

Humanity's Ethical Responsibility Toward Animals

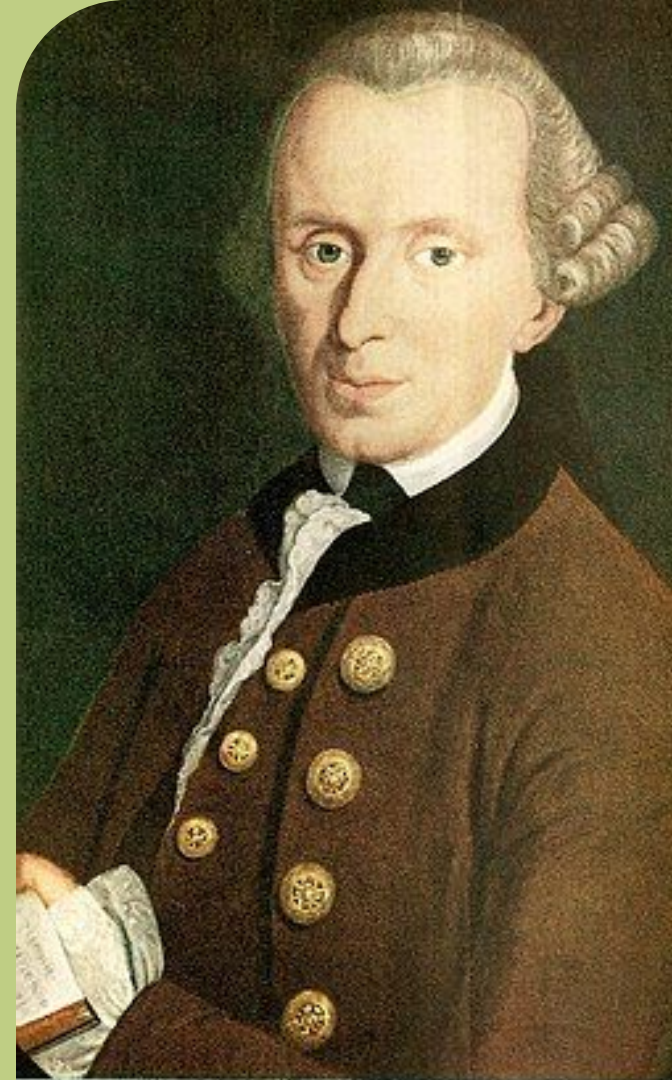
Fellow Creatures: Our Obligation to the Other Animals

Christine Korsgaard

Derrick Li & Angela Zhou

6/2/2025





Kantianism

"The fourth and last step which reason took, thereby raising man completely above animal society, was his realisation that he is the true end of nature... When he first said to the sheep "the pelt which you wear was given to you by nature not for your own use, but for mine" and took it from the sheep to wear it himself...he became aware of a prerogative which, by his nature, he enjoyed over all the animals; and he now no longer regarded them as fellow creatures, but as means and instruments to be used at will for the attainment of whatever ends he pleased."

Conjectures on the Beginnings of Human History, Kant

- Humans are the only beings with "ends-in-themselves", thus the only beings with moral standing.
- Only rational beings can partake in the "Kingdom of Ends"
 - A "social contract" where each being is treated as an end-in-himself and acts according to universal moral laws, having a duty to promote and respect the good of other rational beings.

Moral Standings

Animals are governed by instinct, while rational beings are governed by laws we give ourselves (self-legislation and autonomy), assessing the whole principle of doing x for the purpose of y , then acting.

Before an action is permissible, one must will a maxim to be universal law—i.e. something no other rational creature can object to. (“Kingdom of Ends”)

Without capacity for self-legislation, Kant believes animals lack moral standing – and thus can be used as means to our ends.

For those beings, Kant defines *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 argues for the inclusion of animals as having passive “ends in themselves”.



“Tethered Values”

Korsgaard:

Importance is always tethered to the creatures whose perspective it is viewed from – it is always “to” a subject.

There is no metaphysical property making rational beings “valuable as ends in themselves,” only good-for.

So the only absolute good is what is good-for all, and until we recognize creatures as ends in themselves, part of our universal law, we do not have an absolute good or bad.



Evaluative vs Final Good

Evaluative Good

- Things a creature sees as attractive or beneficial relative to its current goals

Final Good

- Things that matter “for themselves.” The ends that form a creature’s welfare

Relation to Animals

- Only final goods have the status of “ends in itself”
- Evaluative goods alone don’t demand moral protection
- Animals pursue final goods (food, safety, social bonds) just as humans do, making their welfare directly valuable
 - Recognizing that animals have final goods means they cannot be treated as mere means



Duties to Animals

Kant And Indirect Duties

- We don't owe obligations to animals for their own sake
 - Harming animals damages our own moral character
 - We avoid cruelty to animals as to not dull our compassion towards other humans
 - Avoiding animal cruelty is a duty to "yourself / other humans" (preserving your humanity)

Korsgaard's Rebuttal

- Kant's requirement of rational self-legislation would also exclude infants and cognitively impaired humans; "Argument From Marginalized Cases"
- Because animals have interests that matter in themselves, cruelty wrongs them directly
 - We owe them direct duties to prevent needless suffering because their ends are worth pursuing
 - The passive citizen: while not part of determining universal law in "Kingdom of Ends", animals are still subject to their protections.
 - i.e. an immigrant being protected against laws against murder, despite not being a citizen of the country.

Creation Ethics v Abolitionism

How do we fulfill our duties to animals?

Creation Ethics

- If perfectly moral creator built ecosystems, there would be no needless suffering (i.e. predation of animals by other animals)
- Intervening by eliminating predation would destroy the existing predator-prey communities and their goods

Abolitionism

- Since animals are ends, we must never use them as means (farming, experimentation, pets)
- Leaves animals vulnerable to predation and natural suffering we cannot mitigate

Core Antinomy

- If we follow creation ethics, we devastated existing communities
- If we refute all use of animals, we cannot mitigate natural harms
- No single ideal, practical solution exists



Practical Obligations

Preserve And Restore Habitats

- "Habitat loss is bad because animals need a place to live, period. ... Providing land bridges over highways or restoring corridors helps maintain community and individual goods"

End Factory Farming & Meat Consumption

- "Killing a sentient being for food deprives it of its final good (life). ... Factory farms also destroy wild habitat (e.g., feed-crop monocultures), compounding moral wrongs"

Phase Out Animal Experimentation

- "Most animal experiments lack non-animal alternatives. ... The only consistent position is to phase out animal research unless absolutely indispensable"



On Species

People tend to care more about species as a whole rather than individual animals – concerns with extinction (considering animal's value for us, such as the cuteness of pandas)

Concerns of extinction:

- Holistic argument: species have “intrinsic value” in their contribution to the biosphere
- Problem: no rigorous definition of this “intrinsic value”, and if we consider passive “end-it-itself” as the value, that value ultimately falls upon good-for the individual creatures in that ecosystem. (does a group have a “good-for”?)

Does a species have a good?

- Good-for species \neq good-for animal – can't say anything about good-for via species status (natural selection)
- Only humans have the unique conception of “species-being”: identify with species and its condition
- Species is not conscious, thus has no final good (as “good” is only relative to perspective of a creature)
- Archetypical representative of a species – i.e. “the pig”: utilitarian view, species archetype is “receptacle” of good.
 - Abstract representation allows for thinking animals are exchangeable and replaceable – individualism doesn't matter, lose track of final good.

How should we care for species?

- Once a group is an agent, it is also a moral agent/patient: can wrong others and can be wronged
- Habitat is a “shared good” for the group agent/community: enables group functioning for animals
 - Thus “playing god” (abolitionism) is bad because it disrupts this group dynamic