
Moral Status

*Obligations to Persons and
Other Living Things*

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CLARENDON PRESS · OXFORD

1997

The Concept of Moral Status

This is a philosophical exploration of the concept of moral status. To have moral status is to be morally considerable, or to have moral standing. It is to be an entity towards which moral agents have, or can have, moral obligations. If an entity has moral status, then we may not treat it in just any way we please; we are morally obliged to give weight in our deliberations to its needs, interests, or well-being. Furthermore, we are morally obliged to do this not merely because protecting it may benefit ourselves or other persons, but because its needs have moral importance in their own right.

The questions addressed here involve the criteria that ought to be used in ascribing moral status to entities of diverse kinds. These questions are of more than academic interest, since our answers to them influence our positions on issues that are among the most pressing of our time, and show every sign of remaining so into the next century. These include the morality of euthanasia, under various circumstances; whether women have a moral right of access to safe and legal abortion; whether human beings are entitled to utilize other animals for food, biomedical research, and other purposes; and whether we have moral obligations towards natural plant or animal species, populations, and ecosystems, that are threatened by human activities.

In this introductory chapter, I comment on moral status as an intuitive or common-sense concept, and on two widespread—though not universal—beliefs about which things have moral status and which do not. Then I elaborate somewhat upon the concept of moral status, and consider why we need such a concept in order to make sense of our moral obligations towards human beings and the rest of the natural world. Next, I review some of the major positions on current issues that relate to moral status, outline the book's chapters, and preview some of its conclusions. The chapter closes with

two responses to what is probably the most common objection to the type of account that I defend.

1.1. *Moral Status as an Intuitive Concept*

Is it morally wrong to take a stone and grind it into powder, merely for one's own amusement? Most people would say that it is not—unless there are special circumstances. Perhaps the stone belongs to someone for whom it carries precious personal memories. Perhaps it contains fossilized dinosaur bones from which important scientific knowledge could be gleaned, or valuable gems which could be sold to feed starving people. In these cases, we might say that it would be wrong to destroy the stone for no good reason. But most of us would regard it as wrong only in so far as it causes harm to human beings, or deprives them of important benefits. The stone itself does not seem to be the kind of thing towards which we can have moral obligations.

In defence of this common-sense view it might be pointed out that, to the best of our knowledge, stones are both inanimate and insentient. That is, they are neither alive nor capable of feeling pleasure or pain. They have no desires or preferences which we might thwart by treating them in one way rather than another. As far as we can tell, a stone does not care whether it persists in an unaltered state for a billion years, or is immediately smashed into bits. It has no needs, interests, well-being, or good of its own, which we could or should take into account in our moral deliberations.

Is it wrong to kill a helpless human child, merely for one's own amusement? Most people would say that it is, and be taken aback that the question was even asked. A child is normally presumed to have not just some moral status, but a very strong moral status, fully equal to that of older human beings. (About human embryos and foetuses there is, of course, much less agreement.)

This widespread belief in the full and equal moral status of human beings may be defended in various ways, depending upon one's ethical or religious commitments. A theist who derives moral claims from the will of a deity may maintain that this being has endowed each of us with equal moral rights, dignity, value, or worth. A Kantian deontologist may say that all moral agents have an oblig-

ation to respect the autonomy of all other moral agents, treating them as ends in themselves and never merely as means. A classical utilitarian may say that moral agents are obliged to give equal consideration to the potential pleasures and pains of each human being who will be affected by their actions.¹ Some utilitarians go further, arguing that all beings that are sentient (that is, capable of experiencing pleasure and pain) are entitled to equal moral consideration, regardless of their biological species; but few utilitarians would deny that all sentient human beings are so entitled.

There is, then, substantial consensus about the moral status of those entities which appear to occupy the extreme ends of the spectrum. At the one extreme, stones and other inanimate objects are usually presumed to have no moral status at all, even though they may legitimately be valued and protected for other reasons. At the opposite extreme, human beings are usually held to have a moral status which is at least as strong as that enjoyed by any other entity—or at least any that is part of the natural world. Some people may believe that there are supernatural beings that possess a stronger moral status; but about the existence of such beings there is no general consensus.

1.2. *Disagreements about 'Clear' Cases*

Yet even when we confine our attention to the extreme ends of the spectrum of moral status, the consensus is not complete. Some philosophers reject the concept of moral status entirely, taking a sceptical view of all attempts to use that concept to work towards the solution of moral problems. Some argue, for instance, that the concept of moral status is inherently anthropocentric (human-centred) and elitist.² On this view, even the most basic presumptions about moral status that most of us share—for example, that human

¹ Classical utilitarianism is the view that morally right actions are those that produce the most pleasure and the least pain or suffering, with the pleasures and pains of each individual counting the same as those of each other. John Stuart Mill's *Utilitarianism* is the definitive statement of this theory: *Utilitarianism: With Critical Essays*, ed. Samuel Gorovitz (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), 11–57.

² See Thomas H. Birch, 'Moral Considerability and Universal Consideration', *Environmental Ethics*, 15, No. 4 (Winter 1993), 313–32.

beings have full moral status, while inanimate objects normally have none—are a reflection of overweening human pride.

Ethical egoists reject the presumption that all human beings have moral status for a different reason. In their view, each moral agent has obligations only to itself; each is, from its own perspective, the only thing in the universe that has moral status. Moral nihilists reject this presumption because they reject all moral principles, including those that are definitive of moral status. Cultural ethical relativists deny that any moral claim can have general or cross-cultural validity, because they believe that moral truth is entirely determined by the prevailing beliefs within a particular cultural group. On this view, there is no such thing as the moral status that an entity has, or ought to have, for all moral agents. Nothing has moral status except in the context of a culture wherein it is accorded moral status by a majority of persons; and the moral status that it has within each such culture is merely that which the majority of persons within the culture currently believe it to have. Finally, moral subjectivists hold that all moral claims, including claims about moral status, are strictly a matter of individual opinion. On this view, there can never be any rationally defensible basis for endorsing one opinion about moral status rather than another.

I hope in the chapters that follow to provide good reasons for rejecting these sceptical challenges to the concept of moral status. For the moment, however, I want to focus upon the views of those who do not reject the concept of moral status, yet who appear to reject one or both of these common presumptions about moral status.

Some people seem to ascribe strong moral status to things that are entirely inanimate. For instance, some philosophers in the Jain tradition hold that we have moral obligations to such things as earth, air, fire, and water. However, they do not in fact hold that wholly lifeless things have moral status. On the contrary, they urge the gentle treatment of earth, air, fire, and water precisely because they believe that these things are inhabited by many small beings. These beings are not only alive, but sentient; moreover, they can easily be killed or made to suffer by careless human actions.³

In some cultures, stones in general are not granted a strong moral

³ Padmanab S. Jaini, *The Jaina Path of Purification* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 109; and S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, vol. i (New York: Macmillan, 1929), 297.

status, but certain stones are regarded as sacred. Uluru, a red sandstone monolith near Alice Springs, Australia, has been sacred to aboriginal peoples for millennia, as have many other places and features of the Australian landscape. Aboriginal Australians are not unique in ascribing sacredness to natural places and objects; there are sacred sites in every part of the world where animistic beliefs are extant. Thus, if sacredness is a form of moral status, then it is one that is often ascribed to what seem to be inanimate objects. Usually, however, the belief in the sacredness of a particular place or object is accompanied by the belief that it is, or contains, a living and sentient being (or beings), such as a deity of some sort, or the spirit of a human ancestor. Here too, we find that people rarely ascribe moral status to entities that they regard as entirely inanimate.

There are also people who deny that all human beings have full moral status. Racists deny the equal moral status of groups of human beings whose appearance and ancestry is, or is thought to be, different from their own. Sexists deny that female (or, occasionally, male) human beings have a moral status equal to that of the favoured sex. Prior to this century, the most illustrious philosophers in the Western tradition have all but unanimously relegated female human beings to a markedly inferior moral status. Philosophical luminaries as diverse as Aristotle, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Friedrich Nietzsche have maintained that women cannot be permitted the same autonomy as men, because they are naturally less capable of rational thought and action, and thus incapable of genuine moral agency.⁴

In our own time, philosophers are less likely to claim that women

⁴ Aristotle, *Politics* (London: Heinemann, 1932), 63–5; Augustine, *Of the Work of Monks* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1956), 40; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1947), 466–7; David Hume, *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary* (London: Longman, Green & Co., 1987), 193; Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, trans. John T. Goldwaite (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1960), 78; Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Philosophy of the Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 263–4; Arthur Schopenhauer, *Studies in Pessimism: A Series of Essays* (St. Clair Shores, Mich.: Scholarly Press, 1970), 106; and Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1935), 166. The views of these and other philosophers respecting natural mental differences between women and men are explored in my 1980 book, *The Nature of Woman* (Inverness, Calif.: Edgepress).

and members of minority ethnic groups should not have full moral status. Yet we seem continually to discover new forms of bigotry, and new groups of persons whose moral status has been unjustly diminished. In addition to sexism, racism, and ethnic and religious bigotry, we are now aware of homophobia or heterosexism (the denial of full moral status to lesbians, homosexual men, and bisexual persons); ageism (the denial of full status to some persons because of their age); and ableism (the denial of full status to human beings with physical or mental disabilities). Worse, it is not always clear that these forms of bigotry represent minority opinions. For instance, many politicians in the United States still find it expedient to oppose legislation designed to protect homosexual persons from invidious discrimination; and many religious leaders support them.

And yet, the very fact that we now have specific pejorative labels for these anti-egalitarian views suggests that they are much more widely condemned than in the past. Certainly they are more often condemned within the academic world—sometimes with a vigour that leads to protests against ‘political correctness’. This growing condemnation is not just a Western phenomenon. International agreements and the laws of many nations increasingly prohibit the use of racial, ethnic, religious, and sexual categories to detract from the moral or legal status of particular groups of people.⁵

In short, despite the many counterexamples, there is substantial agreement about the respective moral status of human beings and inanimate objects. This agreement does not in itself show that the views in question are true, or even that they will continue to be widely held in the future. It is conceivable—though unlikely—that the majority of people throughout the world will some day come to believe that there is no difference between the moral status of human beings and that of stones. They might, for instance, abandon the notion of moral obligation altogether, striving to construct a Skinnerian world in which human behaviour is scientifically manipulated, rather than shaped through the teaching of moral principles

⁵ For instance, the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. These are reprinted in James Nickel’s *Making Sense of Human Rights: Philosophical Reflections on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987).

or concepts.⁶ Nevertheless, these points of relative agreement provide a useful starting-point for an exploration of the concept of moral status. It is important that (1) most of us share a belief that there is such a thing as moral status; and (2) there is a substantial consensus about some of the things that have it, and some of the things that do not.

1.3. *What is Moral Status?*

Of course, moral status is not a thing, if by 'thing' we mean an object or phenomenon which we can observe in nature, e.g. through a microscope, or with the help of a CAT scanner. The concept of moral status is, rather, a means of specifying those entities towards which we believe ourselves to have moral obligations, as well as something of what we take those obligations to be.

A theory of moral status cannot be expected to answer all important questions about human moral obligations. Many of our obligations are based not only upon the moral status of those towards whom we are obliged, but also upon situational factors, such as a promise we have made, a personal relationship in which we are involved, a civil or criminal law that has been justly enacted, or a wrongful past action of our own that requires restitution or compensation.

Rather than delineating all of our moral obligations towards other individuals, ascriptions of moral status serve to represent very general claims about the ways in which moral agents ought to conduct themselves towards entities of particular sorts. For instance, if we say that all human beings have basic moral rights to life and liberty, then we are claiming for human beings a moral status that prohibits harming them in certain ways without exceptionally good reasons; and that on most interpretations also entails that should they be in need, those who are able to help—without excessive harm or risk to themselves—are morally obliged to do so. Thus, one important feature of the concept of moral status is its generality. Moral status is usually ascribed to members of a group, rather than merely to specific individuals. Moreover, it is usually ascribed on the

⁶ B. F. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (New York: Bantam Books, 1971).

basis of some property or properties that are thought to be possessed by all or most group members.

A second important feature of the concept of moral status is that the moral obligations that are implied by the ascription of moral status to an entity are obligations *to that entity*. To violate an obligation arising from A's moral status is to wrong A, and not merely some third party. For instance, if A's moral rights have been violated, then it is A that has in the first instance been wronged, and on whose behalf others may complain.

An example may help to clarify this distinction. Suppose that you go on vacation, leaving your house in the care of a friend, who then sells your kitchen appliances and absconds. A moral wrong has evidently been committed; but it is obviously a wrong against you and not against your stove and refrigerator, which do not have moral status. Had you, on the other hand, left your pet pig in the care of a friend, who then sold it to a meat packing plant, then it would have been less clear that a wrong had been committed only against you. And if you had left your baby with a friend, who then sold him or her to a black-market baby broker, almost no one would doubt that a wrong had been committed not only against you but also against the child. In each case, your friend wrongs you by selling something that ought not to have been sold under those circumstances; but only in the third case does that which is sold have a moral status that most people would agree precludes its being sold under any circumstances.

1.4. *Why Do We Need a Concept of Moral Status?*

There are many reasons why we might *want* a concept of moral status. In the worst case, we might want only to rationalize the power and privilege of our own group, *vis-à-vis* other people, non-human animals, or the rest of the non-human world. We have already noted some of the ways in which faulty standards of moral status can serve unjust partisan interests. But despite this danger, human beings badly need shared standards and principles of moral status, based upon arguments that most people can understand and accept. There are two obvious facts about human beings as a species that help to explain why we have this need, and why it is particularly acute at the present time.

The first obvious fact is that human beings are clever and opportunistic creatures who have recently come to possess an awesome capacity to do harm, both to one another and to the rest of the world. During most of the existence of *Homo* (the biological genus that includes our own species, and some that are now extinct) the human capacity to do harm was fairly modest, and exercised on a comparatively small scale. Early human populations are thought to have been surprisingly small.⁷ Plant food was usually the largest part of the human diet, and the small-scale gathering activities of Lower Palaeolithic (early Stone Age) people probably had little negative impact upon the ecosystems in which they existed.

Of course, human beings have never been perfectly harmless. Lower Palaeolithic people probably fought and sometimes killed one another, and some of them probably killed animals from time to time to supplement their diets. (Chimpanzees, our nearest biological relatives, do both of these things.)⁸ The development of projectile weapons made Upper Palaeolithic people more effective predators, and increased human predation may have contributed to the extinction of mammoths, and many other species of megafauna (large animals) in Eurasia, North and South America, and Australia some ten to twenty thousand years ago.⁹ In addition, some early human groups may have contributed to the extinction of others. For instance, it seems likely that Cro-Magnon people contributed to the disappearance of Neanderthal people in Europe and Asia about thirty-three thousand years ago—although we can only speculate about whether they did so through violence, by spreading contagious diseases, or simply by competing more effectively for scarce re-

⁷ Paul and Anne Ehrlich estimate that the global population at the start of the Neolithic era, about ten thousand years ago, was not over five million: *The Population Explosion* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 14.

⁸ See Jane Goodall, *In the Shadow of Man* (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), 197–208, and Adriaan Kortlandt, 'Spirits Dressed in Furs?', in Paola Cavalieri and Peter Singer (eds.), *The Great Ape Project: Equality Beyond Humanity* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 142.

⁹ Controversy continues about whether hunting, climatic change, or some other factor was primarily responsible for the large number of megafaunal extinctions during the Pleistocene; but it seems likely that human predation played a contributory role in some cases. See P. S. Martin, 'The Discovery of America', *Science*, 179 (1973), 968–74. It has also been suggested that human migrations caused the extinctions by spreading pathogenic micro-organisms; see Carl Zimmer, 'Carriers of Extinction', *Discover*, 16, No. 7 (July 1995), 28–34.

sources.¹⁰ Nevertheless, while human beings have probably never been entirely peaceful or benign, it seems clear that large-scale wars, and the decimation of major natural ecosystems, e.g. through unsustainable agricultural practices, have occurred primarily within the past ten thousand years.

Today our power to do harm is further magnified by our enormous population, and our ever-more-clever technologies. The history of the twentieth century abundantly demonstrates the human capacity to perpetrate horrors against one another on a scale which has no parallel in human history. Moreover, we are now damaging the global ecosystem far more seriously than we could have done even a century ago.

The second obvious fact about us is that we have a natural capacity to care about other living things, both human and non-human—and sometimes about things that are evidently lifeless, such as stones. Human beings who have not been psychologically or neurologically damaged are strongly inclined to care about many of the beings with which they interact, and to want to protect them. Most of us could not hear a child or a kitten crying from pain or fear, without wanting to help if we could. And our aesthetic, intellectual, and spiritual appreciation of even the non-sentient elements of the natural world—trees and rivers, for instance—impels us to oppose their wanton destruction.

David Hume argued—rightly in my view—that such ‘moral feelings’ constitute the essential and instinctive foundation of all human morality.¹¹ Upon this foundation we construct moral concepts, rules, principles, and theories. This task obviously requires thought and reason. But had our ancestors not been highly social animals, possessing a natural capacity to care for other members of the social group, they would never have become moral agents. Moral concepts cannot replace this natural capacity to care for and about others; but they can complement and strengthen it. And, as Hume argued, strengthening that natural capacity is very much in our own interest, both as individuals and as members of social communities.

¹⁰ For a good discussion of the debate about why the Cro-Magnons prevailed over the Neanderthals, see Richard Leakey and Roger Lewin, *Origins Reconsidered: In Search of What Makes Us Human* (New York: Anchor Books, 1992), 232–5.

¹¹ David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

Human beings are not the only terrestrial creatures with a capacity to care about other beings; but we appear to be the only ones who debate concepts of moral status. We can do this because we have certain intellectual, social, and linguistic capacities, such as the capacity to formulate and communicate moral ideas, and to evaluate them co-operatively by what we take to be appropriate criteria of adequacy. And we must do it, because our species' power to do harm is great and growing. If we fail to constrain our own destructive potential more effectively than we have done up to now, or fail to do it through agreements arrived at by peaceful means, then the next millennium will witness social and ecological catastrophes that will make the twentieth century look like the age of benevolence.

As reasoning beings who are highly social, we must have shared moral principles. To be useful, a moral principle must be based upon observations and arguments which are at least comprehensible to the majority of persons, whatever their cultural or religious background. It must also, as far as possible, be consistent with the strongly held moral convictions of well-informed and thoughtful persons. Both requirements arise from the need for moral standards upon which human beings can hope eventually to agree.

1.5. Two Functions of the Concept of Moral Status

The concept of moral status is one of the tools which we use to bring order to the welter of conflicting claims about what we ought and ought not to do. It is a somewhat blunt tool, in part because it can play more than one role in moral theory and human moral psychology. On the one hand, the concept of moral status can be used to specify minimum standards of acceptable behaviour towards entities of a given sort. Thus, the claim that all persons have full and equal moral status implies that we must not murder other persons, assault them, cheat them, torture them, imprison them unjustly, or fail to help them when help is needed and we have the means of providing it. Such minimum standards represent a floor below which we ought not to allow our actions, or those of other moral agents, to fall. When such standards of behaviour are violated, we are justified in protesting, objecting, and sometimes using force to prevent or deter further violations.

On the other hand, the concept of moral status may be used to establish moral ideals, such as the Christian ideal, to love one's neighbours as oneself; or the Jain ideal, never to kill or injure any living thing. Such ideals cannot fully be put into practice, except perhaps by a few unusual individuals. Yet they serve an important function by reminding us that, however scrupulous we may be in observing our obligations, we could be better people were we to do more than we are obliged to do. Moral ideals create a conceptual space for supererogation, encouraging individuals to move beyond conformity to minimum standards of acceptable behaviour, towards exceptional goodness, heroism, or saintliness.

Trouble can be expected, however, when pragmatically unattainable moral ideals are propounded as minimum standards of acceptable behaviour. People who are told that they must conform to moral standards which very few actually can meet are likely to conclude that morality is a set of hypocritical platitudes that only a fool would take seriously. (Think, for instance, of the reaction of most young people everywhere to the demand for lifelong celibacy, except within heterosexual marriage.) The opposite mistake can also have unfortunate consequences. When respect for minimum moral standards is treated as a moral ceiling—a cap above which we ought never to rise in aiding our fellow beings—the result is a mean-spirited morality.

The strategies that we use to resolve the tension between these two functions of the concept of moral status will influence our attitudes towards many practical moral issues. To the extent that we employ the concept of moral status to promulgate highly demanding moral ideals, we will be more likely to object to such practices as abortion, meat eating, and the use of animals in biomedical research. To the extent that we employ the concept of moral status to establish moral floors rather than moral ideals, we will be more likely to have a tolerant attitude towards such controversial practices, viewing them as possibly falling below the moral ideal, but as nevertheless often within the bounds of the morally permissible.

1.6. Current Controversies about Moral Status

In classical Greek thought, women, slaves, and barbarians occupied a moral twilight zone; their moral status was debated, but agreed by

most learned men to be lower than that of free male citizens. Today fetuses, animals, biological species, and ecosystems occupy a similar twilight zone. Wildly diverse claims are made about their moral status. Each group has its partisans, who ascribe strong moral status to the entities in question, and often seek stronger legal protections for them. And each group of partisans has its critics, who maintain that the entities in question either have no moral status at all, or none that is strong enough to override the needs of (already-born) human beings. These critics point out that when we attempt to extend the moral community—the set of entities to which we ascribe full and equal moral status—too far, or in the wrong directions, we risk endangering the moral rights of human beings.

Such disputes are not unique to our time. Disagreements about the moral permissibility of killing non-human animals have been part of the Western philosophical tradition for at least three thousand years. Whether the non-human world has intrinsic or only instrumental value—whether nature is sacred or profane—is also an issue that dates at least as far back as the beginning of recorded human history.¹²

What may be distinctive of our postmodern era is the intensity, and often acrimony, with which we debate the moral status of both human and non-human entities. Of these debates, that on abortion is the most bitter—at least in North America—and the one on which the media endlessly dwell. Abortion opponents ascribe to human embryos and fetuses a moral status at least as strong as that of human beings who have already been born, and arguably somewhat stronger.¹³ In their eyes, women who have abortions and physicians who perform them are guilty of premeditated murder, or something very like it. A few act upon this belief by shooting physicians who perform abortions, or persons who work in clinics where abortions are done.

In response, defenders of women's right to choose abortion argue that embryos and fetuses, especially during the early stages of their

¹² See Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade* (San Francisco, Calif.: Harper & Row, 1987).

¹³ Frances Kamm argues persuasively that the rights that are ascribed to fetuses through the claim that they may never be aborted are stronger than those that law and common-sense morality ascribe to human beings that have already been born: *Creation and Abortion: A Study in Moral and Legal Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, 1992.

development, do not yet have full moral status. They contend, further, that women cannot be equal and responsible members of the human moral community if they are denied the right to terminate unwanted or abnormal pregnancies, for what they themselves believe to be sufficiently good reasons.¹⁴

Meanwhile, another movement to expand the moral community has been gaining strength. Animal advocates hold that some non-human animals have a moral status which is the same, or very nearly the same, as that of human beings. Some animal rights theorists would extend moral equality to only a small subset of sentient non-human animals, whose mental capacities seem most nearly to resemble our own.¹⁵ Others would extend equal moral status to all sentient animals, that is, all those that can have experiences, including experiences of pleasure and pain.¹⁶ The sentience criterion implies the moral equality of most vertebrate animals, and probably many invertebrate animals as well. Despite such disagreements, animal advocates agree that much of what is routinely done to animals, for instance in the production of food and in scientific research, is morally objectionable.

Both the anti-abortion and pro-animal movements are individualistic, in that their goal is to raise the moral status of certain individuals, and to strengthen the legal protections provided to them. In contrast, the environmentalist movement is holistic, in that its primary goal is the protection of certain *groups* of living things, i.e. natural biological species and populations, natural biotic systems, and ultimately the entire terrestrial biosphere.¹⁷ From an ecological perspective, our obligation to protect stands of old-growth redwoods derives less from the properties of individual redwood trees than

¹⁴ Not all feminists defend abortion in terms of women's rights. Adherents of the feminist ethics of care, for instance, sometimes reject the concept of a moral right as indicative of 'social atomism'. See Allison Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983), and Elizabeth Wolgast, *The Grammar of Justice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).

¹⁵ For instance, Tom Regan holds that only animals that are subjects-of-a-life have full moral status; his view is discussed in Chapter 4. (*The Case for Animal Rights*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983.)

¹⁶ See Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethic for Our Treatment of Animals* (New York: Avon Books, 1975).

¹⁷ J. Baird Callicott calls attention to this difference, in 'Animal Liberation: A Triangular Affair', *In Defense of the Land Ethic: Essays in Environmental Philosophy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989).

from the role which their species plays within the ecosystems of which it is part. The death of the last snow leopard would be tragic, not primarily because individual leopards have properties that imply a strong moral status, but because if the last one dies there will never be any more, and the world will be permanently impoverished by the loss of a magnificent species.

Not all environmental ethicists seek the extension of moral status to non-human elements of the natural world. Some—so-called ‘shallow’ environmentalists—hold a strictly anthropocentric view of moral status. They maintain that, although only humans have moral status, a biologically diverse and healthy biosphere is of such great value to us and our posterity that it is in our own interest to protect it. They argue, for instance, that the remaining tropical rainforests ought to be preserved because, by removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and adding oxygen, they help to maintain the health of the planet (and our own); and because they contain numerous plant and animal species which may some day be found to have medicinal or commercial value. ‘Deep’ ecologists, in contrast, maintain that we have moral obligations to protect the natural world from our own destructive propensities, not just for our own sake and that of future human generations, but because plants, animals, and ecosystems have a moral status which is independent of their usefulness to us.

1.7. Outline of the Book

In Chapters 2–5, the major alternative theories of moral status are critically examined, with an eye to their practical consequences, and their consistency with the common-sense convictions that few of us would be willing to surrender. The theories considered in Chapters 2–4 are what I call *uni-criterial*. Each focuses upon a certain intrinsic property: life, sentience, and personhood, respectively. Each of these properties has been identified by some philosophers as the single necessary and sufficient condition for the possession of moral status. In each case, I argue that while the property in question is sufficient for a particular type of moral status, treating it as the sole criterion of moral status leads to consequences that are intuitively implausible and pragmatically unacceptable.

Chapter 2 examines the ethic of Reverence for Life developed by