

On the Kantian Moral Treatment of Animals

With the development of modern ethical theory, the emphasis on the moral issues surrounding animals has increased exponentially. However, due to various barriers between species, it is unclear how to construct a moral theory when interacting with animals since we do not have a solid basis for inferring animal morality. The common practice is to extrapolate from developed ethical theories that are mainly designed for humans. These theories often produce a spectrum of results based on different assumptions and motivations. One of the mainstream ethical traditions proposed by Kant, often denoted Kantianism, solves this problem by establishing a morality around rationality. This way, humans have no direct moral duties to animals since animals are not rational. However, as a successful theory as it is, most of humanity does share compassion for animals, especially in today's ideology. Therefore, it is intuitive for us to extend this compassion and have a sense of moral duty to animals, which renders this Kantian response counterintuitive. This paper attempts to reconcile this disagreement between Kantianism and our intuition. The general strategy of this paper is to reconcile this problem in a fashion that attempts to minimize the modification to Kantianism, and if such a minimalist attempt does not work, we then try to object to Kantianism. In section I, we introduce the Kantian tradition and the Kantian Value Argument on animals. Then in section II, we introduce Christine Korsgaard's attempt to reconcile our intuition while keeping Kantianism intact and address why it does not work. Following that, we consider in section III an objection against Kantianism by generalizing one of the Evolutionary Debunking Arguments by Sharon Street, which classifies morality as a result of evolutionary selection. Eventually, in section IV, we evaluate the argument we make in section III. in light of counterarguments against Street.

Section. I. The Kantian Value Argument

Establishing a moral theory requires two necessary components: a theory of value and a theory of right action. The theory of value distinguishes intrinsic good and intrinsic evil, while the theory of right action provides a code of conduct *vis a vis* these values. Therefore, this theory of value is more fundamental and a more natural starting point for us to introduce the Kantian ethical theory. As opposed to classical utilitarianism, that we should always act in a way to maximize the outcome (e.g., total happiness) in the world, Kant thinks that the interaction of our actions and everything in the world is something we cannot control. It is too demanding to ask individuals to be responsible for a global and collective process. Therefore, we should focus on the parts we can control – our intentions. Naturally, Kant establishes his theory of value on the intrinsic good of a good will of autonomous agents. By examining cases in the world, one finds that a good action is worth less or none without good will, and a bad action could be worth more with good will. For example, comparing the case of someone accidentally saving another person but did not intend to do so against a case of intentional lifesaving, we tend to think the second case is more valuable. Moreover, even things commonly regarded as good, such as courage and pleasure, could be of negative value as they can always be

behind a bad will, such as some murderer's courage and pleasure to kill. Therefore, good will is central to all moral processes.

As we establish the theory of value for Kantianism, what makes a good will good remains vague. This is where we need a theory of right action, which provides us with the actions one should be willing to do. Kant introduces his theory of right action by defining good will as the will to act in accordance with moral duties instead of the outcomes. These duties are the right actions derived from moral laws, which are the governing entity for Kantianism. As a deontologist, Kant believes that we should act with a set of rules that originates from everyone's rationality, therefore, can be equally applied to every rational being as a moral constraint. Due to the rational origin of these laws, the law should be equally applicable to everyone in the system simultaneously and satisfies two conditions:

1. The Rationality Condition: It produces no logical contradiction.
2. The Humanity Condition: It is the way that every rational being would like to be treated.

These laws are known as different formulations of the Kantian Categorical Imperative (CI). They were made equivalent in Kant's framework since a collectively rational decision should not produce logical contradiction (2 infers 1), and a rational law should reversely be what every rational being wants (1. infers 2.). Combining the theory of value and the theory of right action we have developed so far, we can observe that rationality is central to Kantian ethics. From the theory of right action, rationality is the driving force behind moral laws – the Categorical Imperative. It ensures that the CI forms a universal law that can apply to everyone. As moral laws regulate the actions that one should have the good will to do, rationality is also the effective provider of value behind good will. It naturally entails that all rational agents can confer value by making rational decisions on actions or objects, and this is how we generate value. As good will again motivates the right actions reversely, we see that rationality plays an essential role in the dynamics between CI and good will, which becomes an important point for the animal case.

For our purposes, we ignore the complications between the formulations and focus on the second formulation of the CI, commonly phrased as the following:

CI Version II. The Principle of Humanity

Act so that you treat humanity always as an end and never as mere means.

Here, Kant constructs his famous CI with terms from the Aristotelian tradition. Originating from Aristotle, philosophers refer to actions people take for the sake of something else as means and actions taken for the sake of themselves as ends. For example, when we eat a sandwich due to hunger, the sandwich is our means to avoid hunger instead of an end, in which case we eat the sandwich just for the sake of eating the sandwich. Meanwhile, we commonly regard happiness as an end since we pursue happiness just for the sake of being happy but not using happiness as an intermediate process to something else. Therefore, substituting the definition of terms into the CI, this imperative regulates

that we should treat other humans for the sake of themselves, that is, as rational and autonomous agents. Note that Kant agrees that we can still treat other humans as means, but not as mere means. That is, we can converse with a barista as a partial means for a coffee, but we also should treat her rational and autonomous nature.

Therefore, due to this formulation of CI, we cannot treat people as mere means solely because it violates our rational and autonomous nature. However, we could do so for animals since they are not rational creatures. From the Kantian Tradition, one could summarize the Value Argument in the following form:

- 1) All value is created and conferred by the actions of rational creatures
 - 2) Animals are not rational creatures.
 - 3) Therefore, animals cannot confer value on their own lives.
- C) Animals are not ends-in-themselves.

From our discussion of the CI's origin, it is clear that the CI is a collective result of rationality. It is the law that everyone abides if all participants are rational. However, as in 2), animals are not rational since they don't have the capacity to conceptualize reasons for acting or to endorse and reject them. They may possess natural instincts that can resemble rational actions, but they lack the ability to conceptualize. Therefore, we arrive at 3) that animals cannot confer value to themselves without rationality as a requirement to confer value. Eventually, we conclude that without value, animals cannot be the ends specified in the CI.

Section II. Korsgaard's Argument for the Value of Animals

As the section above addresses, the Kantian ethical theory concludes that animals are not ends-in-themselves. That is, we have no moral obligation to animals as per Kantian criteria; they have no rational and autonomous nature to be respected. Therefore, one should feel free to treat animals as mere means. When introducing the topic, we mentioned that this conclusion appears counterintuitive to most of us, especially given the increased focus on animals' rights. On the other hand, many also find the Kantian formulation of ethics of the human part appealing, as the Principle of Humanity's advocacy for respecting individual human nature resonates especially with the ideology today. This production of a counterintuitive conclusion from a celebrated ethical framework gives us a conundrum. Luckily, Christine Korsgaard, in her *Fellow Creatures: Kantian Ethics and Our Duties to Animals*, offers a solution to this conundrum. With the aim to preserve the most celebrated and the most intuitive aspect of both parts, Korsgaard's elegant solution requires no additional assumptions. She utilizes the property of Kantian human rationality to build the connection between Kantian ethics and the counterintuitive result. Korsgaard's Argument for the value of animals could be summarized as the following:

- K1) All value is created and conferred by the actions of rational creatures.
- K2) Animals are not rational creatures.
- K3) Animals cannot confer values on their lives.

K4) Humans are rational animals

K5) Therefore, humans can confer value on lives – both our lives and the lives of others, including non-rational creatures.

K6) Humans confer value on our own non-rational/bodily/animal nature – i.e., our “natural good.”

K7) Therefore, we also commit ourselves to valuing the non-rational/bodily/animal nature of non-rational animals.

K8) By valuing our own animal natures, we also value (or commit ourselves to value) animals.

C) Animals are ends-in-themselves.

As Korsgaard takes Kantian ethics for granted, she also adopts the Kantian formulation and conclusion from K1 to K3 that value could only be conferred by rational creatures. Therefore, given their absence of rationality, animals cannot confer value on themselves. However, Korsgaard finds another way for animals to obtain ethical value in the Kantian framework – humans. Recalling that, Kant concludes humans are rational animals and, therefore, can confer value on anything. For instance, the action of mountain climbing has no value in itself. However, there are mountaineers who confer value on this action by making a rational decision about this action. Similarly, humans can also confer values on the objection and non-rational creatures like animals.

With the foundation from Kantianism laid out, Korsgaard makes the critical move in K6 to claim that from the observation that humans confer value on actions that are based on our animal nature instead of rationality. For example, eating and drinking actions are not a result of rationality. They originate from our animal nature to keep us alive. One can also observe that we constantly make decisions and judgments for bodily well-being and pleasure like such. Therefore, Korsgaard extends this observation in K7 and claims that it is natural to say that so long as we commit to these actions and the animal nature behind them, we are taking our animal natures to be ends-in-themselves equivalent to our rational nature. Moreover, it is obvious that humans are not the sole possessors of the animal nature. Animals also do, and their animal nature is not different from ours. In Korsgaard's words, their animal nature is the same “incentive” for animals to pursue certain actions. Therefore, we arrive at K8 that we also value animals with this same animal nature and eventually conclude that animals are now ends-in-themselves given these values conferred by humans' rational value of our animal nature.

Although Korsgaard's theory seems to reconcile the conflict between Kantianism and its conclusion on animals, this method violates a more generalized formulation of the Principle of Humanity. As explained in Section I, the Principle of Humanity, Kant's second formulation of the CI, advocates that one should always treat humanity as an end and never as mere means. This principle does not make any claim on animals. However, if we examine Kant's theory closely, we should find that the reasoning behind this principle does not restrict its applicability to humans. Kant formulates this principle with only humans in mind because he considers humans to be the only rational

creatures. Since the foundation of Kantian ethics is to respect any rational and autonomous nature as an end-in-itself instead of making humans a specie in a special place, we could substitute the word “human” in the Principle of Humanity to “rational and autonomous being” without any loss of generality. This revised version of the Principle of Humanity, which we will rename as the Principle of Rationality for our purposes, now becomes more generally applicable to different species. Following this formulation, one ought to treat any rational and autonomous creatures as ends-in-themselves instead of making specific reference to humans.

However, examining Korsgaard’s method with the newly formulated principle renders a problem. Since Korsgaard adopts the Kantian assumption that animals are non-rational creatures and are only ends-in-themselves due to the value conferred by humans, it is not within the Principle of Rationality’s range for us to treat animals as ends-in-themselves. Therefore, the CI still claims that we have no moral obligation toward animals. One could argue in Korsgaard’s ground that the CI does not pose a problem since it is not a negation claims one should not be morally obligated to any animal. However, we could counter this argument by appealing to Kant’s original argument for treating animals morally – the best reasoning one could find is that we should not harm animals since this increases our chance of harming truly rational and autonomous creatures.

Moreover, the Principle of Rationality poses another problem to Korsgaard’s solution. Another implication of the principle is that we should never treat ends-in-themselves as mere means. However, this is exactly what Korsgaard’s solution does to animals. Recall that the heart of her solution is that since humans confer value on our animal nature, we must also confer value on animals’ animal nature because they are the same nature. To see the problem, let us closely examine this value conferral process through an argument:

V1) Humans confer value on human animal nature.

V2) Animals have the same animal nature.

V3) For humans to confer value on our animal nature, it entails rationally that we should also confer value on animals’ animal nature.

V4) If humans do not confer value on animals’ animal nature, we cannot rationally justify the conferral of values to our own animal nature.

V5) Humans confer value on animals as a mere means to confer value on our own animal nature.

The foundation and motivation for us to confer value on animals are that we confer value to animal nature, which animals and we commonly possess, outlined in V1 and V2. Here, the key is to note V3 that a rational being must simultaneously confer value on the animal nature of both humans and animals to satisfy the logic. Therefore, the only reason for us to confer value on animals is that we need to confer value on ourselves. We can also demonstrate the same idea in V4 that when we do not confer value on animals, we cannot do so to ourselves. If we, as rational agents, confer values on animals just so we can confer value on ourselves, this would only make animals a mere means to supplement our values instead of having them as real ends-in-themselves. One more lesson we learned

from this excursion is that the way for animals to become ends-in-themselves is for them to confer value upon themselves, as animals would not be valued as a means to others' value.

Section. III. The Evolutionary Debunking Argument and its Generalization

After we examine Korsgaard's attempt to reconcile Kantianism and the counterintuitive conclusion on animals by keeping both components intact, we must consider the possibility that one of them should be altered. Since it is more intuitive for people, especially nowadays, to share sympathy and moral obligation to animals. We consider modifying the Kantian ethical theory from a new angle – evolutionary biology. One of the Evolutionary Debunking Arguments from Sharon Street's *A Darwinian Dilemma for the Realist Theory of Values* is an argument that all moral beliefs originate from what benefits our reproductive success in selection and evolution. Street's argument initially targets the class of moral realists, who claims that there are *a priori* moral rules that one should follow. However, it is irrelevant for us to classify whether Kantianism is a subset of moral realism or to enter a discussion about moral realism altogether. This paper exploits this argument by generalizing it to different species to oppose Kant's Value Argument.

Street's argument presents as a questionnaire to ethicists. She first asks if there is any relationship between moral truth and moral beliefs. Since this is a binary question, one could only answer "yes" or "no." However, saying "no" means to claim that what we believe is irrelevant to the moral truth, given that there is no relationship between them.

If one answers "yes," then there are two ways this relationship could go: the Tracking Account (TA) and the Adaptive Link Account (ALA). The TA is the account that our moral beliefs consistently tracked the moral truth en route of evolution for unknown reasons. On the other hand, the ALA is the account that having certain moral beliefs in performing specific actions enhances reproductive success. Adapting and performing these actions then boosts these groups' probability of survival and reproduction. The survival of these groups then preserves these adapted traits. Therefore, the traits with the best enhancement of reproductive success should have the most significant probability of being preserved in history. Note that the ALA does not lead to moral truth; rather, it demonstrates that the moral beliefs we currently have are merely results of evolution that we sometimes take as truth. Comparing both accounts, we observe that the TA is an *ad hoc* addition to the theory with no proper logical or scientific evidence. However, the ALA is favoured by the current evolutionary biology research with much research evidence. Accepting the ALA as the reasoning for the relationship between moral truth and moral beliefs is natural. Therefore, as the only reasonable route in the questionnaire, one should believe that the ALA is the proper explanation and origin for our moral beliefs.

We now generalize the advantage of Street's argument to reject the Kantian Value Argument. Though Street constructs her argument with humankind in mind, the principle behind her argument

naturally generalizes to any other animal species. As all animals are also subjected to the force of natural selection, the ALA is equally applicable to animals as well. Meanwhile, we exploit another property of the ALA in this generalization process – the moral beliefs are not invariant across species. According to the current scientific theory, natural selection and evolution is based on filtering the contribution of living and reproductive success of spontaneous genetic mutation; therefore, this process is intrinsically random. That is, no law regulates the direction of evolution for different species. Therefore, the beliefs that can boost reproductive success differ across different species. This means animals can and have already developed their moral beliefs (and different species can have different sets of beliefs for the best enhancement), encoded in their actions and reactions. Having moral beliefs analogous to humanity means they can confer value on themselves. Therefore, animals are also ends-in-themselves. Following the logic of the Value Argument, it follows that we have to extend the CI to animals and treat them for the sake of themselves – beings with moral beliefs just like ours.

We note that interpreting this section as a generalization to the existing Kantian theory is more coherent than a simple objection. Kant is in no way wrong to center rationality in the discussion of his ethics, and this is why many people find it appealing and intuitive to respect human nature for the sake of itself. It is not general enough for different species with different evolutionary paths. In infinite possible evolutionary paths, our ancestors drew the card of rationality, just as other species could have drawn different cards (living underwater, bigger jaws, etc). These different traits then lead to a different set of actions and beliefs that best boost each species' survival and reproductive chance. Therefore, one needs to have different forms of CI founded on different moral beliefs when dealing with a species with a different evolutionary path.

Section IV. Objection to the Evolutionary Debunking Argument

Like every other philosophical theory, the Evolutionary Debunking Argument is also not infallible. One of the main objections to such an argument is that although the ALA build a compelling case that moral beliefs originate from evolution for both humans and animals, it is not clear why having the same origin could make them equally morally relevant. We appeal to a similar case in our discussion of Korsgaard's solution to address this concern.

In section II, we addressed that humans confer value on animals because we confer value on our own animal nature, which animals also possess. On a deeper level, these animal natures share the same origin – the motivation of survival or a better life. Since these animal natures' basic drive is the same motivation, then they should be the same across different species regardless of rationality. Similarly, in the Evolutionary Debunking Argument, different sets of moral beliefs across species also originate from the same innate drive of survival and reproduction. Analogues to Korsgaard's argument, if one agrees that animal nature is the same in humans and animals, then this person should

also agree that having the same origin would make the moral beliefs across species to be equally morally relevant.

Moreover, a Kantian counterargument could also naturally extend on rationality. One following Kantianism can argue that animals' moral beliefs are not due to rationality. Given rationality as a requirement for conferring moral values, animals cannot confer value upon themselves even with these irrational moral beliefs. To respond to such a counterargument, we note that our rationality, which Kant considers the reason for our special place to confer value, is nonetheless a result of evolution. As previously addressed, it is merely an option that humans undergo out of an infinite number of mutations. Therefore, the moral beliefs generated from rationality, just like the "irrational" ones from animals, are nonetheless all results of evolutionary selection. In other words, rationality is in no way favoured. Instead, it is just our way of adapting to natural selection. If the moral beliefs of humanity and animals originate from evolution, then we should treat them equally. Therefore, we should equate the moral status of our moral beliefs with that of animals – equally as ends-in-selves.

Therefore, our discussion successfully preserves our intuition about animals. Moreover, we also found no mistake with Kantian ethics. The only problem is that it is solely a human ethical theory. Within the range of humans, with whom we share a common rationality, Kant's theory works intuitively and smoothly. However, under the general lens of the natural world, we should treat rationality as a randomly selected outcome (though it seems that it boosts our survival chance the best) of evolution rather than a special property that distinguishes us from the rest of the world. The generalized Kantian theory, based on the moral beliefs developed in each species according to their survival and reproductive needs, solves the conundrum addressed previously in this paper.

References

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