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.
Relations: Communitarian and Metaphysical

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 \textit{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.\textsuperscript{1} 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 \emph{qua} human beings and properties of the \emph{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, Warren 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 MacIntyrian 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*:

‘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 the phenomenological approach 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

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<th>Type of ontology</th>
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<td>1-D ontology or object ontology</td>
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<tr>
<td>2-D ontology or properties ontology</td>
<td>object + property</td>
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<tr>
<td>3-D ‘ontology’ (1st level phenomenology)</td>
<td>interpretation (object + property)</td>
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<td>4-D ‘ontology’ (2nd level phenomenology or transcendental phenomenology)</td>
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ontology to a three-dimensional and four-dimensional ontology, if the label ‘ontology’ and this metaphor are still appropriate at all.

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).

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
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?