

The Question and Status of Animals in Kant's *The Metaphysics of Morals*: Analysis and Evaluation

Arghya Roy

2021115008

Kant's *The Metaphysics of Morals* is divided into two sections – the *Doctrine of Right* and the *Doctrine of Virtue*. The *Doctrine of Right* deals with the rights we have while the latter deals with ethical virtues that we ought to possess. Before delving into the book and the question and status of animals based on it, it is important for us to understand the foundation for his moral philosophy. Kantian ethics are centred around the ideas of duty and moral law. He builds his framework of morality around two central concepts. The first is the categorical imperative, according to which human beings can act only according to those maxims which they would want to be extended as a universal law as well. Secondly, he believes that human beings are ends in themselves, since he emphasises on the importance of autonomy and rationality. This is because according to him, rational beings possess intrinsic value and so, they are citizens of his Kingdom of Ends, unlike non-human animals, who can be treated as means to the ends.

As we know, Kant's moral philosophy is deeply rooted in the concept of rationality, which is the source of morality and moral obligation. According to him, humanity is the ability to set the ends for oneself and this capacity of self-governance on the basis of reason is what gives us the ability to assess the reasons for our actions and ensure that they align with respect for rationality. Kant's idea of the categorical imperative helps constrain our rational agency. He draws a distinction between three aspects of human nature according to him, which are humanity, animality and personality. In O' Hagan's words, animality "includes a physical or mechanical self-love for self preservation, the propagation of the species (the sex and parenting drives), and for community with other human beings (the social drive)".

Man has a duty to raise himself from the crude state of his nature, from his animality (quoad actum), more and more toward humanity, by which he alone is capable of setting himself ends; he has a duty to diminish his ignorance by instruction and to correct his errors.

As we can see in this case too, Kant often mentions how we should overcome our animal nature and that it is our duty as a human being to arise past the crude state of nature from animality towards humanity. The way Kant has referred to animals, which has been discussed in much more detail later, and animality makes it very clear that from his point of view, our shared animality is morally insignificant.

Kant establishes in the book that animals have a capacity of desire and life. He refers to the capacity for desire as "a being's capacity to be by means of its representations the cause of the object of those representations, that is, to act for the sake of some effect foreseen and desired." This is where he draws the distinction between human beings and other animals for the first time. In case of animals, he uses the term *tierische Willkür* i.e brute choice while he reserves a higher level of *Willkür* as a whole for humans. To put it in simpler terms, say there

is an object of my desire kept in front of me. If I was a non-human animal, I am most likely to simply go for it. However, since I am a human being, I am a rational being capable of not just desiring and feeling things but also reflecting on my thoughts, feelings and desires, and so, I will firstly contemplate and analyse my choices before I act accordingly to it.

Human choice, however, is a capacity for choice that can indeed be affected but not determined by impulses, and is therefore of itself (apart from an acquired aptitude of reason) not pure but can still be determined to actions by pure will.

As Kant mentions, what distinguishes human agents from other animals is their capacity for free choice. However, he says that this is necessary condition for moral agency but not sufficient. What makes human beings moral agents, unlike other animals, is not that an object of desire induces pleasure in the person but the fact that human beings have the capacity to “make it his end” to satisfy the desire and that they do so with their conscious will, by following a maxim that they have adopted for themselves.

Non-human animals lie outside the scope of moral obligation according to Kant. According to him, fundamental worth goes hand-in-hand with free will and moral agency. So, there is no direct reason in Kantian ethics for human beings to be morally obligated to non-human animals. There are several excerpts from the book where this stance of his is made pretty clear. For instance, he says –

Now just as we say that since vegetables (e.g., potatoes) and domestic animals are, as regards their abundance, a product of man, which he can use, wear out or destroy (kill), it seems we can also say that since most of his subjects are his own product, the supreme authority in a state, the sovereign, has the right to lead them into war as he would take them on a hunt, and into battles as on a pleasure trip. Although such an argument for this right (which may well be present obscurely in the monarch's mind) holds with regard to animals, which can be a man's property, it simply cannot be applied to men, especially as citizens of a state.

This sets it up perfectly to present Kant’s view that human beings, being the moral agents that they are, are ends in themselves whereas non-human animals are means to the ends. According to him, rational beings possess intrinsic value and must be treated as ends in themselves, rather than merely as means to an end. This thus leaves us with an overwhelming question, which is, in that case, can we just treat animals in any way we want, be it torturing them or killing them? Kant provides a solution, albeit an indirect one.

According to Kant, the duty of human beings only lies to themselves and fellow human beings since his duty to any subject is constrained by the subject’s will. So, the subject automatically needs to be another human being, since we established above in the Kantian context that non-human animals lack will and our subject here needs to be someone capable of moral obligation. Therefore, even when we feel that we have a duty to anyone or anything non-human, it is because of “amphiboly in his concepts of reflection”. What seems to us as our duty to that non-human subject is actually a duty to ourselves, but we are somehow misunderstanding by mistaking our duty with regards to other beings for our duty to those beings. These non-human entities could not only be inanimate objects, plants and animals, but also spiritual beings like angels and gods. This brings us to Kant’s stance on treatment of

animals. If we torture a dog, we would not be violating our duty to the dog but rather our duty to ourselves as rational beings and moral agents. Kant says in the book –

With regard to the animate but nonrational part of creation, violent and cruel treatment of animals is far more intimately opposed to man's duty to himself, and he has a duty to refrain from this; for it dulls his shared feeling of their pain and so weakens and gradually uproots a natural predisposition that is very serviceable to morality in one's relations with other men.

So, essentially what he is trying to say is that we should not cause unnecessary suffering to animals because we share with animals the common feeling of pain and so, we can empathise with them in that aspect. So, being cruel to animals will make us less sensitive to others' sufferings and in this way, we will become uncompassionate not just to non-human animals but to fellow human beings as well. Kant justifies killing of animals for consumption or putting them to work as long as their pain and suffering can be minimised. In case of domesticated animals, he says that we should not overwork or strain them. He even goes on to say that gratitude to the service of animals is also a duty to oneself and not to the animal.

At this point, there are multiple questions which seem unanswered and there are many aspects of Kant's framework which have been criticised by other philosophers, especially the contemporary philosophers. As O'Hagan mentions, multiple philosophers have argued that Kantian ethics should be abandoned on the grounds that it is radically opposed to the common sense view that animal suffering matters and so animals deserve direct moral concern. Some say that Kant's idea of moral agency is too restricted, and that animals can behave autonomously in certain respects, while others object to the fact that Kant's view is anthropocentric, or human-centred, and does not consider the interests of animals.

According to Peter Singer, sentience and the capacity to suffer should be the primary basis for moral consideration and not rationality. He thus uses this argument to say that the fundamental principle of equality should be extended to non-human animals as well. Singer calls this issue speciesism (prioritising human beings over other animals based solely on their species membership) and compares it with serious prevalent issues like racism and sexism, which involve human beings. His approach to the moral status of animals is more of a utilitarian kind. According to Singer, this distinction is whimsical and unjustified, and he calls for equal consideration of interests, regardless of species, and believes that animals have a right not to be subjected to unnecessary suffering. There are several philosophers who share Peter Singer's point of view. However, I feel that these scholars are overlooking a critical factor. According to them, we should treat non-human animals equally as ourselves and other human beings but that does not align with the fact that we cannot expect these animals to be able to properly reflect and make sound logical decisions, based on which they will act. So essentially, when it comes to these factors, according to them, the entire responsibility lies on human beings, but we still have to treat them equally. Therefore, there is a clear lack of alignment between these two facts. Does this mean that human beings are allowed to unnecessarily ill-treat non-human animals? No, but that is already accounted for in Kant's framework.

In her book *Fellow Creatures*, Christine M. Korsgaard contends that Kant's ethical framework, while largely focused on rational beings (human beings), can be expanded to some extent to include animals. Animals have intrinsic value, according to Korsgaard, because they are

sentient entities capable of experiencing pleasure and sorrow. According to her, there is no fundamental difference between humans and other animals other than their different forms of cognition. If there is any such pivotal difference between humans and other animals, then it is the fact that some animals may be important to themselves because their own conscious existence is a great good for them. There is no neutral way to judge and create this hierarchy within animals and so, according to her, the claim of comparative importance is basically senseless. The idea of absolute importance now comes into the picture. So, the question arises that are humans and not other animals the creatures of absolute importance. Firstly, how do we define absolute importance? Human beings could be put on the pedestal of absolute importance if the good for humans was necessary for the good for all living creatures and would be a part of the good of every other individual. Essentially, the lack of meaning in something that is considered important but isn't connected to anything substantial is being replaced by the idea that importance is now widespread and connected to meaningful things or concepts. In this case, humans being absolutely important would provide a clear and meaningful basis for their significance. But she says that is not reasonable for humans to make this claim as we cannot just go ahead and make the statement that the well being of a yak in the Himalayas is tied to the well being of human beings. So, we cannot say that it matters to every other animal whether human beings are achieving what is good for them and vice versa. So basically, what Korsgard is trying to suggest is that defining human beings as absolutely important is definitely very convenient and makes it much easier for us to understand the concept but it is a rather shaky and unrealistic argument with not much logical or empirical backing. She disagrees with the fact that our duties to animals is indirect and claims that harming animals is a moral violation not just because of our character but because of the nature of non-human animals themselves.

In my opinion, Kant's framework makes sense, and here is why. We need to recognise the fact that it is impossible for human beings to know how the brains of other animals work or what other animals are thinking. In fact, we human beings cannot even know what exactly is going on in another human being's mind. So, given this inability, it only makes sense that this framework of Kant is based purely around human beings. The only way in which we are able to understand non-human animals is by their observable actions. For example, it would be impossible to objectively tell whether dolphins are animals having the ability to perceive emotions or not. But since we have seen the case of the dolphin Peter, who was the part of a NASA funded project in the 1960s and had eventually committed suicide, we then realised based on this observable action that dolphins do feel emotions. So, since we are unable to tell for sure what the extent of the capabilities and functions of the non-human brain are, it only makes sense that Kant's framework is based solely on human beings and can be extended to non-human animals indirectly.

References:

1. Kant, I. (1991). *The Metaphysics of Morals*. (Gregor, M, Trans.). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1797)

2. O'Hagan, E. (2009). Animals, Agency, and Obligation in Kantian Ethics. *Social Theory and Practice*, 35(4), 531–554. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23562119>
3. Riley, C. (2014, June 8). *The dolphin who loved me: the Nasa-funded project that went wrong*. The Guardian.
<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/jun/08/the-dolphin-who-loved-me>
4. Singer, P. (1986). All Animals are Equal. *Applied Ethics*, 13, 215-228. Oxford University Press.
5. Korsgard, C. M. (2018). *Fellow Creatures*. Oxford University Press.