Fellow Creatures - Our Obligation to Other Animals

Kantianism as described by Gordon Graham is the view that the morally best human life is the life governed by duty. Nothing is defined as “good without qualification” except a will that acts because it is right. When this notion of duty intersects with environmental questions, it leads to the main issue Christine Korsgaard poses: what obligations do we have towards non-human animals and the natural world? She describes the world we live in as one shared with other living beings that have varying degrees of sentience, intelligence, and self-awareness. From this perspective, “we” is not used with regards to us as humans, but “we” as creatures.

It is generally agreed upon that we have obligations towards other animals and they should be treated as humanely as possible. Korsgaard argues that animals have moral standings in their own right, and the differences between them and us dictate which duties we owe — not whether we owe any at all. Because non-human animals don’t organize themselves around values and long-term goals the way humans do, rather they live in accordance to their nature in day-to-day lives, we aren’t as concerned with securing certain rights for them that need protection. For this reason, it’s common to believe that it doesn’t matter how long they live or whether they do live, the only concern we have is if they die humanely. This leads to two conflicting ideas within the scope of obligatory duty towards other animals.

While Korsgaard maintains that animals possess a moral standing in their own right, their moral standings differ fundamentally from that of humans due to our respective capacities for rationality and moral reasoning. Subsequently, the second idea concerns the different kinds of duties we owe to people versus animals because of the differences in their natures and capacities. These differences in nature suggest that our obligations toward them may be qualitatively different from our obligations towards other human beings, even while remaining

genuine moral duties. Kantian ethics insists that any being with moral standings must never be used purely as a means to our ends, yet because animals lack the same rational agency that we humans have, our practical duties to them are treated weaker than those we have towards other human beings.This contrasts with Kantianism's ideal of universal duty as we routinely override the interests of other creatures for human benefits.

Korsgaard challenges the assumption that humans are more important than other creatures by introducing the concept of "tethered" values. She argues that importance is always tethered to the creature from whose perspective it is viewed from. This means that importance cannot be cut loose from the creature experiencing it without ceasing to be important at all. This denies any free-floating importance. Importance is always 'to' a subject. Thus, it's "absolutely important that every sentient creature get the good things it is important-to her to get and avoid what's bad for her." (Korsgaard, 10). The "importance-to" relationship becomes the foundation for our moral obligation across species boundaries.

Non-human animals live in a world that is in a deep way their own world, a world that is for that animal. This world consists of their interests such as food, mates, dangers, family, and other concerns, and they perceive things directly within this framework. The distinction between instinctive and intelligent behavior is crucial here. Instinctive responses may be flexible and learned, as seen in tool-using birds, yet they are still directed by built-in valences. Intelligence broadens but does not overturn those instinctive ends.

Instinctive behavior contrasts with rational behavior, though instinct is compatible with intelligence - they are not the same thing as rational thought. An intelligent animal is characterized by their ability to learn from experiences, with intelligence looking outwards at the world. Rationality, however, is a normative power grounded in a form of self-consciousness. A rational animal is aware of the grounds of their beliefs and actions and can reflect on them,

asking not just "What am I inclined to do?" but "Is that a good reason to do it?" Rationality looks inward towards the self and asks evaluative questions, enabling the ability to self-govern. Other animals are governed by the laws given by their instincts, while we rational beings are governed by laws we give to ourselves (autonomy); we assess the whole principle (or “maxim”) of doing *x* act for *y* purpose, then decide to act.

Self-endorsement allows us to turn a desire into a value. By affirming or rejecting our motives, we don't just act on impulses—we treat our chosen ends as genuinely "good," a stance animals cannot take. Actions reveal and shape our identity; in choosing, we decide who we are. We see ourselves as the source of action, developing ourselves. Unlike other animals who only react to their environment, only beings who can step back, evaluate, and reflect values in their actions can truly have a sense of "self." Our unique capacity for rational reflection and self-legislation doesn't just distinguish us from other animals—it creates special moral responsibilities. Because we can step back from our instincts and evaluate our reasons, we bear the burden of moral agency that other creatures cannot share.

Our unique capacity for rational reflection creates special moral responsibilities toward both rational and non-rational beings. While our rationality enables us to form a "kingdom of ends" with other rational agents, it also makes us custodians for creatures who cannot advocate for themselves. Despite this notion of being custodians, Kant failed to extend these commitments to non-rational creatures. In his writings, draws a sharp line between humans and all other animals stating “beings… without reason have only a relative worth, as means, and are therefore called things, whereas rational beings are called persons because their nature already marks them out as an end in itself” (Kant as cited in Korsgaard, 98). Kant argues only those who can self-legislate moral laws and reciprocally recognize one another’s autonomy can properly belong to the moral community of the “kingdom of ends” whereas other animals cannot and are therefore categorized as “means.”

Korsgaard, however, challenges Kant's exclusion of non-rational animals by demonstrating their moral standing cannot be diminished because they lack the capacity for self-legislation. She dismantles the "Argument from Marginal Cases" argument by highlighting the inconsistency of conferring moral standing to a mentally disabled human over an animal with similar cognitive ability. Instead, she considers creatures as a "functional unity" rather than an independent collection of properties (i.e. intelligent, sentient, alive). Additionally, she introduces the idea of "atemporality" when considering moral standing, which asks us to consider the morality of a being over their entire lifetime — preventing the comparison of the irrational baby to the comparatively rational cognitively advanced animal. Both concepts borrow heavily from the Aristotelian idea of telos, considering a creature in context of its "destined end" rather than the "ongoing self" at that snapshot in time. A human that is unable to reason is thus only "defectively rational," but entirely different from a species which natively does not possess rational thought.

Kant surprisingly stands against needless animal suffering. Despite viewing animals to have no moral standing, he believes humans owe it to themselves to treat animals with care, as harming animals (as he deems, "human analogs") damages our moral character. We owe them gratitude as an "indirect duty." However, this argument is inconsistent: how can one appreciate an animal in and of itself, yet only value it for selfish reasons? And if we apply human concepts such as gratitude onto animals, why not confer them moral standing as well?

Here, Korsgaard argues for animals also having a "final good," as opposed to Kant, who believed the distinction between humans and animals lies in humans being "ends in themselves." For Kant, this distinction began when humans started viewing animals as mere tools. His concept of a "kingdom of ends" for rational creatures (humans) arises from the age-old idea of the "social contract," which all rational beings are under via tacit consent. Since animals lack the faculties to understand or enter rational agreements, some argue they cannot

partake in the social contract. Hume adds that contract dynamics require a relatively even balance of power—otherwise, there's no mutual incentive to maintain the agreement. Kant, however, takes a different view: one must will a maxim to be universal law before the action is permissible (i.e., "The Golden Rule"), governing the self in accordance with one's conception of moral law. To do the right thing, then, is to act in a way that no other rational entity could reasonably object to. These laws are universal by nature; Kant explicitly addresses this in his political philosophy with the concept of "passive citizens": women, children, servants, etc. (and in the modern context, foreigners or immigrants), all protected by laws they do not vote on. However, while socially constructed laws are clear-cut (such as financial fraud), acts of nature are more difficult to universalize since they aren't governed by shared convention—they always produce the same result.

How do we derive the "ought" of not harming animals from the moral standing we assign them? According to Hume's moral realist perspective, one cannot derive a course of action from a fact. Korsgaard does this by extending the protections of universal laws to animals—but why should they apply? She begins by countering Kant's idea: since there is no metaphysical property that makes rational beings "valuable as ends in themselves," there is only good-*for* a being. As Kant writes in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, "What we are to call good must be an object of the faculty of desire in the judgment of every reasonable human being..." Thus, the only "absolute good" possible is one that every creature may agree on. Korsgaard rejects hedonic utilitarianism: rather than creatures being mere receptacles of "intrinsic value" and being a number in the greater hedonic calculus (i.e., something is intrinsically good, so possessing it is good for the creature), she argues that creatures are ends in themselves because they accord value to their own existence through the self-preservational nature of sentient life. Therefore, unless we recognize some creatures as ends in themselves, we cannot

meaningfully speak of absolute good or bad—creatures' final goods are worth pursuing as part of universal law.

In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant writes: "What we are to call good must be an object of the faculty of desire in the judgment of every reasonable human being, and evil an object of aversion in the eyes of everyone." This doesn't mean everyone shares the same notions of good and evil, but that each person's pursuit of their own good must be respected within a universally shared moral framework. When a rational being chooses, they confer absolute value on that choice—others must recognize and respond to it. This capacity to will one's good as universal law is what makes a choice morally valid. Rationality, then, allows us to make choices that are not just good-for-us, but good absolutely. Only rational beings can do this, which is why Kant sees them as the only true members of the "kingdom of ends." For those beings, there are *active* and *passive* "ends in ourselves" — the former bound via reciprocal legislation of moral good, the latter simply meaning the beings' ends are good absolutely. Korsgaard believes these two are separable; and although animals are not active agents in reciprocal legislation, we are obligated to treat all beings who have a final good as ends in themselves. Furthermore, our duty to promote the good of other rational beings means we must respect their autonomy. Each creature pursues what is good-for it as absolute good; and since there is no basis to judge relative importance of each pursuit, each must be wholly worth pursuing. And as animals, in healthy functioning, naturally pursue pleasure and avoid pain, these pursuits are worthwhile as well.

However, these concepts are still in the realm of ideal theory — obviously, there are instances in which good-for's clash between beings, and instances in which rational beings do not act in a manner befitting reciprocal legislation. As mentioned above, sentient animals must be ends-in-themselves rather than a mere means to an end. Humans acting in roles circumvent being pure means via explicit and informed consent to a transaction; however, animals lack the

facilities to do so. Thus, in the interest of all sentient beings' absolute good, abolitionists argue that interactions with animals should at most be minimal, to avoid demeaning them as pets and playthings, mere means rather than ends in themselves. On the other hand, though, animals experience great suffering in the wild — predation and starvation all constitute the brutal reality of nature. McMahen, then, argues for the slow and painless elimination of predators, using birth control to artificially diminish their population— resulting in a wholly domesticated and human-controlled population of herbivores, fed and bred by humans. These two concepts form an antimony of animal welfare: to protect animals from evil, as is our duty, either course of action results logically.

While theories and practicality aren't exactly the same, Korsgaard translates her framework into three concrete reforms that treat animals as ends-in-themselves. First, end factory farming, which condemns billions to torment while consuming vast land resources and displacing wild creatures. Second, restore habitat through land bridges, migration corridors, and territorial grants so animal communities can survive and govern themselves. Third, phase out painful experimentation that treats sentient beings as mere instruments. Together, these reforms reflect Korsgaard's conviction that genuine respect for animals requires abandoning exploitation entirely, not simply making it more humane.