-dependent know-how’, which it takes to be ‘the very essence of *creative cognition*’ (Varela *et al.* 1991, p. 148). We do not represent the world; we *bring forth* meaning ‘from a background of understanding’ (p. 149). This understanding depends on us having a body, on our embodiment. Our capacities of understanding depend on lived, bodily experience. According to this view, the transcendental ground referred to in the previous chapters is *bodily*. In other words, if we want to imitate human intelligence, it is not enough to equip a computer with models of the world; the ‘brain’ needs a (robot or biological?) ‘body’ in order to become ‘mind’. In humans, embodied being-in-the-world is a condition of possibility for thinking. Knowledge needs to be understood as know-how. For example, colour ‘must be located not in a pre-given world but rather in the perceived world brought forth from our structural coupling’ (p. 165). With the term ‘structural coupling’ they mean to emphasize the entanglement of entity and world.

Varela’s approach is non-dualistic. In tune with what has been said in the previous chapters, Varela *et al.* think there is no ultimate ground in the sense understood by the Western philosophical tradition, but they think that the discovery of the ‘groundlessness in our culture’ (p. 253) is not a bad thing: in the Buddhist tradition there is no such absolute ground, yet ‘mindfulness/awareness’ can help us to engage in ‘building and dwelling in worlds without ground’ (p. 254). Based on the previous chapter, we could answer: there is no ‘ultimate’ ground but there is a *transcendental* ground: forms of life, which must not only

be understood in linguistic–cultural terms but also in bodily–material terms. Considering again what has been said in the previous chapters, we see that Varela’s approach is similar to that of Lakoff and Johnson (thinking depends on metaphor as rooted in embodiment) but also to (Dreyfus’s) Heideggerian phenomenology, which is equally non-dualistic when it draws out the implications of being-in-the-world.

Varela *et al.*’s phenomenological orientation, inspired by Merleau-Ponty, is somewhat at odds with their scientific orientation. The authors attempted to combine both, but I doubt if they succeeded. As I have said several times before, the relation between thinking/experiencing/talking, and so on, and its transcendental ground should not be understood in causal terms. But Varela *et al.* and especially their AI cousins risk remaining captivated in a scientific form of life (which is, ironically, ‘proof’ of the phenomenological side of their argument). In so far as they do cognitive *science*, the possibilities for revealing the transcendental ground as forms of life are limited. If these two language games are indeed largely incommensurable *and* if one wishes to move beyond cognition in the way proposed by Varela *et al.*, then perhaps one should not only move beyond classical AI but also abandon the very project of a ‘cognitive *science*’.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, if we wish take Varela’s non-dualism seriously, then perhaps we should move beyond the very term ‘body’ altogether. Following the work of Varela *et al.*, it is fashionable today to talk about ‘embodied cognition’. However, we should be careful of expressing this approach in terms of the *body* or embodiment. Varela *et al.* argue against Cartesian dualism, but their language of ‘embodiment’ remains somewhat dualistic. If, in response to Cartesianism, we emphasize the body over the mind or suppose that there is a something (a mind, mental properties, etc.) that is ‘*em*-bodied’ in the sense that it *has* a body (animals) or is given a body (robots), then we simply revert to Cartesian dualism and therefore remain dualist. Then the concept of ‘embodiment’ does no justice to most human and non-human experience of life and engagement with the world. The very idea of having a body or of embodying something can only emerge in the alienated, detached mode of the scientific outlook on things – which is only *one* particular mode of (dis)engagement with the world, not the only reality or ‘the truth’ about ‘the’ world. Interpreting embodiment in this way rests upon the argument I criticized in Part I: it supposes that, while most of the time we do *not* experience our body as a thing, as an instrument to realize our purposes (intentions and other mental stuff), this is only *appearance* and not reality. But even this way of talking itself depends on a more primal

ontological *a priori*, which is fundamentally relational and knows no separation between bodies and minds, between bodies and environments. Our scientific outlook on things itself (and the related approach to moral status ascription) has grown out of that ground as a way of coping with highly complex environments, but the scientific view of the world should not be mistaken for that ground, which constitutes its conditions of possibility, the relational soil on which various weeds can flourish.

When we ascribe moral status to entities and make a strict distinction between 'us' and 'them', therefore, we should recognize that this ascription, and even asking the very *question* concerning moral status ascription, is only possible since we are *already* standing in relation to these entities. The question of moral status is really about how to shape that relation and its related practice, activities and experiences, rather than which properties the (separate, discrete) entity has. Moreover, the language by which we ascribe moral status is suffused with 'having' metaphors, but even this way of seeing an entity depends on 'us' *being* bodies and 'them' *being* bodies and on the relation between the two. It is not so much the case that we 'have' sentience and they 'have' sentience; rather, both of us *live* and engage with the world in a particular way. Only within the human–scientific form of life, other, non-human entities appear as having particular properties and as discrete entities.

AQ1

One may object that surely we want to avoid the view that morality depends on technology, in the sense that moral status ascription depends on what kind of technology (e.g. robots) we develop. But why should we avoid this view? Of course, this view is mistaken if we interpret 'dependence' as a causal relation: technology should not *determine* moral status. This would be transgression of the is/ought distinction. However, it makes sense to see technology as a condition of *possibility* for moral status ascription, at least if it is regarded not as a 'thing' but as a process: a process not only of 'making' but also of 'growth' and perhaps even 'revelation'. Let me explain this.

### 9.3. Moral status and technology: beyond Marx

If we want to make sure that moral status ascription, as belonging to 'culture', is understood as rooted in material–technological conditions, an obvious route would be to draw on Marxist thought. Marxism famously sees a link between the material (means of production) and the cultural (social relations and politics based on ownership of the means of production). Moreover, according to Marx we can attain freedom by

transforming nature. Thus, both the personal and the social are understood as firmly connected to the material–technological. Based on Marx, therefore, one could argue that moral status ascription must be situated within personal and social structures of self-realization, need and power. Moral status ascription is not done in a vacuum, but is influenced by how we live as personal, natural and social beings: what we say about other entities (e.g. animals) depends on larger social–material structures, on how we socially organize technology understood as the transformation of nature, which is at the same time the transformation of self. If this is true, then discussing moral status without discussing technology does not make much sense.

These are attractive and powerful ideas, and with the help of Benton’s interpretation of Marxism we have been able to take significant steps in the direction of relational thinking (Chapter 4 but also the previous chapters). In this section, however, I wish to take distance from Marxism on at least three points.

First, as Foucault has shown, Marxism and its heirs (e.g. Habermas) are mainly focused on power related to ownership of production means and state power (say ‘big’ politics) and neglect the more subtle ways in which power is exercised over people and their bodies (see Foucault’s studies of disciplining, e.g. Foucault 1975). (I already noted this in my discussion of Benton’s view in Part I.)

Second, in so far as Marxism is a *science*, the relation between material conditions and society/culture is seen in causal and deterministic terms. Instead, I wish to view technology as a transcendental condition of possibility that does not ‘cause’ moral status ascription but, rather, makes it possible and at the same time limits its range of possibilities. It enables and limits our moral imagination and practice. Thus, this argument goes further than Benton’s naturalist view in at least two ways: (1) it attends to our moral *language* and then makes a *transcendental* argument about its conditions of possibility. In this way, it is also social–relational *and* natural–relational at the same time, but it does not reconcile the social and the natural at the ontological level (instead, they are interwoven in the transcendental relational ground) and adds the level of *linguistic* relations. (This step has been largely achieved by the authors who tried to reconcile Marx with Wittgenstein, as discussed in the previous chapter, but the move from science to transcendentalism needs to be completed.)

Third, as Benton has proposed, we must reject strict distinctions between humans and other natural beings when it comes to defining the social. However, Benton’s continuum, with its emphasis on needs,

remains naturalist and caught in the language of Marxist modernism. In so far as it seeks to *transform* human–animal relations and wishes to *create* a new moral order, Benton’s thinking dwells within the modern language of transformation. By contrast, I suggest (following Ingold) that the Marxist idea of a transformation (of nature) must be replaced by non-modern and relational metaphors such as growth, metaphors which do not assume a strict distinction between ‘man’ and ‘nature’ (feminist critique might say: a male civilized force which inscribes itself on a bare, female, uncultured and wild body), but instead see the human and the non-human in non-dualist, relational terms and hold a unified view of the world. Technology, then, is not a matter of making discrete entities (‘artefacts’, ‘things’) which are *formed* by humans on the basis of ‘raw’ natural materials. Instead, Ingold’s work suggests a different metaphor: things ‘grow’. This means that ‘the form of the artefact is not prefigured culturally but arises through the unfolding of a field of forces that cuts across its developing interface with the environment’ (Ingold 2000, p. 290). Let me explain this further.

AQ3

#### 9.4. Using Ingold’s metaphors: making, growing, revealing

In what sense do things ‘grow’? As I noted in Chapter 5, Ingold’s analysis is based on studies of so-called hunter-gatherer societies. The (perhaps rather modern) categorical scheme that comes out of his discussion may be summarized as ‘making’, ‘growing’ and ‘revealing’. I interpret Ingold’s scheme as showing three ways in which we can interpret technology.

Technology as *making* is the common meaning of technology as the production of things and often involves the dualist assumptions mentioned above: humans and technology are seen as strictly separated. It also suggests that we can fully control the material in our hands. Conceiving of technology as *growing* tries to paint a different picture by using an ecological and agricultural metaphor. This allows us to achieve a more relational understanding of what technology is: it is not so much about (trans)forming what is ‘naturally’ given, but about intervening in human and non-human processes of life and growth that are *already* going on and that are strongly related. Organisms engage in their environment. Ingold writes that there are ‘patterns of skilled activity’ which ‘give rise to the real-world artefactual and organic forms that we encounter, rather than serving – as the standard view would claim – to transcribe pre-existing form onto raw material’ (Ingold 2000, p. 345). He gives the example of a basket, which ‘arises through the work

itself' (p. 345). It grows (from) within the system of relations: 'The artefact, in short, is the crystallisation of activity within a relational field' (p. 345). In Ingold's view, form does not follow from design, but is the outcome of that process of growth. He argues that objects should not be removed from 'the contexts of life activity in which they are produced and used' as if they were 'static objects of disinterested contemplation'; instead, they should be restored to the human practices in which they belong (p. 346). "Practices" should be interpreted as referring not only to production-as-growth but also to use-as-growth. With Wrathall, we can relate Ingold's view to Heidegger's theory of truth, which concerns how entities become unconcealed:

Assertions and beliefs play a role in the "truth" – i.e. the uncovering or making manifest – of entities [...]. But entities are best uncovered when we can do more than merely talk about them – when we have practices and skills for dealing with them in the appropriate manner. A chair is most clearly uncovered as a chair, for example, by the simple act of sitting on it. The action shows the "truth" about the chair more clearly and convincingly than an endless amount of chatter about it. (Wrathall 2005, p. 74)

Thus, the "truth" about entities – technological or otherwise – lies in practice and skill rather than in detached theory. Employing Ingold's Heideggerian vocabulary, we can conclude that 'dwelling' precedes 'building' (or that 'building' presupposes 'dwelling').

For moral status, this means that the question of how to relate to other entities is not to be decided (primarily) by means of assertions concerning the entity, for example assertions that have the form of a moral status function; rather, our moral language itself depends on the *practice* and *skill* we use in dealing with the entity. Its moral status lies not in detached definition but in ways of doing (active aspect) and in things 'being done' (passive aspect). Building theoretical constructions depends on dwelling. Technological objects and their (moral) status *grow* in production and in use. They also grow 'back into' the body and *vice versa*. The notion of skill connects technology to the body. Using the language of growth, Wrathall writes about skill:

As we become skilful at anything, our ability settles into our bodies and roots itself in the equipment we use so that, like the roots of a plant, our bodily dispositions and the equipment we use support our actions inconspicuously. (Wrathall 2005, p. 78)

In this sense, the cultural, the technological, and the natural are all part of, and depend on, living, relational growth.

Moreover, understanding technology as growing also enables us to stress that we can never fully control 'nature' – basically because we are 'nature' and we are already deeply related to that which we hope to control and which is the condition of possibility for our lives. Growth can never be fully put under our control.

Technology as *revelation*, finally, is a meaning of technology I construct based on my interpretation of Ingold's analysis of hunter-gatherer societies. Remember that the game animal shows itself to the hunter, 'gives' itself to the hunter (or not). It *reveals* itself to the hunter – if and when it wants to. Again there is an absence of control. I infer that technology is often like that as well. We depend on it as if it were a 'land' which provides an abundance of 'food' we can gather (condition of affluence), a bush in which entities show themselves. A technological "object" can be seen as having *spirit* and *life* (animism) or as an entity that is itself dependent on the vital ground, the *life* process (totemism). Technology as growing and revelation is not a 'system' outside the life-world but itself co-constitutes a life-world, is itself at the same time something growing and the ground for the growth.

Consider contemporary information technologies, in particular the internet and related technologies. Cyberspace is not so much a 'technology' in the sense of a transformation of nature, but something that grows and provides its inhabitants with plenty of information food. They live from the (virtual) 'land'. Information is 'given' to them. Information is not so much there as 'data', a kind of raw material which then needs to be data-processed – that is the old, 1980s way of thinking about information technology. Instead of being about information-processing or calculating systems (computers) with an input and an output (an industrial production metaphor), information technology today rather resembles the biosphere; it is full of informational organisms that grow and that are grown. Information is not to be analysed in terms of discrete entities or elementary particles, but rather in 'rhizomatic' terms (Deleuze and Guattari 1980; see also Ingold). Hyperlinks are like rhizomes that grow horizontally in all directions. Tree structures are replaced by non-hierarchical planar structures without original. There is a network, and the network is like the wilderness, but a wilderness in which we live. Information, then, is to be hunted and gathered in this virtual bush, this information ecology which is all too real since it is our life-world. Sometimes we can only hope that the information we are looking for shows up, reveals itself – if it 'wants' to, if it 'gives' itself to us.

If we ascribe moral status to a particular virtual entity, then, we can only do that given this cyber *a priori*, this relational web that is already there *and of which we are already part*. The point concerning ‘moral status’ is not to ‘determine’ the status of a particular entity and classify it by studying its properties (this belongs to the tree approach, with which the rhizomatic approach is contrasted), but rather to shape and reshape our (already existing) relation to the entity in question. There is no *separate* cyberspace (as there is no separate ‘wild’ nature) or virtual reality as opposed to the real world. It is on the basis of pre-existing relations within the *world wide web* that we talk about the moral status of the entity. The entity and we are part of the same world. That entity is not merely *made* by computer programmers (similarly, plants, animals and humans are not merely *made* by nature or by a god as a programmer who wrote the DNA code); it is not simply the *output* of a process. As we experience it, it has a ‘life’ of its own; it grows and lives in the web of relations that cuts through the virtual/real distinction. It cannot be considered separate from its hybrid human/non-human and real/virtual environment.

This view renders the very term ‘moral status ascription’ problematic, since that approach to moral status seems to assume that ‘first’ there is the entity, stripped of its relations and environment, to which we ‘then’ can give moral status as a kind of dress that fits the essential-ontological properties of the entity. For such a process of purification we have to deny the existence of the very ground that makes possible the process; we have to deny the womb that nurtures our thoughts, we have to deny the (ground of our) world.

### 9.5. The fiction of the automaton, human and non-human

This way of viewing moral status ascription ‘revives’ moral status but does not ‘naturalize’ it; rather, it reaffirms the social as the transcendental ground of moral status ascription. But the social is not orphaned from nature and cannot be conceived of as separate from technology.

Robots, for instance, are often seen as ‘machines’. But, as Ingold shows in his work on skill, “the machine” is a particular way of viewing technology (in terms of mechanics and causation; the world itself is a big machine), not the ‘essence’ of technology itself. Ingold shows that, in hunter-gatherer societies, technical skills are ‘constituted within the matrix of social relations’ (Ingold 2000, p. 289). It is only later, especially

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in modern times, that there is a process of ‘externalisation’: a process of



‘disembedding of the technical from the social’ (p. 290). Skilled making is divorced from human experience and human agency and is seen as the execution of a design, the implementation of scientific knowledge. Today we understand technology as being separate from humans and society.

Intelligent autonomous robots are an interesting case in point here. On the one hand, they are the *summum* of externalization: they are no longer a ‘tool’ at all, but assume independence: as self-moving and ‘self-thinking’ entities, they might seem independent from humans and society. They are the ultimate machine or *automaton*: something which does not derive its power from the human body and is therefore autonomous.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, when we ‘use’ such robots we do not really or merely ‘use’ them (we do not treat them as a tool) but we *interact* with them. Perhaps we even have *relations* with them. This is only possible since they are already and necessarily embedded in the social, which is the relational *a priori* for seeing them as ‘independent’ entities. This is especially true for so-called ‘social robots’, which are designed to live with us. But other ‘autonomous’ robots (*automata*) are also already part of existing social–material relational structures concerned with energy production, energy distribution and energy use; in this sense, they are *not* independent. Hence, talk about fully ‘autonomous’ intelligent robots (which then would have a different moral status) is as much a fiction as the fiction of the fully autonomous, atomistic *human* individual.

This paradox can be further clarified by Ihde’s concept of the quasi-otherness of technology, which he thinks is particularly applicable to the automaton (Ihde 1990, pp. 98–108). If the robot has a particular appearance, we start to treat it as if it were an other (see also Coeckelbergh 2011a). Now this appearance and this way of seeing robots as ‘separate’ machines or even as ‘others’ are only possible if we assume a social–relational ground, which allows us to draw robots into the social sphere, and *then* ascribe a different moral status to them. The robot is *already* part of the relational fabric in which we *live*, and as such it appears in certain ways and not in other ways. Hence, what moral and ontological status we ascribe to the robot will depend on our form of life (for example a scientific form of life) and perhaps also on the *robot’s* skills and ‘form of life’: how it develops and grows from within and into the material–social–cultural fabric that is already there, the ‘world of persons, objects and relations’ in which we are continuously and unavoidably involved.

Similarly, it would be wrong to oppose ‘technology’ to ‘nature’, as Latour and Ingold remind us (see also Chapter 5). Nature is not

something non-human which *then* is brought under human control and transformed by technology. Ingold shows that tools are not necessarily to be seen as instruments of control: in hunter-gatherer societies they are, rather, 'instruments of revelation' (Ingold 2000, p. 320); they are part of the relational world which is the precondition for both modern and pre-modern (or non-modern) understandings of nature and technology. Metaphors of domination and control (e.g. master-slave metaphors) constitute only one perspective on human-nature relations; they are not 'what technology really is' and they do not exhaust the range of possibilities for dealing with non-humans – or, indeed, with other humans. As Ingold puts it:

What we have in reality are human beings, living and working in environments that include other humans as well as a variety of non-human agencies and entities. [...] [In] this mutually constitutive interrelation between persons and environment there is no absolute dichotomy between human and non-human components. (Ingold 2000, p. 321)

Thus, technology cannot be sharply distinguished from society or from 'nature'; it is embedded in the relational, social world which consists of both humans and non-humans. In this sense 'none of us are Westerners' (Ingold 2000, p. 323) and 'we have never been modern' (Latour 1991) – which is why 'we do not even have to leave the bounds of our own society in order to discover the challenge presented by supposedly non-Western perspectives to the dominant categories of Western thought' (Ingold, p. 337). Actually, if the transcendental argument is right, we cannot *really* leave those bounds anyway. We can travel to distant places and 'other' cultures, but our thinking remains *on the ground* and our gestures and our skills remain rooted in the form of life in which we grew. At most, we can try to stretch the bounds in thought *and* practice, and this may slowly change our form of life.

This view of social change rejects Marxist determinism, since material-social conditions are not seen as one term which then causes change in another term (human relations, human freedom) but as part of the relational fabric which we ourselves weave. Moreover, it also avoids Heideggerian fatalism. On the one hand, it is true that we cannot 'simply' change the *a priori* ground of our practices and thinking. To say so assumes that this ground is something that is disconnected from human agency; it assumes that 'first' there is something external which

we ‘then’ can manipulate. The metaphorical structure of this view is similar to the image of a bare ‘earth’ or ‘nature’ which is then cultivated by humans (or the image of the young child as a blank slate on which we write culture). Rather, what we want and do already swims in the relational ocean that carries our volitions and actions. In this sense, Heidegger’s use of the terms *Geschick* (fate) and *Gelassenheit* in his later philosophy (see, for example, Heidegger 1959) are appropriate: in a sense we have to ‘wait’ for change. However, this view risks becoming fatalistic if it is interpreted as ‘doing nothing’. It is true that the world will not change at will; it will not yield to our intentional actions. However, we should not assume that there is, on the one hand, a world (which must be controlled) and, on the other hand, human will and action. Human activity is already part of the world, brings forth that world. Therefore, it is not true that we do nothing. We already ‘do’ the world, we already *world* (verb), by dwelling. This implies that of course we can change it, since this is what we are doing and have been doing all along. But this change is not done from a god’s eye point of view, by us, by the human understood as the Great Manipulator, the Great Controller, the Judge, or the Gardener; instead, the change is immanent in the process of relational life itself; it is immanent in the dynamic world of humans, animals and things. We are already part of the ‘machine’ and it is part of us; we already live *in* the ‘garden’, and it is only as such that we contribute to its shape as one of the nodes in its living, breathing, vibrating network.

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For ethics, this means that we should replace an ethics of distance, of disengagement, with an ethics of immanence and engagement. We can no longer externalize “Evil” but have to understand responsibility as being responsive *to* and *within* the deep-relational world and its constituents – human and non-human entities. If the language-activity of ‘ascribing’ moral ‘status’ must be part of this relational understanding at all, it can only emerge as one of the many ways in which we shape and reshape our relations to other entities, that is, as one of the ways we shape and reshape our form of life – and therefore also reshape the form of life of other entities. Surely some ways of doing things, some ways of relating to other entities, are better than others, but this cannot be decided *a priori* from a ‘point of nowhere’ (Nagel). In the spirit of Dewey’s pragmatism, we can say that it is, rather, a matter of (imagination as) improvisation: it is experimental, trying out. In this sense, we must go ‘beyond good and evil’, to use a Nietzschean phrase.

This relational critique challenges influential currents in philosophy of technology in so far as they assume a strict distinction between the human–technological and the natural. This is the case for many twentieth-century philosophies of technology, who assume that there is such a thing as ‘Technology’ as an autonomous sphere. Not only is the term ‘technology’ as used by these thinkers far too general, as Verbeek has argued (Verbeek 2005), but it is also misleading if it suggests that technology is something entirely external to us and to nature, or something that has nothing to do with how we live our lives.

Critical philosophies of technology, rooted in the Frankfurter Schule, also remain dualist in this respect. For example, Habermas distinguishes between the System and the Lifeworld and then argues that the Lifeworld (how we, humans, live our lives) has been ‘colonized’ by the System (technology or, more broadly, instrumental rationality). Similarly, Feenberg’s claim in *Between Reason and Experience* (2010) that ‘democracy’ has ‘intervened’ or been ‘extended’ into the ‘technical’ sphere assumes a dichotomy between the human–political and the ‘technical’. But the dichotomies assumed by these arguments, whose structure parallels a dualist, Manicheistic view of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ as much as they parallel the industrial labour–leisure dichotomy (and perhaps also a male–female dichotomy), are untenable in the light of the relational view I am developing here. Based on Ingold’s interpretation of Heidegger, we must acknowledge a plurality of worlds as ways of seeing and doing that depend on their social–relational ground, which is not separate from the life-world. What these philosophers call instrumental rationality and the ‘System’ is not something alien to the life-world, but emerges from it in a specific cultural–historical period. It is not something external which then penetrates our lives; it is *already* part of our lives. We are not raped by technology; technology is already ‘in’ us from the start; in a sense it *is* us and we are technology.

For philosophy of technology, this view of the relation between humans and technology implies that artefacts – and, more generally, ‘things’ – should *also* be understood in relational terms. For Heidegger, things *gather* and are therefore not *mere* things.

Our thinking has of course long been accustomed to *understate* the nature of the thing. The consequence, in the course of Western thought, has been that the thing is represented as an unknown X to which perceptible properties are attached. (Heidegger 1971, p. 153)

Heidegger responds here to what I have called the properties-based view in the beginning of this book, which is a *non-relational* view of artefacts. Instead, Heidegger argues, we are always related to things. Even if we turn ‘inward’, he says,

we come back to ourselves from things *without ever abandoning* our stay among things. Indeed, the loss of rapport with things that occurs in states of depression would be wholly impossible if even such a state were not still what it is as a human state: that is, a staying *with* things. (Heidegger 1971, p. 157)

This is again his transcendental argument: there is a relational–existential ground that acts as a condition of possibility for perception, experience and action – even for the appearance of things and of ourselves as ‘individuals’ or as ‘atoms’. Heidegger’s term ‘dwelling’ refers to this pre-existing relational ground. ‘Ground’ is slightly misleading, since it suggests something fixed, whereas it is something moving, living; this is why ‘dwelling’ is perhaps a better term. If we try to build or construct something (a building, a formal language, a system, a *logos*, etc.), this is only possible on the basis of living relations, which include things. Language itself is ‘alive’.

In *Being and Time* Heidegger already said that initially the Greeks understood language as ‘discourse’, that is, as speaking. It was not understood as *logic* ‘based on the ontology of objective presence’ (Heidegger 1927, p. 155). Thus, language was initially understood as something living and something social, not as something about statements (or “propositions”) and *logos*. Similarly, technology is not so much about things as about what we do (together). In later work Heidegger analyses the Greek word *techne*, which means ‘to make something appear, within what is present’ (Heidegger 1971, p. 159). The thing makes appear the relations, our practice, dwelling. Therefore, we may conclude, an artefact is not a purely external *something*; it is part of how we exist, how we live. We are already engaged with it. Technology as *techne* is part of dwelling, part of life; it is not its enemy.

Another way to elaborate this non-instrumental view of technology is to say that technology is a ‘form of life’. In the mid-1980s, Winner already introduced this term in his social and political philosophy of technology. Like McLuhan, Winner argued that technologies are not mere tools and are not just having ‘impacts’ and ‘side effects’.

The relation between technology and society (or technology and humanity) is not a matter of cause and effect:

New worlds are being made. There is nothing “secondary” about this phenomenon. It is, in fact, the most important accomplishment of any new technology. The construction of a technical system that involves human beings as operating parts brings a reconstruction of social roles and relationships. [...] We do indeed “use” telephones, automobiles, electric lights, and computers [...]. But our world soon becomes one in which telephony, automobility, electric lighting, and computing are forms of life in the most powerful sense: life would scarcely be thinkable without them. (Winner 1986, p. 11)

Winner uses Wittgenstein’s term to argue that technology changes patterns in perception, thought and behaviour. Although it may ultimately change ‘the very *conditions of life* itself’, for example by ‘genetic engineering’, he argues that usually it creates variations of old patterns (Winner 1986, p. 13).

Winner’s view of technology is also interesting for how we deal with other entities. He writes that when we interact with computers – and, we may add today, with robots – we ‘carry with us highly structured anticipations about entities that appear to participate, if only minimally, in forms of life and associated language games that are parts of human culture’ (p. 14). This suggests that, if we interact with social and humanoid robots, what matters to the *form* of this interaction is not the (physical) properties of the robots, but the relation between their appearance and human forms of life, that is, human culture, human social life and human biology. Their acceptance will depend on whether or not they fit within a certain form of life; in so far as these forms of life differ between cultures, our interactions with, and attitudes towards, robots will differ as well.

Interestingly, Winner does not only draw on Wittgenstein but also on Marx – although he also rejects Marx’s determinism. In *The German Ideology* (Marx and Engels 1846) Winner reads that a mode of production is a mode of life: ‘By changing the shape of material things, Marx observes, we also change ourselves’ (Winner 1986, p. 14). But this is not a deterministic, mechanistic process; metaphors of industrial production are inappropriate here:

In this process human beings do not stand at the mercy of a great deterministic punch press that cranks out precisely tailored persons

at a certain rate during a given historical period. Instead, the situation Marx describes is one in which individuals are actively involved in the daily creation and recreation, production and reproduction of the world in which they live. (Winner 1986, p. 15)

Indeed, when they set out their premises, Marx and Engels start from the active individual, which is a *living* individual (Marx and Engels 1846, p. 31). They argue that language, conceptions and consciousness are products of the language of life, the actual life process:

The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men – the language of real life. [...] Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious being, and the being of men is their actual life-process. [...] In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here it is a matter of ascending from earth to heaven. (Marx and Engels 1846, p. 36)

This emphasis on the life-process in relation with technology shows an often neglected dimension of Marxist thought and has already been discussed in the previous chapter: Marx's materialism is at the same time a kind of naturalism, and the material basis of language and thought can be reinterpreted as a transcendental ground. Hence the language of moral philosophy is rooted in the 'language of real life'. But Winner, in contrast to Ingold's language of growth, stays close to Marx and Engels in so far as he expresses his interpretation of Marx in terms of modern production/creation metaphors. Nevertheless, like Benton and others, he makes an interesting link between Marx and Wittgenstein, who 'direct our attention to the fabric of everyday existence' (p. 15). Whatever the differences between them may be (Winner ascribes 'passive traditionalism' to Wittgenstein), Winner shows that both thinkers had a thoroughly relational view in which the human and the technological, the social and the material are firmly connected:

the philosophies of Marx and Wittgenstein share a fruitful insight: the observation that social activity is an ongoing process of world-making. Throughout their lives people come together to renew the fabric of relationships, transactions, and meanings that sustain their common existence. Indeed, if they did not engage in this continuing activity of material and social production, the human world would literally fall apart. All social roles and frameworks – from the most

rewarding to the most oppressive – must somehow be restored and reproduced with the rise of the sun each day. From this point of view, the important question about technology becomes, As we “make things work,” what kind of *world* are we making? (Winner 1986, p. 17)

In other words, in this powerful statement of the main question philosophers of technology (and, indeed, engineers, policy-makers, and others) should ask, Winner – though not explicitly – goes beyond determinist and causalist thinking by embracing Heidegger’s and Wittgenstein’s *transcendentalist* approach: technology is a *condition of possibility* for human culture and society in general as much as it is a condition of possibility for what we can say about entities, natural or artificial. Our talk about their moral and ontological status presupposes this ongoing social activity, this continuous process of world-making in which worlds of entities and the relations between them are shaped.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, this transcendentalist ground is ‘given’, but, with Winner, we should interpret this emphasis on the given not as an invitation to traditionalism (following the beaten track); the ‘given’ is at the same time constituted by our, *human* activity (we make the track). However, it is good to keep in mind that we cannot simply change our patterns of activity, that is, our form of life, by single acts of human will, which are then supposed to *cause* the desired effect. Worlds are shaped by us as much as we are shaped by worlds.

### 9.6. Nature, virtue and skill

The relational critique of nature–society and nature–technology distinctions also helps us to challenge dominant scientific–naturalist and romantic–naturalist approaches to ‘nature’ itself. With Ingold, we should criticize modern biology, in particular neo-Darwinism: as I noted before, it is relational only in the weak sense that it understands evolution in terms of the relation between an organism and its environment (change by natural selection as organisms adapt to their environment), but the organism *itself* is not usually seen in relational terms: it is the result of genetic changes, that is, the result of an internal program or code, the ‘blueprint’ of the design. It is ‘built’ by ‘nature’. Instead, Ingold attributes changes in living organisms to ‘transformations in the whole field of relationships within which they come into being’ (Ingold 2000, p. 366). He goes so far as to say that ‘the genotype, conceived as a programme or blueprint for the growth of the organism,



does not exist' (p. 372). The 'genotype', the 'bio-logos', is an abstraction that exists only in the mind of the biologist (pp. 382–383). But biology is not genetics. DNA (the genotype) is not the form which is then realized (the phenotype); rather, forms are 'an emergent property of the total system' (p. 383). Forms and changes in form are to be attributed to the whole system, not to genes only. The genome exists, but does not contain 'a specification of the essential form of the organism, or of its capacities for action' (p. 385). Genes and words 'gather their meanings from the contexts of activities and relationships in which they are in play' (p. 387); they should not be abstracted from 'the manifold forms of life that have actually appeared in history' (p. 390), from the 'relational contexts of their development' (p. 391). Ingold gives the example of cycling: it is a skill which is neither 'innate' nor merely 'culture'; it is neither phenotype nor genotype (p. 385).

This implies that we should abandon strict distinctions between 'natural' history and 'human' history, between natural evolution and technological evolution, between evolution and history. For example, there is no strict distinction between, on the one hand, what is 'innate' and 'biological' and, on the other hand, what is cultural. Ingold rightly argues that we are not born with an innate 'language program' to which content is then added (semantics and syntaxis); instead, our 'equipment' is developed as we live our lives (p. 379), emerging 'in the context of [the child's] sensory involvement in a richly structured environment' (p. 397). Similarly, there is no 'body' understood as something autonomous, separate from its environment; what we call 'body' arises and continuously changes in a field of relationships. 'Natural', 'social' and 'technological' changes in form can all be understood as emerging *within* one relational whole, and this process cannot adequately be described in terms of industrial metaphors. Ingold writes: 'People inhabit one world, not because their differences are underwritten by universals of human nature, but because they are caught up – along with other creatures – in a continuous field of relations, in the unfolding of which all difference is generated' (Ingold 2000, p. 391).

Finally, this view of 'nature' – that is, this rejection of such a dualist term – and this view of the relation between humans and their environment also have consequences for 'green' or 'environmental' politics. If such a politics wishes to be really 'environmental', it cannot be a politics of 'nature' and of 'nature conservation', since that assumes the very distinctions which I criticized in the previous pages. It assumes that a pure, virgin 'nature' has been 'colonized', 'transformed' and 'raped' by human technology. If the problem is defined in these terms,

environmental ethics must necessarily be an ethics of restraint, limiting, self-control and containment: the 'natural' should be protected (at all costs?) against the "Evil" brought about by humans and technology. Therefore, the argument goes, humans should limit their influence on 'nature', leave it alone.

If, on the other hand, we see humans and technology as incorporated in the relational natural–social–technological world-body, world-activity and world-life, then we need a different kind of ethics: an ethics that concerns the question of how to shape forms of life, an ethics of life and growth, of metamorphosis perhaps – which is an ethics of abundance and excess rather than scarcity and restraint. 'Shape forms of life' should not be understood as implying that 'first' and external to us there are 'given' forms, which we then manipulate and transform from the outside. Rather, it means that life reshapes itself, that there is metamorphosis, and humans are part of that process – albeit an active part. Humans can try things out, explore possibilities, and then perceive and *experience* which forms are good, which forms lead to more flourishing – human flourishing and other flourishing. According to this view, knowledge of good is neither pre-fixed in a moral–meta-physical catalogue nor the will of an evil being. It is neither a property of (human or divine) will nor an outcome of independent (human or divine) judgement. Instead, it is a know-how and wisdom that grows as forms of life grow out of the social world-ground, branch out rhizomatically into new bio-moral possibilities, and change shape within a thriving relational network.

AQ6

This view has implications for virtue ethics, in particular for an upcoming branch called 'environmental virtue ethics' (see, for example, Sandler and Cafaro 2005 and Hursthouse 2007). To end this chapter, let me offer a reflection on the relation between virtue and skill, and suggest an ethics of skill as an answer to the 'environmental problem'. In particular, I will make suggestions for rethinking virtue ethics: the understanding of 'nature' and especially the notion of 'skill' (as found in Dreyfus and Ingold) allows us to tackle the problem of motivation environmental virtue ethics struggles with and to develop a non-romantic and non-Stoic view of virtue, 'nature' and its relation to technology.<sup>5</sup>

Standard environmental virtue ethics assumes a dualism between, on the one hand, a body of moral knowledge (the virtues) and, on the other hand, practices which transform nature. This then naturally raises the problem of motivation: a gap between (propositional) knowledge and action. We know what to do (we know the environmental virtues), but we fail to act according to the principles (we fail

to act virtuously). Furthermore, neo-Stoic and Romantic solutions (see Chapter 2) try to reach out to nature by means of imagination, in particular by imagining that we are part of nature, but still presuppose strict distinctions between humans, technology and nature. Humans and nature remain separated and are only bridged in imagination, that is, in *thought* – not in practice. Furthermore, technology is mainly seen as an instrument in relation to virtue: there are good uses and bad uses. Nature is seen as the soil which is cultivated or as “wilderness” threatened by technology.

However, in this chapter a different view has emerged that enables us to move beyond the view of nature as a separate thing, beyond the instrumental view of technology, and beyond the colonization view of technology (see also the previous section). Nature is not something outside us; we are always already ‘in’ an environment as embodied, relational beings. Technology, likewise, does not exist apart from experience, skills, practices. Therefore, neither nature nor technology is the subject or object of control. Control has always been the central (Greek) virtue. But now we need different virtues. If the view of moral knowledge developed here is adequate, then such virtues cannot really be known *a priori*, but are formed in practice and grow as skill grows, as know-how grows. Perhaps formalization of virtues can be useful for novices (see again Dreyfus’s developmental model of skill), but it cannot be the goal of moral knowledge. ‘True’ moral knowledge is *in* the skill and *in* the activity, in which good is experienced and done. In this sense, there is no truth or good (nouns); there is only *true-ing* and *good-ing* (verbs).

For technology, this means that it is to be seen as part of this developmental process, part of the growth of skill. It is not a thing, but a human-mediated form of metamorphosis, in which all parties change (technology, human, nature, etc.). Furthermore, for environmental virtue ethics the problem of motivation identified in Chapter 2 evaporates: according to this view, if we engage in skilled and practical activity, achieve know-how and experience good, there is no longer a gap between moral knowledge and action, since moral knowledge is no longer understood as a ‘*logos*’ (or design, laws, etc.) separate from wisdom achieved in concrete practices. Moral knowledge is about know-how, about learning and practising. The traditional distinction between know-how (practice) and know wherefore (value) collapses: value grows in practice. If we nevertheless experience a gap between knowledge and action, this is a sign that we do not know how to flourish; it is ethical failure itself. Then there is no problem of moral motivation in the sense

that we know what we should do, but we don't do it; instead we *don't* know what we should do *because* we haven't done it.

To take up again Cafaro's suggestion in response to Thoreau: if we have never slaughtered an animal, we do not really know what we are doing when we support animal factories by eating the meat they produce or when we write about killing animals. And, if we want to know the good life, we have to experiment, try out different possibilities. Our lack of ethical knowledge is not a lack of theory (insight) but a lack of experience. We need know-how. The problem is not what nature is, but how to handle it.

If we need imagination at all, then, it is not imagination as *representation* (representing the real *logos* of the universe) or as *feeling* (the Romantic imagination) but a 'moral imagination' or 'ecological imagination', as Fesmire says it in his Deweyan vocabulary (Fesmire 2004; 2008): the capacity for dramatic rehearsal and moral improvisation, which is not self-absorbed – like the Stoic or romantic imagination – but allows us to relate to the world, is *engaged*. We should not cultivate apathy (as the Stoics recommended) or indulge in fantasies about 'the earth' (as the romantic ecological movements of our time all too often do), but swim in the world and simultaneously try out how to swim better *and* how to make better water.

Thoreau's view promotes practical engagement with nature, yet was still too romantic and Stoic in its retreat from the city and in its stress on self-cultivation and self-sufficiency. Moreover, like Borgmann, Thoreau seemed to have privileged a range of activities '*a priori*'. Borgmann called them 'focal practices'. In Thoreau, and certainly in Borgmann, we can still read much natural–artificial dualism between the lines. But Thoreau *did* it: his view ethics as an engaged, experimental ethics survives. In this sense, *Walden* supports the view that emerges here: knowledge about the good life is a matter of know-how: it is only through experience and skill that we can acquire it. We have to live it.

For moral status ascription, this view of moral knowledge implies that we should not try to (re)construct the *logos* of the moral universe (and imagine ourselves as related to other entities and to 'nature' accordingly) or ascribe special status to anything "wild" or "natural". Instead of performing these detached activities, we should realize that we can only 'ascribe' moral 'status' *within* concrete practices, *within* the relations in which we are deeply engaged. If, given this insight, it still makes sense to perform the activity of 'ascription' at all, it should only be seen as one aid in ongoing processes of coping with, and living, the world: a process of improvisation in the face of uncertainty, a process of *dancing*,

not imagining, of participating in the dance of all entities to which/to whom we are related. Changing moral status means developing new skills, trying out new moves. The choreography of humans, animals and things is not pre-given but grows in the process of coping, which we cannot fully control. As new lines and patterns show up, meaning dawns upon us and a new world rises, breathing and damping of life.

Is this a new kind of mysticism? It is certainly not a detached, contemplative form of mysticism. In the next chapter I will ask the question of how this view might be related to religion and spirituality. Let us start with a little preview, which complements the analysis in this chapter.

If we want to change our nature-talk, then we have to look into the transcendental conditions of this language game: its social-cultural conditions and its related bodily and material-technological conditions. But even if in the West we might think of this as a “secular activity”, we should not forget that both our nature-talk and its conditions of possibility are deeply related to Western modernity *and religion*. For example, if we talk about nature as a sphere separate from the human sphere, this talking and thinking are made possible by a post-Christian secular modernity, which is shaped by Jewish-Christian thinking: once the ‘creation’ (object) was separated from the Creator (subject), we could think of the former as un-spiritual. It was the precondition of modern thinking. Modern science has bracketed the Creator, and what remains, it seems, is a meaningless universe of things, in which subjects feel alienated, especially as they are increasingly seen as machines, robots – that is, things. But the romantic response was also modern: it projected the feelings of the subject onto the empty canvas of the natural world. Nature became a reservoir for our feelings, a container of our inflated self. But, when feeling was gone, what remained was a collection of facts, things, and organisms as systems. It turned out that this attempt to counter dualism failed. If we want to really avoid (the experience of) alienation, therefore, we need to move beyond modern thinking and question the transcendental patterns that make possible this kind of thinking; we need to question what Wittgenstein called our form of life. We need, among other things, to conceive of a different society, a different technology and a different *spirituality*.

# 10

## Spirits and Gods: Forms of Religion

### 10.1. The secularization of moral status and the purification of religion

At first sight, it might seem that moral status has nothing to do with how we *feel* about entities, let alone with *religion* or *spirituality*. Standard approaches to moral status often explicitly aim to find a *rational* justification of moral status. The properties approach, in particular, can be understood as a way to rationally determine the moral status of an entity by examining its properties. As I said in the first part of this book, this is a scientific approach to moral status. Science and philosophy-as-science are what we may call outgrowths of *the habit of rational thinking*. For example, Singer's approach proposes to base justification of moral status on the property 'sentience', and utilitarianism, as a moral philosophy, is a scientific approach *par excellence*. The purpose of such philosophies is that of the rationalistic strand of the Enlightenment movement: liberate people from their dogmatic beliefs and let the truth shine. With regard to moral status, it implies that Singer and others try to help us to think about moral status in a rational way, by using our faculty of reason, rather than relying on our feelings and intuitions – let alone “superstitious” beliefs. Viewed in this way, most standard theories of moral status can be seen as heirs of the history of secularization and rationalization, which is a history of de-spiritualization.

The first steps in this history were taken not by Enlightenment philosophers, or even by early modern philosophers, but by Jews, Muslims and Christians. They have made painstaking efforts to eradicate polytheism and what we now call, in a Christian fashion, paganism. By emphasizing that there is only *one* god, they have also delegated all spirituality to the One.<sup>1</sup> This redistribution of spirituality,

an accumulation in 'spiritual capital' which made God (and his Church, in Christianity the *body* of Christ) a monopolist in spiritual matters, effectively removed spirit from the world. Gradually no other spirits and certainly no other gods were allowed. Nature was de-sacralized long before modernity. Nature became purified of spirit and the pantheon became a mono-theon: no other gods were welcome in the temple. First the gods and the people who worshipped them were excluded from the city and from the Church. The villagers came to be regarded as *pagans*, who would still believe in the 'old' gods and spirits. Unless they could be converted, these pagans were useless as soldiers of the Church; they were "out". Later, the monotheistic religions would do everything to ban other gods and spirits completely and to convert everyone to monotheism, even in the village: either by emphasizing again and again that there is only one god, or by adopting the 'pagan' rituals and spirits to some extent and transforming them into something else (the latter strategy has been followed by Catholicism). This was combined with a 'Greek' reverence for *logos*. If anything – any *object* – became holy and full of spirit, it was their holy Book, which contains the Word of God, the divine *Logos*, and which contrasts with the non-spiritual world. As the opening of the Gospel of John states: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' And, according to Philo of Alexandria, a Hellenic Jewish philosopher who tried to reconcile Greek philosophy (Plato and Stoicism, for instance) and Jewish religion, *Logos* was God's *blueprint* for the world.<sup>2</sup> In this way, the monotheistic religions prepared the way for the modern split between the natural and the spiritual, and between, on the one hand, *logos*, words, rationality, mind and the spiritual and, on the other hand, the absence of *logos*, silence or beastly screaming, irrationality, passion, body, the material and the natural. Once the natural world was purified, the sciences could study its laws and objects.

In modern times, this process has been described as secularization. Weber used the term 'disenchantment' for the belief that

principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted. One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculation perform the service. (Weber 1919, p. 139)

Indeed, it is often believed that magic and spirit no longer exist in the modern world. Once science replaced religious experience, the spell is gone. However, is this true? Have the monotheistic religions and science been entirely successful in expelling spirit and magic from the world? Several authors have questioned the secularization thesis. There is much to say for the thesis not only that ‘we have never been modern’, as Latour argued, but also that *we have never been secularized* – at least, not completely. First, as I already suggested, the history of science is itself related to religion. Viewed in this way, I think Szerszynski is right that science and technology must be seen as ‘a distinctive product of the West’s religious history’ (Szerszynski 2005, p. 814). This means that our current way of conceptualizing moral status is also a product of this religious history. Second, even *today* we do not always see things as ‘spiritually neutral’ objects with a status that has nothing to do with the spiritual. This takes at least two forms (for a more elaborate discussion see Section 10.3. and Coeckelbergh 2010): the first is neo-paganism; the second neo-animism. Neo-paganism, which re-enchants nature by ascribing spiritual value to nature and to natural beings, must be understood as postmodern in the sense that, since we entered modernity, it is no longer *obvious* that nature is spiritual – we have lost our ‘innocence’, so to speak – and, if we had a scientific education, we have to do effort to detach ourselves from the modern way of looking at nature. The scientific way of thinking, as a condition of possibility, constrains the way we see things. Neo-animism is another, perhaps less self-conscious, movement, which refers to the experience that some objects, for example, ‘even’ *technological* objects, have spirit. We do not only anthropomorphize computers, robots and so on; we also *spiritualize* them. Turkle already observed in the 1980s that children think that something is alive when it moves and that computers are also treated in this way (Turkle 1984, p. 61). But adults, too, sometimes have animistic experiences, and this is especially so in the case of humanoid robots, which move and appear to have agency. We first experience and respond to them in a spontaneous, animistic way – only afterwards (usually *very soon* afterwards) we return to scientific perception, especially if we are in a scientific environment such as a robotics lab.

The response of the scientist–philosopher to such experiences is, of course, that of the Enlightenment thinker. If people anthropomorphize things, they are said to be deceived, to be under the spell of ‘ideology’, gliding back into Plato’s cave where we are captured by appearances. If Enlightenment champions are kind, they want to help us out of the darkness. If they are malicious, we only hear their laughter echoing



in the cave they think we are imprisoned in. "Of course there is only one reality, one universe (the scientist is a mono-realist). We should not confuse our irrational beliefs, emotions, feelings, and so on with the body of scientific propositions that represent the one and true *logos* of the universe."

Even some modern monotheists may respond to us in a similar way, at least in the following sense. These people would not argue that we should take a scientific point of view, but they might say that we fail to see religious truth *and* that we fail to make a crucial distinction between science and religion. In the sphere of religion, we should worship the (one) god; in the sphere of science, we should regard things for what they are: objects, without spirit. To paraphrase a well-known Christian saying: give the scientist what belongs to science (scientific truth, the universe of objects, the "facts"), and give God what belongs to Him (revealed truth, divine nature, the spiritual). Their imperative is: "Do not mix these two worlds, these two 'cities.'" There is the university and there is the church, and never shall their ways meet again. Thus, both the scientist-philosopher and the modern monotheist share the presupposition that there is a sharp distinction between science and religion (and between one, real natural universe and the religious *beliefs* of people) – the relevant difference being that the scientist-philosopher wants to explain away, tolerate, limit or eradicate the monotheist's religion and all forms of religion and 'superstition', whereas the monotheist wants to explain away, tolerate, limit or eradicate only *non-monotheist* spiritual experience and practice.

But these efforts of purification are in vain. There never has been a purely 'spiritual' or 'religious' sphere, in the same way as there is no purely 'natural', 'technological' or 'social' sphere. As Ingold and Szerszynski point out, pre-modern cultures experience their world as already natural, social and sacred at the same time. But this does not *fundamentally* change in a technological culture. We remain dependent on nature, and, even if in modernity we feel alienated from it, this does not threaten our existence, since we are still carried by it. We also start to develop new dependencies: we built new natures. We created a second nature full of artefacts. We also created what I call a 'third nature': the world wide web (which is also connected to the second nature). Our spiritual experience does not stop at the borders drawn by science or monotheist religion. Spirit lives where we live: in the natural-social-technological world we inhabit, experience and co-create.

We can conclude that the attempt to purify religion (by scientists *and* by monotheists), which tries to distinguish religion from the social, the

natural and the material–technological, fails since our ways of doing are still firmly grounded in, that is, made possible and limited by, a religious–social–natural–material *a priori*, which constitutes the transcendental ground for both our scientific and religious discourse about religion and moral status. This means that moral status ascription must be discussed in a way that recognizes the religious dimension of human experience and the religious dimension of its transcendental ground.

## 10.2. Two conceptions of religion: genealogical spirituality and life-spirituality

Let me now reconnect this view of religion to the argument made in the previous chapters. To say that there is no autonomous thing called ‘religion’ is not a scientific claim about the true nature of the universe, but is, rather, the view that human experience and existence cannot be understood in secular terms alone, since our ways of thinking, seeing and doing are not entirely secular and will never be entirely secular: human experience and existence are made possible by, and constrained by, a ground that also has a religious–spiritual dimension. For understanding *religion*, this transcendental claim has at least two implications. First, religious *language* and thinking – in particular religious metaphor – are not ‘autonomous’ but depend on the forms of life, of living together, of growth discussed in the previous chapters. The way we talk about religion and spirituality depends on *how* we live, how we live together, how we make things, and so on. Religious thinking is firmly connected with the social–natural–technological ground. In a strict sense, we cannot talk *about* religion, as if it were an autonomous sphere, an object we can take distance from and then talk about; rather, we talk religion as we *live* religion. And living religion means at the same time living society, living technology, and so on. When we talk religion, we do not leave our body, our tools and our society at home. (Similarly, when we talk moral status, we do not leave our body, our tools and our society at home.) Second, forms of religious *experience* are also dependent on this relational, primal ground, the ground which I identified as the transcendental *a priori* of moral status ascription.

Perhaps we can call this ground ‘sacred’, but not because it would be a separate sphere divorced from ‘the secular’. Rather, it is at the same sacred and natural, spiritual and technological, holy and social. Compare our dependence on this ground to dependence on a ‘pagan’ well or stream: it is spirit and it is water, it is holy and it is what people do together. It is not ‘religious’ if that means something autonomous,

something about “higher spheres”; rather, it is simultaneously a way of thinking and a technique of living, indeed, a way of life.

Religion attempts to (re)connect with this ground. The origin of the term ‘religion’ lies in the verb *religare*: to bind, to link, to relate. This may be interpreted as an attempt to restore an ‘original’ world order (an order of the *past*, perhaps a world or a temple constructed according to an ‘original’ blueprint, the Word of the Architect). Religion may try to reconnect what has been broken, to heal what has been ripped apart. However, it may also be interpreted as being the continuous attempt to relate, to grow and connect *in the present*; that is, it may be interpreted as life itself.

Note that trying to reconnect conceptually what has been ‘broken’ by modernity might itself be viewed as an effort of re-sacralization, of trying to restore a whole, or it might be viewed as an attempt to relate in the present. In this sense, Latour, Ingold and Szerszynski are ‘religious’ writers.

We can now connect these interpretations of *religare* to remarks about *logos* and rhizomes in the previous chapter and construe two kinds of religion, by which I mean more than *conceptions* of religion: two kinds of religious–social–technological discourse, thinking, experience and action.

The first kind of religion is genealogical in Ingold’s sense: it tries to connect to the past, to trace us back to a time when everything was ‘in order’. It is not so much conservative as restorative and reactionary in kind. It sees spirituality as something that is ‘passed on’ from a creator-God to its creatures. Our ‘spiritual’ DNA is passed on. And perhaps we pass it on to *our* creatures, to the artefacts we make – for instance, robots. They are our ‘children’; religious history is a history of fathers and forefathers (God being *the* Father). This kind of religious thinking loves tree-structures; its society has a hierarchical tree-structure, and its thinking about morality is tree-based: there are codes based on principles, there are moral status categories based on ontological classes based on properties. Religion is basically a practice of remembering, or at least a particular kind of genealogical remembering. Acts of the past have to be re-acted.

The second kind of religion does not suppose that there is an ‘Original’ act (e.g. an original creation, an original act, etc.) but sees the *present* as fundamentally historical, as moving on, as being alive, but not in a straight line. Here cyclical and rhizomatic thinking is appropriate. Religion is about making connections *now*, about continuous spiritual non-linear growth. Spirit is not a Word that is passed on from generation

to generation, that is distributed among the people by a 'Father', but something that is *already* there *in* the world, already shared between entities, present in entities. Here moral status is not something that is decided from 'above' by or in the original act of creation or in the re-act of moral status ascription; it is *already lived* and presupposed when the relation to other entities is in question, and it can and is allowed to *change*. This kind of religion involves forms of *immanent* spirituality.

In both cases, moral status ascription is a 'word', it has a certain linguistic form, but in the first kind of religious thinking there is a *first* word which is also the *last* word, the first and the last letter (the alpha and the omega), which is spoken by the Creator. Afterwards, there is only re-creation and ('secondary') pro-creation by 'his' creatures. In order to know the moral status of an entity, we have to 'download' the Word, get to know the Idea, the Original Form. In the second kind of religious thinking, there is no blank, dark world of matter onto which the Creator then speaks a word, inscribes his ontological and moral Book. There is no female earth-body or mute slave body waiting to be fertilized and inscribed by the Man and his *Logos*. Instead, 'moral status words grow' as much as the world on which they depend grows. There is no one Speaker but a dynamic, living network in which words take different shapes. In a sense, there is no 'creation', since there is no sharp boundary between 'creator' entities and entities that are created. The 'word' of moral status is not to be found in a Book (which then needs interpretation by the community of readers) but emerges from a continuous dialogue in a network of relations between entities. Spirits come and go, relations change. There are no discrete entities with linear histories from birth to death (see also Ingold); instead there is moral metamorphosis: form that changes not in the way of a 'designed' and 'made' transformation but in the way biological entities change form. This kind of spirituality does not hold on to a Past (when everything was in order) or a Future (when everything will be in good order again), but plunges into the uncertain currents of the present and waits patiently until spirit reveals itself or joyfully finds it in a world where it is at home. There is plenty of spirit. Spirit can be shared; it is not a scarce resource distributed by the Judge. Both value and spirit are 'given' to us – but not by a god and not long ago or in the future. Value is *lived*, not ascribed. This is a spirituality of abundance, a spirituality of growth and a spirituality of life.

The latter form of religion also implies that a philosophy of technology cannot be a philosophy of *alienation*, if this means that – by means of modern technology – we have lost an original state or

world. This was the view of many twentieth-century philosophers of technology. It seemed that we had lost ‘original’ humanity and that we had been divorced from ‘nature’. But in the alternative view I am articulating here there is no assumption of ‘Original Sin’: no act which divided us from the divine and by which we are now locked up in the material world. In contrast to this Gnostic (dualism) and Christian view (doctrine of original sin), it is held that there has always been a relational ground, that we have always been related, and that the spiritual and the material are already connected. There is no reconnection (*re-ligare*, religion) needed. If there is anything to *heal*, it is not a restoration of a lost unity, a lost world order (compare also: a lost moral order), but regaining experience and awareness of the already existing and living relations – which are also always already moral relations.

Note that this distinction between two kinds of religions should not be understood as (mutually exclusive) *categories* that have nothing to do with one another. If the transcendental argument is right, *both* kinds of thinking and experience are only possible on the basis of a common, social–relational, material and, indeed, *spiritual* ground.

In order to develop my argument about spirituality and moral status, let me now fine-tune it by distinguishing between various spiritual forms and infer how thinking about moral status depends on these forms.

### 10.3. Forms of spirit and moral status ascription

As I argued in the first section, in spite of what has been called secularization and disenchantment (to use Weber’s term), in modernity – Western modernity and perhaps also *Eastern* modernity – human experience has not been fully secularized and the world has never been entirely disenchanted. Secular moderns believed that the world was purified of spirit. This has been a condition of possibility for the very idea of ‘moral status ascription’: it is only when the world itself is devoid of meaning and value, when objects are ‘neutral’ in this sense, that we can *ascribe* moral status to it. Moral status is inscribed on a spiritually and morally blank slate. But when it comes to actual moral status ascription and experience, that is, when we look at what and how people value, then it turns out that particular kinds of spirituality frame those ‘moral status ascriptions’; that they are enabled by, and limited by, what we may call ‘forms of spirit’. Developing previous work (Coeckelbergh 2010), let me describe a few forms of spirit and their corresponding moral status experiences.

*Natural spirits.* Many contemporary changes in perceptions of moral status seem outgrowths of a romantic attempt to revalue nature and the natural, undertaken in opposition to what is perceived to be a world without meaning and value. Indeed, romanticism is the flip side of the rationalist, 'disenchantment' side of the Enlightenment. Romantic artists such as Caspar David Friedrich ascribed a soul to nature, in particular to the landscape. However, the romantic revaluation of nature must be distinguished from nature religions and their contemporary neo-pagan heirs. The romantic observer is detached from nature and uses it (e.g. the landscape) as a mirror of her own feelings – mystical feelings, feelings of love, and so on. Romanticism is a form of Idealism: spirit is ascribed to the world, but what counts is the mind and experience of the observer. It disguises itself as an attempt to become one with nature, but turns out to be a form of disengagement, an aesthetic contemplation of spirit rather than a being-with spirit. For the romantics, nature was a projection screen; it did not have what we would now call 'intrinsic value' or spirit. For Philipp Otto Runge, another early romantic artist, for example, the landscape was a *symbol* of religion. Moreover, the Enlightenment thinkers – romantic or rationalist – stayed close to Christianity, even in their romantic or spiritist thinking. In Friedrich's paintings we find symbols of the Christian god, not natural spirits or the gods of nature. And Swedenborg<sup>3</sup> saw himself as a *Christian* mystic.<sup>4</sup>

Nature religions, by contrast, 'ascribe' spirit to (what from a scientific point of view can be described as) natural objects and natural events; or, rather, they do not ascribe spirit, but find it. Often the whole of 'nature' is seen as sacred. Nature religions are relational *par excellence*. Humans are connected to (other) animals, stones, mountains, and so on. What counts are not the feelings of the romantic observer, but the natural entities themselves and the natural whole of which they are part. Whereas romanticism and other (anti-)Enlightenment currents are entirely compatible with strongly anthropocentric approaches to moral status, nature religions reveal the moral world order as a web of relations with a non-anthropocentric and less hierarchical distribution of moral status. Within this form of spirituality, which is sometimes called 'animism', it is impossible to single out one entity (a god) or class of entities (humans) as the masters of the universe. Nature religions are deeply pluralistic. The world is viewed as already meaningful and spiritual. Humans and non-humans live side by side (though not necessarily in harmony) rather than in a hierarchy of beings. There is no strong metaphysical distinction between things and animals or between humans and (non-human) animals.

Contemporary relational views of moral status, therefore, if they are truly relational, have more affinity with nature religions than with romanticism. I suspect that most 'green' views of moral status are made possible by a curious mixture of romanticism and nature religion: we ascribe moral status to animals and nature, but what counts is *our feeling* that nature matters, or perhaps even *our calculation* (in the case of rationalist utilitarians) as masters of the universe who, as good Christians, should take care of God's creation. From our tower we see that animals are suffering, feel bad about it (or calculate), and then we help out. We do not live with them.

*The liberation of spirit.* Next to romanticism there is another anthropocentric view that 'competes' with the more 'horizontal' orientation of nature religion: Gnosticism. Like secularism, it supposes that we live in a world without spirit. In response, it turns to the self, where it finds a 'divine spark' which can and must be liberated. The contemporary equivalent of this view is what Aupers and Houtman (2005) call 'cybergnosis': in order to overcome alienation, one transcends the material world and finds liberation in the digital realm. In the sacred cyberworld, we can shed our moral bodies and become spirits. What counts here is the status of the human soul. Humans can become virtual, that is, spiritual. No one cares about non-human entities; they are left behind in the dark material world. Moral status, one can infer, belongs only to those beings who can *liberate themselves* by means of scientific *gnosis* (knowledge) and technology and can reach immortality. In other words, it belongs only to humans, and perhaps to entities who already belong to the digital sphere. The earthly world was never spiritual in the first place. Since animality and naturalness are part of 'evil' earth, they do not get moral and spiritual status, or perhaps only what we may call *negative* moral and spiritual status.

*The spirit of the creator.* At first sight, the creational view of the monotheist religions, which are still very influential today, is close to that of Gnosticism. It seems that making a distinction between creation and created is to locate spirit only on the part of the creator, which leaves the creation de-spiritualized. As I said, it seems that, long before secularization, the monotheist religions have disenchanting the world. I have questioned this view and I have suggested the possibility of an entirely different kind of spirituality. However, there is a way to deny the disenchantment thesis and still remain within creational monotheist thinking: one could argue that there is a spiritual relation between creator and creation in a form that is more than a 'divine spark': the parental bond. We are the children of the one god; he is our Father.

Moreover, animals and natural elements are, while not created in the image of God (*imago dei*), still *creatures* of God. Hence, when it comes to ascribing moral status, it follows that humans have the highest moral status, whereas animals and natural elements have a lower, but still significant, moral status as parts of God's creation. Perhaps even artificial objects can enjoy *some* kind of spiritual and moral status, since they stand in a 'parental' relation to humans, who have the highest moral status of all creatures. Artefacts then get a kind of 'indirect' moral relation due to their 'grandchild' status. (This seems especially applicable to robots, who are created in the image of humans.) Thus, in principle, monotheistic creationism allows giving a moral status to all created entities, although it is always some form of *derived* moral status. The entity has no intrinsic moral status but carries it as a gift of its divine or human creator. In modernity this gift becomes a property. If there is no creator-god who gives and takes, then we no longer 'borrow' ourselves and our status, we *own* it. Then we no longer thank our creator for His gift, but *claim* our rights.

*Spirits in and of the network.* In our time network metaphors are popular and can also be used to describe the possibility of a kind of spirituality that is very similar to that of nature religions. In a network – digital or otherwise – entities are related to other entities, and, although the entities do not necessarily have equal spiritual power, spirit is already distributed rather than concentrated in one divine agent and then distributed by that agent (it is not "distributed from the start", since that formula would suggest an origin). Moreover, perhaps the whole, the network, could also have some kind of sacred nature. Such a 'neo-pagan' network spirituality would allow a moral status distribution that crosses the digital/non-digital and the natural/artificial divide. Moral status then becomes something that may arise not only in natural relations but also in artificial and 'digital' relations. Then spirit and moral status are not exclusively natural, as in nature religions, but also not exclusively digital, as in contemporary cyber-gnosticism. Furthermore, then spirit and moral status do not only emerge from parental-creational relations, as in monotheistic creationism, but there is the possibility that they arise from other kinds of relations as well.

This idea of a networked spirituality and moral status distribution corresponds to the view that emerged at the end of Part I, but here it is even further removed from a dogmatic description of a relational ontology and spirituality. Rather, it is an exploration and interpretation of the spiritual conditions of possibility for a relational approach to moral status ascription. Let me explain this further in the next section.



#### 10.4. Shopping in the spiritual supermarket?

I have distinguished two kinds of religion and – in a more fine-grained analysis – various forms of spirit. Is this an invitation to *choose* between different forms? Are these various forms ‘on offer’ (perhaps with a ‘discount’ if they are based on older forms of spirituality: “Christianity for sale”)? Are these forms “options” similar to *lifestyle* options in liberal–capitalist society? Are they lifestyles themselves? Is it ‘up to you’ which one you choose?

In order to answer this question, let me reintroduce my *transcendental* argument, which stresses that it is not a matter of choice at all: we live in a particular culture – also a particular *spiritual* culture – and therefore we cannot simply ‘switch’ or ‘shift’ to a different spiritual thinking and way of life. Our particular way of spiritual thinking and its related moral status ascriptions cannot be changed by choice or words alone. Let me explain this.

The forms of spirit (and of spiritual experience) discussed here are not part of ‘culture’ or ‘religion’ if these terms are meant to designate separate spheres, set apart from other human activities and from nature. Instead, they are rooted in *forms of life* – forms which have material–technological dimensions as well. For example, nature religion and animism appear to be linked to hunter-gatherer societies, monotheistic creationism to pastoral and agricultural societies (and, if we draw on Ingold again, perhaps also to industrial societies, which do not reproduce but produce, but still execute ‘original’ designs, pass on the code, and so on), and network spirituality to late modern information societies.

These connections to the social–economic dimension are already implicit in the metaphorical schemes we can use to describe these forms of spirit and related types of spirituality and ways of ascribing moral status. For example, the ‘horizontal’ nature religions and their ‘network spirituality’ offspring seem to correspond to more egalitarian mixed human/non-human communities than the agricultural societies which know the rule of a divine Lord, a human lord, a Master of creation, a master of the house, a master of slaves, and so on.

This does not mean that it is pointless to discuss moral, social, linguistic and spiritual change. The point of my transcendental argument is not to show that these different societies and material–technological forms determine our thinking and experience, *cause* us to use particular metaphors, to experience the world in certain ways, and to engage in particular ways of thinking. Rather, my claim is that, if as

critical philosophers we want to question the basic forms of our spiritual and other thinking (including moral thinking, moral language, moral experience, etc. – which turn out to be at the same time religious and spiritual), it is wise to analyse their conditions of possibility as a way to *interpret* and contextualize that thinking in order to better understand what we are doing and to explore what *else* we could do (say, experience, think, write and so on), how we could live *differently*, and what the *limitations* are when we attempt to live–think–talk differently. Growing up involves exploring one’s powers and one’s limitations.

# 11

## Fences, Walls and Maps: Forms of Historical Space

### 11.1. Two conceptions of space and time

In philosophy, space and time are often conceived of as *Kantian* conditions of possibility. Kant argued in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1787) that they prestructure our experience. They are not themselves objects, but they preform our perception of objects. This conception of space and time has informed philosophical accounts of how the human mind works when engaged in natural sciences and mathematics (or at least *modern* science and mathematics; as far as I know, in contemporary physics space and time would not be regarded as independent conditions or as conditions that have to do with the human mind). Before we can study the objects and laws of nature, and before we can formalize these laws, we have to presuppose the categories of space and time as an *a priori*.

The space and time I will be concerned with in this chapter, however, have little to do with these abstract, universal and ahistorical concepts. Following the phenomenological tradition, the scientific way of looking at the world is not taken for granted and is shown to be problematic when applied to all human activities and reflection, that is, when it is used outside the language game of modern science. In the first part of this book I have questioned the practice of moral status ascription as a moral science, according to which moral status is ascribed to objects after examination of their properties. In my attempt to go beyond the 'dissection theatre' of moral status science, I have explored a different, relational approach to moral status. Moreover, in the preceding chapters I have not examined the conditions of possibility of *scientific* knowledge of moral status, but the conditions of possibility of *any* knowledge of moral status, especially common, everyday experience of moral

status and everyday moral practices of moral status ascription. The space and time that prestructure *this* kind of experience and practice, then, are not the space and time of mathematics or physics, but what we may call 'historical space': a form of space that is the materialization and condition of possibility of a particular way of seeing and doing, a particular form of life which developed throughout history, which is open to interpretation, and which profoundly shapes our thinking – including our thinking about moral status. What I hope to introduce and briefly examine here are patterns of moral geography, in particular moral status geography: meaningful patterns of 'moral status doing' that form space and are formed by space. What these forms of historical space reveal and make possible is not (only) the work of the mathematician, scientist or philosopher, but the perception and praxis of all people, including farmers and traders, for instance. Without offering a comprehensive description of all moral-geographical patterns, it is instructive to discuss some of them, in particular those relevant to moral status ascription.

First I will offer a brief discussion of the relation between culture and space, which will reveal modern thinking as a form of *distancing*. I will put concepts such as earth, land, territory, universe, globe and network within a history of distancing. In the next section I will further develop this interpretation and turn to a particular condition of possibility of major importance that continues to prestructure our thinking about moral status: the city–countryside–wilderness pattern. I will attempt to describe this significant moral-geographical structure in order to show how moral status ascription and the moral distinctions that come with it are entangled with the ways we have structured our space, that is, they are made possible and shaped by the way humans have lived and the way they have perceived and treated others – humans and non-humans. In the last section I will expand this analysis by discussing the earth-space pattern and show its implications for how we think about moral status.

Hence, by reconnecting them to their historical-geographical soil, this chapter shows that moral distinctions are living distinctions. Moral status becomes historicized and localized.

## 11.2. Cultures and space

We are used to thinking of the relation between culture and space as a *contingent* one. In modernity we separate thinking (the mental, belonging to the 'inner realm') from the 'outer' domain, the material

and the biological. Space is thought to belong exclusively to the latter category. Of course, we acknowledge that different cultures are situated in different places, but it is assumed that if, for example, the ancient Greeks had lived somewhere else, they would have had the same culture. The Greeks just happened to live on the territory we call Greece; the Persians just happened to live on the territory we used to call Persia. And when today we try to appreciate cultural difference we take a God's eye point of view, which is an *overview*, and see that there are different cultures living in different places and that there are different cultures living in one place (for example in one nation state). Having understood this, we try to tolerate difference. We learn to take distance from our own culture.

This *multiculturalism* thus assumes that there are culturally neutral territories on which cultures happen to live: sometimes they live together on the same territory, sometimes they have different territories. Earth is not something that sustains life and that is *part* of life, but a neutral, two-dimensional plane on which cultures have inscribed themselves. Of course this changes the landscape, but this is regarded as a one-way, causal relation. It is assumed that there is a certain amount of land, which was once available for use (it is 'standing reserve', as Heidegger would say) and was then divided into territories and properties belonging to different cultures and to different people: farm-land, national territory, and so on.

Although we are now used to thinking of earth and land in this way, viewed from a historical perspective it is a rather extraordinary and relatively recent idea. It was the attitude of the Europeans when they arrived in North America: by conceiving of the land as something that is not intrinsically related to peoples and their cultures, they could define its status in such a way that it could be taken (in the worst case) or bought (in the best case). In other words, the earth (*terra*) becomes a *territorium*, a domain: it becomes an object that can be owned. The condition of possibility of this perception of the land is that it is first purified, stripped of its inhabitants (those who are in the habitus of living there) and their culture. At the same time, culture was purified from earthly elements. This allowed those Europeans to take and buy land, and it is still our Western, now *post-colonial*, attitude: of course, today most of us think the land is 'theirs' or should have been 'theirs', as a matter of social justice; however, this way of thinking is still *post-colonial*, since we can only conceive of the land as something that is owned. And if it is not owned it must be appropriated. The question of justice limits itself to the issue of *by whom* it must be appropriated.

This way of thinking pervades influential theories of justice. For example, Nozick's view of nature in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* follows Locke's theory of acquisition: the land is an object, a natural asset, a natural resource (rather than a *source*), which is previously un-owned and which is then appropriated, that is, made property (Nozick 1974). This modern view of the earth has roots in Christian thinking. As Locke argued in, God has given us the earth, with its fruits and beasts, and we have to use it:

AQ1

God, who hath given the world to men in common, hath also given them reason to make use of it to the best advantage of life, and convenience. The earth, and all that is therein, is given to men for the support and comfort of their being. And [...] all the fruits it naturally produces, and beasts it feeds, belong to mankind in common, as they are produced by the spontaneous hand of nature. (Locke 1690, p. 18)

AQ2

However, this is only an initial state, a state of nature. Then the earth, with its fruits and beasts, is appropriated by mixing one's labour with it (Locke 1690, p. 19). This is the birth of private property: civilized men do something with the objects of nature, they labour, whereas the 'wild Indian, who knows no inclosure' (p. 19) still lives in the state of nature. *Cultivation* as appropriation thus means in Locke's view to mix one's labour with the natural object: the natural object is used as a resource and culture is the outcome of the process. More generally, in modern thinking either culture is seen as something that is entirely unrelated to earth and land, or it is seen as the outcome of the labour process. In both cases, there is no pre-given, intrinsic relation between nature and culture. It is assumed that nature and culture are two entirely different things. To inscribe culture onto the land or to mix the human with the natural is to assume that we 'first' have a nature understood as a readily available standing-reserve, a resource we 'then' can use in the writing or production of culture.

The roots of this dualistic view are also the roots of the Western tradition broadly conceived: a combination of Jewish-Christian-Islamic thought with Greek thought. Next to the already mentioned view that nature is given to us by God, we should also consider the Greek idea of the cosmopolis: the Stoics thought that we are citizens of the world. This has influenced Christianity (through the writings of Paul) and made it a *world* religion: it no longer mattered whether you were a Jew or a Gentile, it no longer mattered where you lived, you could

be a Christian everywhere (similarly, one can be a Jew or a Muslim everywhere). We are the children of God, but we are also the children of *Logos*. The Word is spread everywhere. This idea has made it possible that distance was taken from the earth and from the land: we became more abstract, reasonable beings – users of *logos* and faithful receivers of *Logos*. Moreover, as remarked before, since spirit was seen as belonging to God alone, spirits (plural) were removed from the land. Nature, earth and land became secularized – albeit not completely, as argued before.

Thus, what emerges here is a history of the West as a history of *distancing* (or alienation), which may be problematic in itself, but nevertheless very helpful to understand our current relation to land and earth.

First people belonged to the land and the land nourished spirits, humans, animals. This is what Ingold refers to when he talks about the Aboriginals, and this is what Leopold and Callicott try to recover: a sense of land as neither owned nor un-owned, a land that cannot be described in those categories. Nature and culture are dimensions of one life-world. Culture and place cannot be disconnected.

Then a first, very influential distancing occurs: when agriculture develops, people start to think of the land as an object they can appropriate and are entitled to, especially when we mix it with our labour. We do not belong to the earth; the earth – and its creatures – belong to *us*. It is given to us by God as something we can make use of *for the support and comfort of our being* (to paraphrase Locke). Land becomes farm-land and fences are built (I will return to this in the next section). Earth is no longer the soil of natural-cultural growth, but the ingredient of a nature-labour mix, a raw material sliced up and cooked up by us to make ourselves comfortable. It is cut up in domains that can be owned privately. What we do in the private domain is – literally – our business; only in the public domain is there room for politics.<sup>1</sup>

In the industrial age, further distance is taken from the earlier perception of the land. The land is something to be landscaped and created ('taken' from the sea, for example). We are not only the cultivators but also the producers of land. Once everything is taken, once everything is colonized, we are still hungry for property. The desire for appropriation has given us the globe, but the globe is not enough. After we took all space and thereby eliminated the very notion of it (see below), we started appropriating the seas and even what we call 'space', extra-terrestrial 'territory'. But our technologies limit how far we can go. We need better technologies.

In the information age, we find a very creative solution: we develop and use information technology to create an entirely new kind of 'land' and 'space': cyberspace. The world wide web does not only help us to complete the process of globalization; it also gives us new objects and hence the possibility to acquire new *property* and to set up new fences. It is not only 'worldwide'; it also expands our world. We can now mix our labour with information objects and create a digital culture. The web demands from us that we continuously appropriate new information. New digital land can be created infinitely.<sup>2</sup> God has given us nature, but we have given ourselves a present that is far more appealing: we can now create or appropriate as many domains and sites as we want to. The sky is not the limit, since there is no longer a sky. There is no longer an earth. There is the net. Labour means net-working.

But what happens to the 'old' land? In earlier times, land had already become the 3-D representation of our maps and our satellite pictures. It was already the skin that covered the globes in our cabinets. Now we take even further distance from the earth: we become cursors, that is, those who follow a course on our screens. There is no 'environment', only décor. We become *screenagers* and inhabitants of virtual (game) worlds. We become abstract nodes of a network. 'Place' is defined by your connections. We are not nomads, since nomads follow tracks and traditions; they still belong to the land, even if this land is stretched out. We people of cyberspace, by contrast, no longer belong anywhere. We have become place-less. We no longer in-habit; we do not live 'in' a culture-space. What the Stoics wanted has now been nearly fully realized: the world has become a *universum*, that is, it is turned into *one*. This has eliminated 'place' as such. Mono-theism and mono-realism are followed by mono-localism, which destroys the very idea of a locus. If you are everywhere, you are nowhere. Moreover, the distinction between private and public space disappears, since space itself disappears. In desperation, the most important question to ask each other becomes: *Where* are you? But, when we give our position, we realize that we could as well say 'nowhere'. When place becomes a grid position or a network node, place no longer *matters*. It is decoupled from the material and the natural. Mobile devices do what millennia of Stoic reason and Gnosticism have never completely managed to do: distance us from the earth.

What does this mean for moral status? In the next sections I will further refine and elaborate this history of distancing and explore its implications for moral status.



### 11.3. The city, the countryside and the wild

One way of describing the practice of moral status ascription, as it developed in Western thinking, is to say that it is about *giving an entity a place*, in particular *the right place*. For this purpose, we usually rely on a kind of moral order, a structuring of moral space (see also my introduction). The problem with new entities, for instance some kinds of robots, is that we find it hard to ‘give them a place’; they do not fit well in our present, given moral world order. For animals, by contrast, we have a structure available, or at least so it seems: based on divine revelation or modern science, we can reconstruct a kind of moral hierarchy (e.g. based on Aristotle or the Bible) or apply a criterion such as sentience (based on biology) in order to give them a place. However, these traditional ‘metaphysical’ and ‘moral science’ approaches to moral status do not only incur the problems I identified in the first part of this book; in the past decades they have also been largely unsuccessful in reshaping our intuitions about the moral status of animals and in motivating us to treat them differently. In fact, they have caused moral–motivational deadlocks such as: “I know that this animal (e.g. a pig) is intelligent and sentient and that according to Singer’s criterion it should be treated better and perhaps not be killed at all, but at the same time this is an animal that has been bred for feeding us and this has been the case for ages; it is a *farm animal* and it is part of our *livestock*.” Or: “I know that from a relational point of view, this animal is part of the ‘biotic community’ and hence should be treated as a fellow rather than a living piece of meat, yet it seems that humans have *always* eaten it, ‘they’ eat it, and if we were to release it into the wild, it could not survive without us.” In order to better understand these and similar troubles, and more generally to understand why, in spite of new scientific and moral insights, our ways of doing and our moral perceptions and intuitions are remarkably inert, let us look at how the city–countryside pattern has long prestructured, and continues to prestructure, our moral status perceptions and practices concerning animals and other non-humans. (This will also refine the history of distancing I started in the previous section.)

In order to reveal this moral–geographical pattern and relate it to moral status, we have to take ‘giving animals a place’ far more literally than philosophers or scientists are inclined to do. For example, in light of one of the most significant cultural–historical developments in the history of humanity, we can reformulate the moral status question regarding animals as follows: Do animals belong to the city or do they belong to the countryside? Or do they belong to neither and should

they be 'given back' to the 'wilderness', to 'nature'? And, in order to understand common answers to these questions, indeed in order to understand moral status ascription to animals, we should also ask: And how did they end up there in the first place?

In the course of history, there have been at least two developments that deserve our attention here: domestication and civilization. My description of these developments does not aim at correspondence with historical facticity (if there is such a thing), but at offering added hermeneutical value to my discussion of moral status ascription: we want to better understand this common, yet at the same time very curious, practice.

*Domestication* refers to drawing the entity into the sphere of the *domus*, the house (that is, the villa and the village), which is a transition from 'nature' or the 'wilderness' to the human world, in particular the human world of farming. This has happened with animals, but also with humans, who only became fully cultural by a process of 'unwilding' or domestication. Cultivation of the land (agriculture) went hand in hand with culturing of the human, a culturing of mind and body, a learning of new skills. Herding went hand in hand with herding humans. Next to hunting and gathering, humans learned to transform earth into land, and land into the fruits of the land, and the fruits of the land into songs and dances of sorrow, joy and thankfulness for the fruits of the land. They learned, for the first time, to take *care* of animals (and of humans) and to see animals (and humans) as *stock*, available for manipulation (handling) and calculation: as supply for future use, it can be slaughtered, owned and traded.

Those who did not manage this transition into the (agri)cultural herd were regarded as 'wilds', such as the native population of North America and Africa. They were given a different, lower status. Indeed, domestication is not only a historical-geographical operation, but also a moral one. With the rise of agri-culture, the moral status of humans and animals changed. Hunters and gatherers became land-builders (see, for example, the Dutch word for farmers, *landbouwers*, or the German word *bauern*), housewives and husbands (original meaning: house-dweller). Humans and animals no longer belonged to the Land. The non-farmland became wilderness, a place where no belonging is possible. Farmland was created by mixing labour with nature. Humans and animals came to belong to the house and the farm-land in the same way as their cattle came to belong to the farm-land. Humans and animals often lived together in the house. Economy was about house holding: working on the land, taking care of the animals, keeping stock, and so on.

Those who lived in the wild did not know how to 'hold house'. They lived like wild beasts, or so it appeared to the cultured villagers. Wild animals means animals who are untamed, uncultured, undomesticated. They belong to 'nature', to what is on the other side of the moral-geographical fence. Tamed animals, however, have moral superiority, since they allow the farmers to make a living. They are livestock; they have value. Rules are created: "Do not kill an animal for pleasure (alone); only kill it for eating. Follow the rules. And you are the ruler of animals. We humans determine when their time has come, just as the divine Lord determines when *your* time has come." Animals outside the village are outside culture. They can be hunted for food (the older way of living), or they must be killed if they threaten the livestock (this is the Big Bad Wolf morality: evil is what threatens my livestock). The wild, for example the forests and the mountains, and its wild animals, was mainly seen as at best useless and at worst dangerous. Forest must be turned into land, and mountainous terrain cannot be turned into land, it cannot be cultivated; therefore it is situated outside culture. Moreover, the wild animals are not domesticated, they are not tame; therefore they are useless and have no moral value. Only much later, in the romantic imagination, do these terrains and animals get a more positive meaning and sometimes also a higher moral status. Still today many people say that they wish to 'return to nature'. A few of them try to live like hunter-gatherers. Most of them, however, mean with 'returning to nature' that they want to become villagers; that is, they turn away from the *ville* (French word for city) to the *village*. To understand this, we need to describe another development: domestication was followed by *civilization*.

Civilizing means drawing an entity into the city. To civilize the entity is to make it a resident of the city. This has mainly happened to humans, not to animals (I will soon show why). Cities arose when some people were *liberated* from their bond with the land and found *liberty* within the walls of the city, where they had no lord or master and were neither lord nor master themselves; there was only a major, as a kind of best among equals, a *primus inter pares*. These 'free men' received rights and could trade, that is, make their own tracks (original meaning of the word trade) and buy and sell the goods that were produced by others. Thus, rights were seen as the privilege of a few; only relatively late in history has there been a process of enlarging the boundaries of citizenship, which went hand in hand with enlargement of the physical boundaries of cities (followed by the global virtual city of the world wide web). Only recently have some people suggested that some

animals should get rights as well, that is, should be liberated (“animal liberation”) and politicized, that is, drawn into the *polis*.

In order to better understand the concept of civilization as liberation, and to grasp why the idea of animal rights might have sounded ridiculous and outrageous to our ancestors (and to many people today), it is helpful to oppose citizenship to other statuses. In the same way as the domesticated need their wilderness to define their own status, citizens need their uncivilized others: ‘nature’ and wilderness, for sure, but also and in particular the *villagers* (house-people) and the slaves (who also belonged to the household, but in an even stronger sense). As traders, the citizens were removed from agricultural production, and they liked to see themselves as having higher status than the *peasants*, the people from the country (French: du *pays*), the *pagans*. Once they enjoyed the status of free citizens, everything that was outside the city walls became country-side, as opposed to civilization-side. In the same way as the fence of the farmer served to distinguish his culture from the wilderness, the city wall served the citizens by distinguishing their *civilization* from the barbary on the other side of the wall, the *new* wilderness outside the wall. Within the city walls there was liberty; outside, one could only find labour and slavery.

This way of understanding civilization is supported by Arendt’s view, which opposes political freedom to the life process and its associated labour. In *The Human Condition* (1958) she explains the concept of ancient Greek politics by opposing the freedom and equality of the citizens to the labour and servitude of the *oikos*, the household: a place for labour and slavery. Only citizens could achieve freedom. According to Aristotle (see again Book I of the *Politics* and my Chapter 2), the use made of slaves and of tame animals is not very different; they are ruled by the needs of life. We may conclude from Aristotle and Arendt that those who were engaged in household activities would not have been seen as political subjects at all. More generally, one might say that, according to this way of thinking and doing, any entity that is not a citizen, any entity that does not have its place in the city, has no political status and considerably less moral status. In this Aristotelian world, only the citizens make full use of their capacity of reason, of their *logos*. If your moral status is lower (that is, if your *place* or *position* is lower), you may have the capacity but not use it (country men, slaves working on the land) or you may not even have the capacity (wild men, animals).

Indeed, civilization is opposed not only to the uncivilized, barbarous countryside (the new wilderness), but also to the wilderness of ‘nature’. Wilderness or barbary is the absence of *logos*. In Book I of the *Politics*

Aristotle says of animals that they are incapable of *logos*; only humans have the gift of speech (1253a10–13; see also Chapter 2). He mainly referred to tamed animals, but his view seems to be applicable, *a fortiori*, to ‘wild’ animals. The human and non-human animals in the wild may make noise, but they do not speak. They have their low moral status because they roam in a realm where reason is silent. And, in such a silence, neither trade nor political discussion is possible.

To conclude, histories of domestication and civilization have created moral–geographical patterns, ways of doing and thinking about humans and non-humans, that are surprisingly persistent and influence our discourse and thinking about the moral status of animals. We can conclude that these patterns constitute moral fences and walls that prestructure contemporary moral experience and hence act as conditions of possibility in the sense that they limit changes in moral status thinking and, especially, doing. Furthermore, the moral changes that have occurred seem to amount to a kind of moral *distancing*. It is only by distancing ourselves from entities in thinking and doing (by means of domestication and civilization), and by building fences and walls between us and them, that we can give them the status ‘wild’ or ‘livestock’, that we can give them rights or not, and so on.

#### 11.4. Space morality

The city as a space of liberation, in which citizens have rights, has been gradually expanded to include nations and, eventually, the whole of mankind. While at first rights were the privilege of a few, they have been generously distributed to an ever wider circle of space (at least, in *theory*). First, rights were given to all ‘citizens’ in the state, then to all ‘citizens of the world’. The idea of a world citizenship, then, expands civilization over the whole world, at least the human world. The rights of the bourgeois became human rights: rights all humans have, regardless of other properties and forms of citizenship.

To make possible the ‘veil of ignorance’ (if I may borrow Rawls’s term) involved in this ‘human rights’ reasoning – a veil behind which all other distinctions disappear and only the human/non-human distinction is left – it was also very helpful that humans could literally take sufficient distance from their own social–spatial context and take a ‘higher’ moral stance. Moreover, world citizenship united the human world (together with globalization; see the first section), but it could be strengthened if it was accompanied by a territorial division of space, now along human/non-human lines. The citizen always needed a non-citizen to confirm

his moral–political identity; the city needed a non-city to define itself. When, after slaves, peasants, women and children, ‘even’ animals are civilized, our ‘preferred other’ disappears: we have a problem. But a solution has been found, again by making use of technology. Our non-city is now the extra-terrestrial space (except perhaps the orbital space and the moon, which have been colonized and are part of civilization now). Indeed, if we wanted to make sure that the idea of world citizenship is realized to a much larger extent than it is today, it would be extremely helpful if we were to discover extra-terrestrial aliens, especially less intelligent ones: if they lacked the Aristotelian capacity of *logos* (they might scream but be incapable of speech), they could then be constructed as the new barbarians, that is, those who are not part of our civilization. Setting up this new ‘we’ and ‘them’, a moral distinction firmly anchored in a clear division of territorial space, would probably do more to unite the peoples and bring world peace – that is, peace on *earth* – than the idea of human rights and the monotheistic religions have done so far.

Before concluding this book, therefore, I wish to discuss one more, related, moral–geographical pattern, which is part of a development that Arendt has named ‘earth alienation’, and which is very relevant to the present discussion about moral status. I already alluded to it in the first section: distancing can take the form of taking distance from the *earth*.

Arendt has argued in *The Human Condition* that modern science has alienated us from the earth, in particular by means of instruments such as the telescope and by means of space exploration. Today one might add Google Earth, GPS navigation, webcams, and similar software and electronic devices. Arendt’s point was that these are not merely technological developments but that they also changed our thinking. Let me briefly summarize her position and explore its implications for moral status ascription.

Arendt observes that people interpreted the launch of Sputnik 1 in 1957 as an attempt to escape ‘men’s imprisonment to the earth’ (Arendt 1958, p. 1), which she thinks is illustrative of our attempt to escape the human condition altogether, for example by extending our lifespan.<sup>3</sup> According to Arendt, explorations of the globe with its mapping, individual expropriation following the Reformation, and the invention of the telescope and the airplane have created a form of alienation that is both beneficial and problematic. Taking distance helps us to survive, and without it we could not have discovered the earth and enjoyed the benefits of this discovery, but ‘any decrease of terrestrial distance can

be won only at the price of putting a decisive distance between man and earth, of alienating man from his immediate earthly surroundings' (Arendt 1958, p. 251). Science, in particular, has contributed to this alienation by seeing things from what Arendt calls 'the Archimedean point': it has enabled 'earth alienation' (p. 264) by formulating universal laws, using algebra, and indeed by inventing technologies that allowed humans to escape the earth. The scientist, who 'acts into nature from the standpoint of the universe and not into the web of human relationships' (p. 324), removes us not only from the human, social world but also from the earth.

With regard to the moral status problem, I wish to highlight the moral dimension of this relation between technology and thinking. If we look at the earth from a *space* point of view, then this perceptual elevation is also a moral elevation: we remove ourselves from the earth and its entities and look upon them in a way that is comparable to how humans always imagined that gods viewed *them*: from above and from a (large) distance, without necessarily *caring* about them. This is also the position of modern science, and it is the position of many moral philosophers. Like the 'household' morality and 'city' morality related to domestication and civilization, this 'space morality' as moral-geographical *alienation* involves a form of elevation by distancing. Human moral superiority or apathy is asserted not by the fencing in and fencing out of other humans and non-humans (domestication) or by walling in and walling out other humans and non-humans (civilization), but by removing oneself from the earth and its entities, making these entities part of the (over)view, disconnected from the observer (alienation). Moral status is ascribed to entities once one has *mapped* them – ontologically and morally. And, once territories and entities are mapped, they can be controlled and mastered by the philosopher-king, the ruler of the moral realm. In other words, the space morality approach is a form of moral *colonization*.

Thus, this earth alienation goes further than civilization, or is a grotesque form of it. The cosmopolis includes all humans and at the same time excludes non-humans by taking the view from outer space. But this new viewpoint also does something to the status of humans: it renders them abstract *earthlings*, members of a species on a planet. By looking upon them as earthlings, the human observer stops being an earthling himself, since in order to take up his position he has already alienated himself from the earth. By seeing humanity as a species, the philosopher-astronaut stops being a member of the species and stops being situated on the planet. And, by looking at the world

*polis*, he stops being part of that world city. From this position he can finally hide the appearances and the relations behind his veil of ignorance and ascribe true moral status. Unless extra-terrestrial beings are discovered, the only relation that remains is that between the god-mapper and the ones who are mapped and categorized, between the one who has the overview (the divine geographer, the mapper) and the ones who are seen (those 'on' the map). To him belongs not the freedom of the citizen, which is still earth-bound, but the freedom of the god.

The mapper I talk about is, of course, not literally located in extra-terrestrial space, or at least not usually. This is about you and me. For example, when philosophers ascribe moral status they take up this position. After the mapping, the ascriber of moral status assumes the role of a tenant of the moral order, who keeps stock and guards the objects, the distinctions, the fences. Both objects and concepts are subject to her rule. Domestication is followed by management of the material and conceptual *oikos*. On one side of the fence there is a process of cultivation of entities, concepts and distinctions; this order is then protected from external attacks. What is needed, in all these activities, is proper *distance*. The Lord-philosopher does not dance with the villagers. The astronaut-philosopher looks upon her moral ontology and smiles condescendingly, without descending to the earthly world which she has come to experience as the map or the picture that was supposed to represent it. Humans and non-humans on earth become a 3-D representation of the elements on her moral map. As the carriers of reason (the bearers and Guards of *Logos*), they have become universal, un-placeable, and therefore re-placeable – since unbound by space. And, when the moral subject takes *that* much distance, the object is also released from spatial limitations and can finally be processed as an *information* object, one of the most abstract objects ever conceived. Both humans and non-humans are subjected to digital farming and processing, and the 'place-less position' of the Farmer or Controller can be taken up by any 'logical', reasoning subject, perhaps even an artificially intelligent one.

But is this form of 'thinking and doing moral status' avoidable? It *is* avoidable, in principle: a condition of possibility is not a cause; there is no determinism. There is the possibility of a kind of engaged and relational thinking, which stays closer to the earth, which can give *space* to entities, and which can crumble the fences and the walls. There is the possibility of a different form of life. However, the point is that, if





we wish to think and do differently, we are swimming against a strong current, and it seems that we need to make extra effort to stretch the boundaries of the linguistic, social, technological, spiritual and historical-spatial forms that limit our moral thinking, although there is no guarantee that we will succeed in *making* a change. I will say more about this in my conclusions.



## 12

Moral Metamorphosis: Concluding  
the Transcendental Argument12.1. Living value: moral status ascription  
and forms of life

After these ‘dogmatic’ and ‘transcendental’ arguments for a relational approach, it is time to draw conclusions for the moral status of non-human and human entities, or, rather, for *how to think about* their moral status.

Standard deontological and utilitarian approaches offer a method that leads to a moral taxonomy: a method of moral status determination, classification, and sometimes calculation, which leads to a moral status taxonomy. Linnaeus’s *systema naturae* was a classification of the natural world; this approach attempts a classification of the moral world. While most modern moral philosophers no longer assume that there is a *created* moral order which should be reflected and represented in a moral taxonomy, they assume that it is their task to (re)construct the ‘right’, justified moral order by founding it on a pre-given ontology (usually an individualist, contractarian and dualist society-versus-nature ontology) and by providing criteria of moral status. ‘Wild’ nature and ‘wild’, yet *unclassified*, artefacts are covered with layers of moral significance that must fit the world as it is, that fit reality. The moral–architectural project here is a project of restoration: the ontological foundations are there; what remains is the scientific task of raising the moral building as it should be, along the lines given by the foundations. The ultimate dream of contemporary moral taxonomists, then, is to make the ascriber of moral status into a kind of moral status *machine* that preforms this task by itself: if you give it a particular input (the entity in question, the criteria) it determines its ontological status and then, using that map, constructs (a model of) its moral status

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(the output). The moral engineer only needs to provide the software code with the *moral status algorithm*, a moral status function which uses, for instance, sentience as a criterion. There may be problems in translating this into machine code (What does sentience mean at a lower level of abstraction and a lower, more elementary level? How can this moral philosophy be *applied*?) but these are *in se* 'technical' problems that can be solved by good moral science and good moral engineering.

So-called 'relational' arguments do not usually divert from this overall method. They 'merely' replace individualist, contractarian and dualist ontological maps by social-relational ones. I write 'merely' since, of course, such a modest 'relational turn' is a significant change in thinking: it helps us to question the standard accounts of moral status and encourages us to inquire into non-Western ontologies related to different cultures removed from us in time and/or space. And, even if it were not entirely successful on its own, perhaps such a turn could constitute a necessary *antithesis* in a dialectical argument about moral status, which then goes on to construe a 'synthesis' that takes into *account* both individual and relational properties and dimensions of entities, 'intrinsic' and 'extrinsic' properties (see also the 'mixed' accounts I discussed in Chapter 3).

However, I have argued in this book that a truly relational turn (a *deep* relational view, as I have called it) requires not so much a change of ontological map or taxonomy, but rather a change of the method itself. The reasons that motivate and justify this change are not *theoretical*. To call them theoretical would suppose that they stem from *Anschauung*, an insight in the Greek sense of *theoria*: we have a different insight into the nature of things, we come to *see* that 'in reality' the world is relational, whereas we moderns always thought that it was all about elementary particles, causes and properties; let us therefore change our ontologies and construct moral status in a different way. Rather, the reasons are *practical*: when we think about moral status and try to think more relationally, we discover that we run into boundaries, which have to do with our form of life: we cannot think more relationally without *living* more relationally. I have argued that – paradoxically – the reasons why it is so hard to think more relationally are to be found in the very relational nature of human thinking and human being. In my transcendental analysis I have indicated that what enables and limits our thinking on moral status has to do with our existential dependence on relations, with our being-in-relation: linguistic relations that give meaning to the words we say and that structure these words into sentences we use to ascribe moral status, social-cultural relations that

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shape the form of life which is the womb of our thinking, experiential and technological relations to our body and to the environment which limit thinking about moral status, spiritual relations which co-structure the way we shape these other relations and are themselves structured by them, and spatial relations that cannot be disconnected from how we think about moral status and how this thinking has changed in the course of history.

Moreover, all conditions of possibility are themselves interrelated and interdependent. For example, patterns of moral-geographical space appear in the words we use and the words appear in the patterns. And at a meta-level, where the philosopher's mind likes to reside, the dependencies are still in place. For example, my description of different conditions depended on words and on technologies (writing, a word processor program, a computer, etc.) which constrained and shaped the form of my thinking (e.g. my thinking was perhaps more linear than it needed to be). And the thinking-writing took place in those moments when I disregarded my body (but nevertheless I drew on my experience, which is always partly bodily, and I used metaphors anchored in bodily experience) and when I was a 'citizen', that is, liberated from the troubles of the household (yet I was never completely separated from it, and my thinking was made *possible* by it).

Another way of expressing these limits to moral status reasoning is to pick up again the emphasis on the relation between moral status and the *social* as developed in the first part of this book, but with 'social' broadly understood. Any philosophical discourse on moral status must be situated *within* and not outside the social theatre of humans, animals and things. Changing moral status ascription is changing the boundaries of the social and hence changing our form(s) of life. How we should relate to other entities, therefore, depends crucially on which worlds, languages, bodies, technologies, spiritualities and spatial boundaries we create or adapt, which are given to us, and which we (are prepared to) live in.

The fruits of this essay for thinking about the moral status of animals, robots and other entities (including ourselves), then, is neither a *result* (the aim of science: one does research which should have results) nor a *method* (the aim of philosophy understood as meta-science; it thinks about the proper method for science). It is not a result, since, as an opponent may sigh, after this work we still do not know what the moral status of (particular) animals, robots and other entities is. It is neither a scientific method, since it does not describe how to reach such a result, nor a straightforward normative philosophical argument (for example,

about how we should treat particular kinds of animals or robots), and it is not meant to be one. What is left instead, I hope, is a better *understanding* of what we do when we try to ascribe moral status to entities, and the suggestion that the very *question* or *problem* of “moral status” and “moral status ascription” must be replaced by different questions and problems. If this book is right, then it makes a lot less sense to talk about moral *status* or about moral status *ascription*. Let me unfold this conclusion.

My claim that it makes little sense to talk about moral status may be interpreted in at least two ways. The ‘dogmatic’ interpretation says that we had better avoid talking about moral status given the relational nature of entities, which makes them dynamic and non-discrete. This renders the very idea of a ‘status’ inappropriate and void: ‘status’ suggests the properties view of moral status, whereas we want to talk about dynamic entities-in-relation. The relational dogma about moral status proclaims that moral ‘status’ is itself relational, that is, dependent on the entities’ relations to their environment. In the language of value and property, there is no ‘intrinsic’ value but only ‘extrinsic’ value. The ‘transcendental’ interpretation of the claim, by contrast, does not itself make an ontological, metaphysical claim, but changes the problem definition and asks about the *conditions of possibility* of moral status ascription. If we take this turn, then it no longer makes sense to talk about moral status as if it were an objective property, since ‘moral status’ depends on moral status ascription and its conditions of possibility.

But is ‘ascription’ still an adequate term, given what has been argued in the previous chapters? If we take this approach seriously, the normative question also changes: instead of asking about the moral status of entities, that is, what status we should ‘ascribe’ to them, we should ask what kind of relations we want to have to them. Moreover, if the argument of Part II is right, this question boils down to the well-known, ancient ethical question “How should we live?”, not interpreted as a question concerning ‘ethical rules’ (modern ethics) or ‘virtues’ (at least if interpreted as a kind of principles that are themselves external to life), but understood as asking about what form our language, our common life, our relations to nature, our spirituality and our space should have. Moreover, at the end of Chapter 9 I have argued that answering this question does not require a judgement from the outside, but a self-formation and self-transformation of life, or, better, a moral *metamorphosis*, which incorporates and from which emerges an ethics of growth and excess that explores forms of life as ways of flourishing. Ethics, then, is seen as part of life rather than something that controls/does not control ‘nature’

or restrains humans. It is the question of flourishing, which is now understood more *literally*: life is used as its own best metaphor.

To accept these conclusions of the transcendental argument and to change the normative question is not to embrace the end of morality; at most it is the end of one particular way of thinking about morality and its relation to life. It is the end of a morality focused on human self-control and of a morality of good and evil, but it does not wipe out the normative; it 'only' reinterprets the normative as an 'imperative' to flourish, which is the 'law' of life itself rather than its containment and control.

However, I am not sure that we are close to such an ethics and such a form of life. More linguistic–conceptual change is needed and more and different possibilities of life need to emerge. Philosophy can contribute to linguistic–conceptual change, but in light of my argument about forms of life it is good to keep in mind that its contribution is limited. And the conceptual work done in this book is only one small part of a continuously changing network of intertextual, inter-human, human–technological, human–spiritual and human–spatial relations and activities. In order to further develop the proposed approach to 'moral status' and morality within philosophy, we need to further critique and, if necessary, replace the architectural, bio-classificational, legal and computational metaphors by other, better metaphors: metaphors that express how the 'moral status' discourse is only one possible modus of moral *growth*, of moral life.

Viewed from the perspective of (further elaborated) relational alternatives, the discourse about moral status may itself well turn out to be a weed, a possibility which we might come to experience in the future as not good and not useful for coping with being-in-the-world. However, those philosophers, activists, lawyers and others who make a living from it need not worry too much: if my transcendental argument is right, then the discourse of moral status is here to stay for a while. We cannot just change it and we *do not know* when it will go, since we are surely not in the position of an all-knowing and all-powerful Gardener or Judge. We do not know *a priori* what is good (we have to improvise) and hence we cannot remove now what *a posteriori* turns out to be a weed. Moreover, as said, we cannot 'just' or 'simply' change our thinking without changing our living. Thus, linguistic–conceptual work done by philosophers and others is not enough. If we continue to live as most of us do, the moral status discourse is likely to be a very stubborn weed. But Heidegger was wrong when he said that 'only a god can save us'.<sup>1</sup> It is true that we cannot bring forth the change by our thinking *alone*.

But we should not think of it as requiring external, non-earthly, divine intervention. If there is anything to be 'saved' at all, it will be done by us and other entities and it will happen to us and other entities as we continue to try to *live* together as part of the relational world, try out new possibilities, and thereby slowly but surely change the conditions under which we express our despair. For this purpose, we need a philosophy of life; not as *theory* but as activity and experience. We should not love wisdom in a Platonic way but act and find it in the world; there is no wisdom outside activity and experience. As Diogenes knew, we have *live* wisdom and *live* value. Value is neither to be described nor to be created; it has to be lived.

## 12.2. Can we move beyond modern and postmodern thinking? towards living philosophy

Recognizing these limits to linguistic–conceptual work is important, since otherwise the transcendental argument becomes a modern argument for *changing* redesigning our moral outlook from the perception of value (the moral order with its entities and properties) and the creation of value (the modern idea) to 'living value' – with 'living value' interpreted as yet another moral paradigm or metaphysical dogma.

Paradoxically, if we want to avoid or go 'beyond' a modern interpretation of the view of moral status I elaborated, we have to recognize and accept the strengths, not only the weaknesses, of the modern way of thinking and its continued influence on thinking that tries to shed modernity. Let me explain what I mean here by briefly retelling and reinterpreting the story of modern thinking once more.

Contemporary philosophy, in so far as it is modern, tries to 'change things with words'. This idea has its origin in a particular kind of religious thinking and practice that has been tremendously influential, and still is influential in all monotheistic religions and post-monotheistic cultures in the world. Since at least the emergence of monotheistic creational thinking, the world is not taken as given but as created, that is, created by words. First there is the Word, then there is the creation. The Word is not created. Everything is created – even time, as Augustine wrote in Book 11 of his *Confessions*. Confronted with the question of what happened before God created the world, he re-enforced the creational idea. 'Before' there is nothing, that is, there is only the Creator. Since there was not even time, it is even meaningless to talk about 'before'. According to this view, there is an unbridgeable gap between Creator and Creation. (This is why some forms of monotheist thinking reject

images of God: there should be no image since there *can* be no image: images are representations of something created, but God is understood as non-created.) Moreover, the 'means' by which God creates cannot be a thing, since all things are created. Therefore, the only 'instrument' God had was his Word. But what is this?

In the light of cultural–material history, we can historicize this divine word. First, the 'Word' is hardly a word, it is more a Breath. God *breathes* life into non-living matter. Breath is still connected to its environment; it is still somewhat earthly. But then the Breath turns into something that is removed from anything earthly. It becomes more abstract: a Word that is spoken *without breath*. In a scriptural culture this idea of a breathless word is translated as: God has *written* the world. When today some critics of technology say that we are 'playing God', this comparison is understandable, for this is how we moderns think and live: we also try to create new things, new humans and new worlds with words. We believe in the power of the word, the concept, the idea. We also try to bring non-living matter to life with our words, concepts and designs. We try to create the Golem-robot. Always the same scheme is followed, assuming a division between creator and created, between word and matter. "First there was the Concept" is the beginning of the bible of modern thinking. In this sense, modern art is by definition conceptual, and shares this feature with industrial society and early information society. We make things; things are our products. We build, construct. But first there is the Code, first there is the Text. Then matter is formed according to the word. Similarly, ethics is about applying the Moral Code to bodily, natural creatures. Morally speaking, they are death; but luckily God (later: human Reason) breathes life into them, forms and transforms them.

Since this way of thinking is so forceful and influential, twentieth-century *postmodernism* could only appear as a 'footnote' to modernity; that is, it could only try to critique modernity by making references to texts, codes and laws. It has called attention to con-text, it wanted to de-construct, it called for more texts than only the One, but it remains within the modern, conceptual–textual way of thinking. It remains within the modern order of thinking. It tries to read between the words, but words are still 'first'. It wants to de-construct, but first there is construction. It wants many stories, but first there is a text. Postmodern ethics, too, remains textual. For Lyotard, the content of the law must remain open, but 'there is a law.'<sup>2</sup> Thus, both modern and postmodern thinking remain true to their roots in creational religious thinking.



If we wish to move 'beyond' this kind of thinking to the *non-modern*, we may consider the thinking and practice of various kinds of non-modern cultures, as Ingold and Latour did. We may try to think about what a non-modern ethics could look like. But it is wise to recognize that these efforts are easily held captive by modern (and, more generally, Western) thinking for the same reason as our thinking about moral status is held captive: we are both empowered and restrained by our linguistic, social, bodily, material, technological, spiritual and spatial forms, that is, by our form of life, and this form of life is still mainly modern.

Consider the idea of a book. The very idea of writing a book is very modern and proto-modern (e.g. Jewish or Greek): not because modern technology is used to write and print it, of course, since books have been written before, but because in a deeper sense writing books *is* 'doing' modernity *par excellence*: it assumes that first we need a word, which then is supposed to have influence; that is, the writer hopes that it will flow over the world as a kind of reviving spirit that nourishes the barren, uncultivated lands. Philosophical words are supposed to breathe life into the dry, dogmatic matter of received tradition. The writer wants to rewrite history. The archetypical book is the Bible: the word that re-formed history and time.<sup>3</sup>

Consider also my previous, all too modern suggestion that, if we want to move beyond modern thinking, we have to look for different metaphors, for a different language. As I suggested, the transcendental argument calls the presuppositions of this claim into question. To ask for a different language is a typically modern thing to do: it assumes that, once we have a different language, a different concept, different words, we can do things differently. It is assumed that, once we have different words, we can de-construct and reconstruct the world. For example, with status ascriptions (which have the form of a status function) we can reallocate and redistribute moral status. And the same thinking goes on at a meta-level, for example here in this book: with words we can call attention to the transcendental conditions, a project which – in a modern interpretation, at least – allows us to achieve a different, non-modern view: a different concept, a different logos, a different metaphysics, which can then be *applied* to different ways of doing. It is up to the writer–philosopher to speak a different word, a *new* word, and then that word is supposed to change the world. For example, we might want to call for a philosophy of skill, and start to design an ontology, logic or metaphysics of skill, in the hope that this idea will then change things in the world.

It is only when we recognize how strong and attractive this way of thinking is that we can even consider different routes, or perhaps only the *possibility* of a different route. If we try to *imagine* a different route, rather than walking it and living it, we remain modern. For example, we can try to think of 'living value' as a *verb* and imagine philosophy *as* skill (knowing-how to live) rather than writing a philosophy of skill (a particular way of doing: the creation of an object). But, if this remains a 'concept', then we have not moved beyond the very ideas and ways of living we wanted to critique.

Of course, we can try to critique our discourse, for example the moral status discourse. Consider what I am doing in this book. It seems to me that moving away from a properties-based view has much to do with moving from thinking based on *nouns* and adjectives (e.g. values as nouns, things as nouns with certain properties, that is, adjectives) to a thinking based on *verbs*. Rather than moral status of a thing, understood as an adjective that belongs to a noun, moral consideration is here reframed in terms of verbs: what matters is what we are doing together as relational beings. *Living* value becomes a verb. However, to the extent that this proposal remains a 'philosophy of language' and proposes a different *logos*, it remains modern. Again we try to move towards a different word, concept, image, which is then supposed to transform things. It turns out that we are doing the same thing 'in other words'. It seems hard, if not impossible, to escape this way of thinking. This is because our philosophical language, and indeed our thinking itself, is modern and is deeply rooted in strong, persistent religious traditions, which makes our thinking possible but (because of that) also 'bewitches' and limits it (if I may borrow from Wittgenstein here).

If it is at all desirable to move away from modern philosophy, which, in tune with its roots, has become a philosophy of language in order to understand itself, to a philosophy of *life* as suggested in this conclusion (a life-philosophy or living philosophy rather than a philosophy *of* life), then it is best to accept that such a philosophy will necessarily remain modern if and to the extent that it remains theory, a 'mere' concept, which 'then' has to be applied.

Does this conclusion imply that, if we *really* want to move beyond this kind of thinking, we have to stop doing philosophy? This is a difficult question and I do not know if I can answer it. Whatever the 'ultimate' answer, though, let me try out a route. If we feel that a change towards a non-modern way of thinking and living is desirable, we can already do some work within philosophy (in its current form) to further explore

what this would mean, even if this means that we are still largely bound to modern thinking.

For instance, learning from the approach articulated in this book and from the non-modern views it draws on, we could start with a reversal of the relation between *logos* and non-*logos*. In the modern view, there is 'first' the living word (or the Living Word, Christ), which then needs to be applied to death matter (it needs to incarnate, to go into the flesh). In order to 'sense' or 'taste' from a non-modern view (I avoid the metaphor of vision, which is typical for *logos*-oriented, theoretical views), we can try to construct an antithesis (which is a very modern thing to do, of course): 'first' there is life, with all its relational richness, from which grows thought that becomes 'death' theory once it has turned into *logos*. In response to this antithesis we could then try to construct a *synthesis* and say that this dying is not necessary, that words can be as 'alive' as the lips from which they entered the world. We should not make the mistake of prohibiting words (similarly to prohibiting images) in order to remove 'death' theory from its living stem as the removal of the 'false' from the 'real'. Whether or not words 'live' depends on the environment in which they grow, and there is no 'real' apart from the continuously changing environmental relations and process of moral-natural growth. However, this 'dialectical' game, which tries to arrive at a synthesis of *logos* (thesis) and life/experience (antithesis), remains modern and breathes the strong desire for theory and theoretical closure.

Perhaps we should accept that, living in these times, in the kind of environment and having the relations we have, we have this desire for theory. We remain lovers of theory rather than lovers of wisdom. We have the desire to be gods and (re)construct, rewrite, redesign the world. But it is important to recognize that our desire to play god is not arbitrary, not something we decided (and thus something we may change by *deciding* otherwise): it is an outgrowth of a living relational whole, which now has a particular form, one which nourishes that desire. Now, how can we cope with this desire? We could argue that we should try to control it. If we must have an ethics of control at all, it is not so much one that tries to control particular 'worldly' desires, but rather one that tries to 'control' the desire to control the world. But this way of thinking remains modern. The language of modern ethics is the language of control, and the idea of a kind of meta-control does not fundamentally escape this way of thinking. Thus, this kind of meta-control seems to make things *worse* rather than better, at least if we believe modern thinking to be problematic. Any control

(in the ordinary sense of the term) itself strives for the absence of meta-control. It wants to be the highest level of control; it wants to be 'on top': it wants that *everything* submits to its power, even the desire to control itself. But this is a serpent that eats its own tail, leading to a vicious circle of control. Therefore, what we need should not take the form of control – or at least not in the common sense of the word. It needs to come from 'outside control'. Heidegger used the word *Gelassenheit* (letting-go) for the kind of attitude we need here. But what is it? What is 'letting-go'? Is it the kind of waiting or patience Heidegger proposes? Is it waiting for a god who will save us? If we take seriously the non-modern thinking explored earlier in this book, then letting-go should not be *conceived* of, turned into a concept, but should be understood as an activity and a skill. And expert skill cannot be written down but must be shown, learned and done. Then what happens to our condition is something that changes and evolves, and improvement of this condition does not depend on ourselves alone. But it is also not something that can be done by an 'outsider', by divine intervention. It must be done by us, and at the same time it must happen to us. It is not so much that 'there is a Law', as Lyotard said as a postmodern; rather, 'there is activity', 'something is being done' and 'there is growth'. Maybe this means that we 'have' to spend less time on philosophy as the design of concepts and theory and start learning to *do* philosophy as lovers of wisdom and flourishing rather than lovers of control and creation; but it is not enough to issue an imperative, a word.

For moral 'status', this means that moral status has to be 'done' or 'lived'. Rather than trying to categorize entities or ascribing moral status to them, rather than treating them as objects that already have a certain status as a kind of property or as naked objects that are clothed with value by us, we should shape our (new or already existing) relations with these entities as these relations (and thus 'we' and 'they' as well) are changing and growing. Instead of regulating what we do, instead of applying a Law or Code, instead of applying a pre-given form to matter, we would do better to engage in the slow change of moral evolution and moral metamorphosis: the form of the relation is not regulated independently from the 'outside' (if that were even possible), but changes as we change and as the relation changes. There is no ethics of growth in the sense of regulation: there is no all-powerful and all-knowing Gardener – a god or we ourselves – which manages the moral order as a garden. There is change, but this change results from what we do in response to other entities and our environment, and what this environment and other entities do to us. Shaping and formation are inherent in

the process, but it is not a top-down shaping. We form other entities as we are formed by them. Form is neither fixed nor created; form evolves. The question of moral 'status' abstracts from these processes of development, growth and evolution. It treats entities as discrete objects which are removed from life with its relations and its change. It treats entities like dead butterflies pinned to cardboard in a stuffy cabinet. What is needed, instead, is a moral philosophy as a life-philosophy. If that philosophy still needs words at all, better they be words that do not desperately try to form and re-form, but, rather, fly around and explore old and new scents as they grow themselves into new, better-adapted forms – this is *their* metamorphosis.

Is this picture of moral philosophy too frivolous? Does it take seriously what is at stake? I believe it does. This approach takes seriously our concern with other entities and with our relations to them, but suggests that we should think twice before we voice and discuss this concern in terms of 'moral status' and 'moral status ascription'. It recommends that we should accept the constraints on human agency due to the form of life we live in. 'Moral status' is something that happens rather than something that is made. As Nietzsche suggested, you cannot really take seriously what you created yourself. Thinking that we create and construct the world and its values with our words and our things, that we *give* moral status to entities as if it were a property and a commodity – *that* is not taking moral status seriously.

### 12.3. Three imperatives for the art of living

Since modern ethicists love imperatives and classifications, let me conclude this chapter with an overview of three types of ethics and their corresponding 'imperatives'. We can distinguish between three ways of thinking and doing, three life-forms, which give us different imperatives when it comes to the art of living:

1. Representation and imitation
2. Creation and revolution
3. Growth and evolution

*First life-form.* There is eternity. There is a Form, *Logos*, a Code, a Law. There is Nature. There are norms. There is a design. We have to represent the *Logos* as well as we can. Follow the norms. Copying as *mimesis* is the skill we need. Art makes images of gods and nature. Texts are copied in the monasteries. God is the Creator, we do not create. Humans are

natural and created. We should try to understand creation, the *Logos* or Word of God. The Word is eternal. It is the beginning and the end. Science tries to read the Code. Biology tries to know the *Logos* of life. Technology is an instrument and represents natural functions. There are natural ends and artificial means. Ethics means: see the value in what is and apply the Code. The Law is imperative. There is an Origin – make sure you know it and follow what comes from the Source. Use your mimetic, representational imagination.

*Second life-form.* There is change. We need change. We should not accept what is. We need revolution, re-formation, transformation. Humans should create new things. The Creator is death. Our word counts. We should make our own norms (autonomy) and law, our own world. We create our own design and then produce it, print it. Find the nature in yourself. Express your true self. Be authentic: make sure that your ‘products’ follow your ‘design’, who you really are. All art is conceptual art: first there is the concept. Art and science are biotechnology: we try to change, edit, perhaps rewrite the Code or write a new code. Be original – *you* are the origin, you are the author of your life. Use your creative imagination. Be a god.

*Third life-form.* There is growth and evolution. There is non-intended change. There is no creation. There is no origin. There is adaptation. Adapt is the ethical imperative: not adaptation to a pre-given or created form, but adaptation to changing environments. There is growth and development, but that growth is not directed. There are networks. Art crosses the boundary between natural and artificial. It goes beyond mimesis and creation. We are hybrid and mutating. There is no pre-given bio-*logos* or norms, we have to grow and adapt. There is life, *bios*. We have to try out what flourishes best. This is the *living* art of living. Imagination is improvisation, experiment, practice. Forget about representational or creative imagination: there is no pre-given or created image, word or self. There is no origin and no end. Grow and flourish!

## General Conclusion

### **A different moral epistemology: Painting, breathing, living**

I have argued in this book that moral status is not a property and not *like* a property. If the reader insists it is a property of some sort, then it is at least a property like colour, in the sense that it does not only depend on the object but also on the subject. The object reflects light in a particular way, but colour itself is always (also) in the eye of the observer, and this receptivity is constrained in various ways. Similarly, moral status arises in the relation between object and subject. It partly depends on our way of seeing and what structures that way of seeing. The philosopher who reasons about moral status then acts as a painter: the moral painter tries to represent the moral colours of the object. But, in doing that, there is always something of the painter in the painting; there is something of the 'eye' in the colours of the object. The painting is not an objective representation of an independent reality. Not even a photograph can be that; there is the selecting subject, looking from a specific angle, and so on. Our way of seeing influences what we see. We cannot reach the thing-in-itself.

However, this book goes further than this post-Kantian position and shows that moral status ascription is not even like the perception of a property such as colour and not even like perception at all, but involves active engagement with the world. What makes moral status ascription possible is not a matter of seeing but of doing. In other words, the moral epistemology suggested here attempts to be non-Cartesian all the way. Cartesian moral epistemology presupposes a detached observer who lets in the rays of light and 'takes a photograph' in her mind. According to that view of moral knowledge, there is a strict separation of object and

subject, and they do not influence one another. We take a god's eye view, a view from an airplane or from outer space. From this point of view, we practise moral ontology. We argue that moral status is a non-relational property or we argue that it is a relational property. We argue that there is intrinsic value or not. Perhaps we even argue that moral status is a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic properties – a position that is sometimes suggested to me and which I discussed in Chapter 3. But even such a position would not leave the un-earthed point of view. It would be a better moral ontology, perhaps, but we should also question the project of a moral ontology itself, which seems to presuppose that we can see and oversee the moral world order. Instead, the moral epistemology I interpret and develop in this book holds that moral status ascription depends on how the subject engages with the world. This moral subject is no longer a perceiver or observer but a doer, who actively relates to her environment.

If this is right, then in order to describe moral status ascription and its conditions of possibility, and perhaps more generally morality and its conditions of possibility, we need a different metaphor than seeing, a metaphor which expresses the continuous contact and exchange with the world. I think moral *breathing* is a more adequate metaphor. Breathing is *a continuous and active relating to the world* in a very intense way: we depend on it for our life. Whatever we do or say, we always breathe, that is, we are always engaged in a basic but intense relation to our environment. Similarly, when we do moral philosophy and ascribe moral status, we do not do this from a vantage point outside the world. Our thinking depends on the cultural–material air we breathe. A fish cannot live outside the water, which enables and limits its activities; similarly, our moral thinking depends on the linguistic, social, technological, spiritual and historical–spatial relations in which we live. Some philosophical fish take a brave leap out of the water, but have to return to it. They belong to the water. The words that leave our mouth can only be spoken because we breathe, and they can be heard only by those who breathe the same air. The transcendental–phenomenological argument made in this book is nothing else than a proposal for a kind of philosophical yoga: an exercise in becoming more aware of your moral breathing.

AQ1

Without this transcendental exercise, our thinking is uncritical – in the Kantian sense of 'critique'. To put it as a commentary on John 1:1: in the beginning of moral reasoning is not the word, but the moral breath, which presupposes that there is already a world, an ongoing and lived relation between the reasoned and her environment.

AQ2



Only gods may speak without breath; hence in the case of a divine word it is possible that ‘in the beginning was the word’. But, for us mortals, *logos* presupposes breath and air, that is, it presupposes active engagement with the world, an acting in relation to the environment and a close, *vital* contact with that environment. Moral reasoning divorced from the moral life delivers dead words.

Consider again contractarianism and the Searle-style constructivism I articulated at the beginning of Part II. This way of thinking assumes that ‘in the beginning’ there is a ‘word’ that sets up (a part of) the moral world order: it declares its principles and distinctions. Indeed, creation is about making distinctions: by means of distinctions, a world is created in the first place. Before creation, there was no distinction, no *form*. The moral status ascriber (or ascribers, in the contractarian view) are like the god of Genesis 1, and the ‘state of nature’ before moral status ascription resembles the earth before distinctions were created: ‘The earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters’ (Genesis 1:2). In contrast to this moral epistemology, I suggest that there is not first the moral word which constructs the moral world order and, at most, only *afterwards* ‘becomes flesh’ (the ‘Christian’ view). There are not first moral principles and distinctions, which then need to be applied to the ‘earthly’ world. Rather, when it comes to moral status *the word is flesh from the beginning*; it is already a living word. It is ‘among us’ in the sense that what we say about other beings and about ourselves is profoundly shaped by our form of life.

If this moral epistemology is right, then it *looks* as if we can throw away the ladder of moral status ascription and focus instead on good living. In agreement with all major wisdom traditions, I believe the latter should indeed be the *focus* of ethics. But – and here I return to a question I already touched upon in Chapter 12 – *do we still need the ladder*, then? My provisional answer is “Yes and no”. On the one hand, moral status ascription and, to some extent, all moral reasoning are part of our current form of life, that is, of the moral–social water we swim and live in. But to a large degree this ‘we’ is not only a particular society or community, but probably most of humanity in so far as its cultures and peoples have grown into Western (modern) thinking. In a sense we ‘need’ this thinking, since we live in a world that is transformed by it and that ‘works’ in this way. Moral reasoning, as a product of evolution, can be regarded as a set of conceptual tools humans living in *this* world and *this* age now need to deal with the increasingly complex cultural–material and social–technological world. Moral status ascription, and

more generally modern Western philosophy, is part of our current toolbox. On the other hand, while we might not be able to dispense with moral reasoning and moral metaphors altogether, it seems that we need other conceptual tools than moral status ascription, and *other* moral metaphors. I argued that the very term 'moral status' is misleading in various ways, and I have explored other moral metaphors. For example, in so far as the language of moral status presupposes the moral subject of a disengaged observer who takes stock of the properties of an object 'out there', it does too little justice to the dynamic and relational nature of the moral life. Instead, we could aim for right and good living (including good *relating* to other entities), and from this starting point decide which conceptual tools we need to assist us in this task. But we do not know if we can reach that aim. *We do not even know the aim.* (In a sense, if we knew the aim, we would have reached it.) We cannot aim, but we can turn.

However, if the transcendental argument is right, this turn is not entirely a matter of choice. Not only questions of right action and good life, but also the meta-ethical questions asked in this book, are not asked in the abstract but are asked and discussed as we live. Even the previous, highly abstract meta-ethical question concerning the evolution and evaluation of our moral-conceptual repertoire is rooted in our form(s) of life, which means that our thinking about these matters is limited by the language, social relations, culture, bodies, technologies and spiritualities we live. Influenced by monotheistic creationism, it has become our habit to think as creationists – even if we consider ourselves secularized. Influenced by modern science and philosophy, it has become our habit to live as Cartesians. The history of Western alienation, then, is not so much one of domination by dictators or by technology, but is mainly one of self-alienation. We alienated ourselves from the world and from its 'entities', and now we have a moral philosophy that hangs in mid-air. To the extent that moral philosophy is like an airplane or spacecraft, it is time to land it, to re-root it, to re-vive it, indeed, to resuscitate it. This turned out to be the main normative message that emerged from what I did in this book. However, if we 'choose' this path towards a more earthly, engaged philosophy, we should remain aware of the limits to human agency when it comes to changing our ways of thinking and living. Given these limits, the chances are high that our children and grandchildren will still continue to talk about moral status and at the same time continue to live in a way that renders everyone and everything always slightly *alien*: this is what we do now to the things we make, to the animals we live with, and finally to ourselves.

In this sense, our current failure to relate properly to the world may well be a kind of fate, perhaps the tragedy of tragedies. Or is this too pessimistic?

### Morality's womb

In my introduction I compared a moral tradition to a womb, in which you can find moral safety and the conditions for moral growth. Like other work in moral philosophy, this essay has left this safety in order to explore a relational approach to moral status. But this book has taken another, far less common, step, which indirectly supports the relational approach but engages in a different, 'non-dogmatic' exercise. In response to the question of whether it is possible to change our thinking about moral status in a more relational direction, I have examined some important conditions of possibility of 'moral status' thinking and doing, which limit what we can think and do in that direction. More generally, the specific rules, principles and distinctions of a given moral tradition do not only encapsulate the moral subject from the cold of nothingness, but also limit its thinking. After questioning a moral tradition, we realize that even *this* meta-ethical effort is not taking place in isolation. This inquiry about moral status ascription suggests that reasoning about moral status, and probably *any* kind of moral reasoning, is highly dependent on a 'deeper' kind of womb: moral thinking and doing grows in a state of symbiosis, that is, lives together with and *cannot live without* the linguistic, social, technological, spiritual and spatial forms of life that feed it and protect it from isolation. In other words, moral thinking itself, including meta-ethics, is deeply relational. One *can* leave a specific 'local' moral tradition, perhaps – although one then soon has to find and build a new moral dwelling place – but it is much more difficult, if not impossible, to leave a broader, more general form of moral thinking and doing, one which is probably common to several moral traditions, if not to the thinking of 'humanity' in a global world (if that makes sense). Like many others, I have assumed that this is the position of 'modern' thinking today: it is vibrant in 'the West' but it has also mixed with other cultures, and both enables and limits the way we think. Leaving *that* kind of thinking would mean leaving that shared *form of life*. Is this possible? We can leave the village of tradition and the city of conventional moral thinking and run into the forest, but then we 'have' to follow the tracks made by people who have tried this before. And, if we do not return or find another village or city, then we might try to build a 'new' dwelling place, only to find that it looks surprisingly

similar to the one we left. Or can we really *change* this kind of form of life? Can we make new tracks and find a new form of dwelling?

Philosophers have usually been either too optimistic or too pessimistic about the possibility of this kind of 'deep' change to our form of life. Some of us think that we can change our ways of thinking and doing by means of therapy or (meta)technology, that is, more rules and better things. These technologies of the self (Foucault) and other technologies are the classical ancient and modern solutions to the problem. Others, like Heidegger, have questioned this technological way of thinking (recall again Heidegger's claim that only a god can save us from it). The view I try to make explicit here tries to avoid both positions. It holds that the specific linguistic-social-cultural-technological-spiritual-spatial form of life – and, indeed, the specific form of moral thinking – that emerged in the West is neither an illness that demands treatment nor a kind of original sin that stands in need of salvation. The illness metaphor does a good job of catching the *living* dimension of morality and the forms of life on which it depends, and the salvation metaphor rightly suggests the *weight* a particular form of thinking and form of life can have on us; a weight which cannot be lifted by an act of human will-power. Our way of thinking is 'in' us and the 'cross' of tradition is heavy. However, both metaphorical-philosophical gestures are symptoms of the 'disease' they wish to treat and commit the same 'sin' as the thinking they criticize, to the extent that even in their most critical moments they exemplify a modern, 'activist' and non-relational approach to problems. They are modern, since they emphasize agency and intervention from outside as a solution to the problem: the doctor should do something about it or help me to do something about it; the god should do something about it. In other words, both views assume that we can diagnose and *fix* the problem. They bring back the scientist-physician, the therapist-sage, the priest and the engineer (who is or knows the divine designer) into the meta-moral domain. These consultants ask of us a move of alienation: "Look at that sick body, behold your black soul! But you will be healed, you might be saved." Moreover, these solutions are also non-relational, in the sense that they tend to regard the 'Western' form of life as something that is isolated from other (real and possible) forms of life.

This emphasis on agency and isolation must be questioned. As I suggested before, it seems that, at this level of abstraction of the problem, some *Gelassenheit* is to be recommended, given that it is so hard to change a form of life – especially by willing the change, and by doing particular things, making particular interventions. As individuals

and societies, we do not have much control over our own moral growth, and much less over the living womb – the form of life – that makes that growth possible. Moreover, forms of life do not ‘live’ in isolation but are related to other forms of life. Without such relations, a form of life – like anything living – simply *dies* if there is no exchange with the wider environment. If we were to cut off our words, norms, objects and places from our lives, they would die, that is, lose their meaning – unless they were to live on by means of ongoing relations and to grow new relations (perhaps the art of mourning requires us to do both). This is also true for the life-form as a whole, which is spread out, entangled, rooted and connected. There has always been exchange between life-forms, for example (and for lack of better terms) between ‘West’ and ‘East’ and between ‘North’ and ‘South’. There is no ‘pure’ life-form. There is already growth and there is already some ‘therapy’ and ‘salvation’ in this sense.

But, while we might need mediators who can travel between these forms of life, we can dispense with the false impression of a meta-ethical “Yes, we can” if this is understood in a simplistic way: change is possible, of course, and we have our part to play in the theatre, but what happens on the stage is not entirely up to us, and interventions by the moral consultants of this world cannot change that fundamental limitation. This meta-ethical limitation does not justify attempts to halt normative philosophy and stop people who try to change the lives of others and (far more rarely) of themselves. On the contrary, after the death of ‘anything goes’ postmodernism (if it ever lived among philosophers in the first place, if it was ever *born* at all), and given the current problems in a ‘global’ world (which we tend to look upon from our detached epistemological position in outer space), we probably need *more*, not fewer, guides to ‘the good life’. However, as I have argued, changing a *life-form* is not that easy, and the power of the ‘word’ is limited. At the meta-ethical level, there is a tragedy for which no easy remedy can be given. Perhaps philosophers and historians of ideas can offer us ‘re-enactments’ of the story of moral philosophy, which can give us the benefit of purification (*catharsis*): as spectators, we sympathize with those thinkers who passionately try to change the moral world order, but are ignorant of how their thinking remains within morality’s womb. We pity and fear them when they try to fly higher than they can; we watch their fall. Then passion calms down.

As my taking this spectator-view position shows again, this book also is often all too modern, theoretical, and probably rather alienating as well. It is an *outgrowth* or offspring of the life-form within which it is

written and within which it has grown, and should not be confused with it. The 'life' of its words, if any, depends on past and future relations between these words and other words, and on relations between the words and the life-form in which they have matured and to the growth of which they might contribute. Moreover, relations with *other* life-forms are crucial in moral ecologies, also at a meta-level. For example, I hope that some of what I have said here can be fertilized and grow by making connections between the ideas in this book and Eastern thought, in particular Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. One could also say more about pragmatism (especially Dewey's work) and explore its relation to the main ideas articulated in this book. And it may be interesting to discuss further the political dimension of 'moral status ascription'. But let me first expose these reflections to the weather of the coming season. As an author I must let go now, and I can only hope that the letting go becomes a letting grow.

## Notes

### Chapter 1

1. Note that if these properties are not established by moral science, they might resort to a more traditional view: the justification might be that if humans refuse to make this contract, they are not acting according to the *logos* of the universe with its well-distributed moral values. They are not recognizing the intrinsic value of the entity in question. It seems that this view was shared by the ancient Greeks (i.e. the Stoics) and by medieval Christians, but also by early moderns who discerned a natural and moral order in the universe. The idea that value itself is a purely contractual or conventional matter seems to be a much more recent idea.

### Chapter 2

1. See, for example, Westra's questions in Sandler and Cafaro, p. 79.
2. I say more about the problem of motivation in environmental ethics later in this section, in Part II and elsewhere; see, for example, Coeckelbergh (2011b).
3. Perhaps it could rely on a non-essentialist view of human nature: application could be left to *phronesis* (a practical wisdom that cannot and should not be captured in theory and that could be acquired at individual and societal level), and motivation could be said to emerge from the activity and the experience – see again Cafaro on Thoreau and my arguments in Part II.
4. See, for example, Holmes Rolston's questioning of the relation between human virtue and (intrinsic) value in nature (Holmes Rolston in Sandler and Cafaro 2005, pp. 69–70).
5. Note that for Hannah Arendt this is an important distinction: speech belongs to politics, whereas labour belongs to the non-political household (Arendt 1958).

### Chapter 3

1. One may also consider personalist theory, which seeks a similar 'third way' between individualism and collectivism.
2. This is his doctrine of 'internal relations'.

### Chapter 4

1. Building on what I said in the previous chapter, one could put more emphasis on the political aspect of Aristotle here and stress the *polis*-world

distinction rather than the *logos*–world distinction: not the logico-political order, not the *polis*, but the world is our body.

2. Note that Benton's view is non-romantic in this respect: living together with animals and living as 'natural' beings is not necessarily harmonious. This orientation may derive from Benton's Marxist approach, which in turn takes its inspiration from Hegel.

## Chapter 5

1. Latour is a prominent thinker of the so-called *actor-network theory*.

## Chapter 6

1. Compare also §418–419, p. 133; § 359, p. 120; or *Philosophy of Psychology* § 20–21.
2. We are concerned here with *human logos*, as opposed to the ancient Stoic *logos* diffused through the world or the *logos* of the monotheistic god. In this view, in the beginning is not the divine word but the human word.
3. Note again that in principle there is not even need for a physical object. Hence we may assign status functions to virtual objects such as avatars in a virtual world or 'informational objects'. This renders this view suitable to applications in information ethics.
4. The term is from Rawls, but, in contrast to Rawls, Habermas makes the deliberation intersubjective; Rawls's deliberation can be performed by a single rational subject.
5. Rawls is almost mono-logical, and Searle may be interpreted as having a collectivist version of mono-logos in so far as he supposes a 'we' as the collective subject of status functions.

## Chapter 7

1. For more on the importance of know-how and skill, see also the work of Dewey (pragmatist tradition) and Dreyfus (phenomenological tradition).
2. Similarly, for Merleau-Ponty the body can only appear as a thing against the background of *embodied* experience in an environment. We can only experience ourselves as having a body because at the same time we *are* a body. See also Chapter 9.
3. See also my reference to Ihde in Chapter 3.
4. I leave open here whether or not this attempt, if it tries to mimic human skill, can ever be successful in principle.
5. Note that Heidegger includes only humans in his notion of being-with. For Heidegger, the other being 'has the kind of being of Da-sein' (p. 117). However, as I will argue, we also need to include non-human beings that are 'like-with'.
6. I use the term 'ontological' as referring to what Heidegger would call 'ontic': the way I use it refers to 'what is' rather than to the structures of being.



## Chapter 8

1. One way to put the problem is that non-humans sometimes appear as quasi-others or quasi-social, in which case it makes sense that social relations extend to human–non-human interactions and relations.
2. As I said in Chapter 2, what I called ‘epistemological anthropocentrism’ cannot be avoided, but here I give it a much broader and novel interpretation: our knowledge of other entities depends on human subjectivity, but our human subjectivity depends on a form of life that is entangled with non-human forms of life.
3. Perhaps in the West we live in a *culture* of hope. Christianity, or post-Christianity, seems to be a case in point.
4. See also Schütz on the lifeworld as social praxis.
5. Gier argues that Wittgenstein is close to Schopenhauer on this point (Gier 1981, p. 54).

## Chapter 9

1. For the distinction between animism and totemism, see Ingold (2000), pp. 112–113.
2. It also seems to me that AI has never *really* taken up the non-representational project proposed by Varela *et al.*: even though they took on board evolution, learning, and so on, and therefore left the idea of the computer or robot needing a fixed model of the world in order to find its way, they still run computer *simulations* of the processes of evolution, learning, and so on; in other words, their computers and robots still work with models. But the very ideas of ‘modelling’ something and of ‘implementing’ something in the robot are hopelessly dualistic. To the extent that this paradigm guides AI, it is impossible *in principle* to build a robot that has a sense of ‘having’ a body or ‘being’ a body – if such a thing could ever be done at all. Enacting seems reserved for humans and animals.
3. See Mitcham’s distinction between tool and machine as quoted by Ingold, p. 300. Note also that such robots (and humans) are seen as executioners of a *logos*: a representation of the world or *model* programmed into the robot; this is the early AI *program*.
4. See also Arendt’s reading of Heidegger.
5. A further elaborated version of this argument can be found in Coeckelbergh (2011b).

## Chapter 10

1. In Christianity we also find the idea of a trinity: Father, Son, and Spirit, but they are to be regarded as *one*.
2. Philo borrowed Plato’s craftsman metaphor here: in Philo’s view, the creator of the world is a craftsman, in particular an architect or town planner (see Runia 1986, p. 168).

3. Note that Swedenborg influenced Kant, who seems to have shared Swedenborg's view that there is an invisible world of spirits which influences us and to which we can connect.
4. The main contact eighteenth and nineteenth-century thinkers had with nature religion was indirect, through the recovery operation of ancient Greek thought; see, for example, Nietzsche's Dionysus. They were less interested in the folk religion of their time, which was a mixture of Christianity and nature religion. One might also think of the *Lebensreform* movement in the early twentieth century, with people like Kneipp and Steiner, who wanted to go back to nature. But Kneipp was a Catholic priest and Steiner's spiritual philosophy had a central role for Christ. It would take longer for people to become interested in folk practices and nature religion.

### Chapter 11

1. See also Arendt's distinction between household (*oikos*) and *polis* (Arendt 1958).
2. Perhaps this also means that the new property has less *value*, at least according to the 'old' property theory and the economy of scarcity it was concerned with.
3. Consider contemporary attempts at so-called 'human enhancement' and trans-humanist visions of human enhancement.

### Chapter 12

1. See the famous *Der Spiegel* interview.
2. See Lyotard's book *Just Gaming*.
3. Other 'archetypical' ancient texts relevant to moral status ascription are codes of law and inventories for the purpose of stock-keeping and taxation: those who practise moral status ascription care about rules for treating humans and non-humans (a moral codex), and as metaphysicians they dream of an inventory of all entities with details of their ontological and moral status: the high priests and kings of the moral order (humans) wish to have an overview of their moral stock, a true representation of the moral order, of the moral (e)state given to them by God. Humans are the stewards of creation, and they tax it and take their rent (e.g. in the form of slaughtering animals).

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