



FELLOW CREATURES

by Christine Korsgaard

Oxford University Press, 2018. ISBN 0198753853. 272 pp. \$24.95

Kant thought that of all the animals on the Earth, the human being stands apart as the sole animal whose actions are morally significant; all other non-rational beings are mere “things...with which one can do as one likes” (7:127).¹ As things, non-rational animals (hereafter simply “animals”) are mere “means and instruments” for the will of the human being to do with as he or she sees fit. Hence, despite our own animality, by virtue of the capacity for reason, human beings are no longer “fellow creatures” to other animals, but rather their absolute master (8:114).

From remarks such as these, one might be forgiven for thinking that Kant's ethics simply has no place for the recognition of the moral significance of animal suffering or flourishing, and thus little to say about the ethical treatment of animals. In particular, one long-standing point of contention has been that Kant's position seems at best only to recognize indirect ethical obligations towards animals. On Kant's view, we owe something to animals only because we owe something to ourselves, as rational beings (6:443). This means that the (at least apparent) wrongness of torturing an animal, or of consigning it to a life as a widget in the industrial food system, is merely an indirect wrong to the animal, insofar as it constitutes a (direct) wrong to humans, for example, by undermining those dispositions of feeling in us to treat each other with empathy and respect. By thus undermining our natural sympathy towards other living creatures, animal cruelty increases the likelihood that we will treat each other in immoral ways. However, on this view the animal has essentially disappeared as an immediate object of moral concern. The resulting indirectness of moral concern for animals has appeared to many as repugnant, mistaken, and perhaps even unavoidable without a significant revision of Kant's framework.²

In *Fellow Creatures*, Christine Korsgaard hopes to convince us that the Kantian framework can indeed account for the immediate moral significance of animals. The book draws on, amplifies, and in some cases revises, previous work of Korsgaard's on these issues.³ Consisting of twelve chapters in three parts, *Fellow Creatures* is written in Korsgaard's signature assured and eloquent style. Part one defends a particular conception of value as “tethered” to living creatures. It also presents a view of the difference between rational and non-rational animals that should be familiar to any acquainted with Korsgaard's previous work. Part two examines the details of Kant's conception of our moral relation to animals, which he notoriously holds to be at best indirect in nature. Here Korsgaard mounts a defense of a Kantian (though not Kant's) case for direct obligations to animals. Finally, in part three, and within the frame of a Kantian “antinomy” concerning our ethical relation to animals as established in part two, Korsgaard takes up several thorny issues concerning the elimination of predation in the natural world, whether there is a distinctive value possessed by a species (and whether there is a corresponding loss in its extinction), and the use of animals in medical experimentation.

As is no doubt clear from the above, *Fellow Creatures* is, despite its relatively short length, extremely rich in philosophical content. I will not be able to touch on more than just a few issues in this short review. My main focus will be on the question of whether or not Korsgaard's Kantian framework can genuinely accommodate non-human animals as direct objects of moral concern. Below I discuss two elements of her view regarding this question. First, I look at Korsgaard's account of the difference between the animal and human mind. I then turn, second, to

Korsgaard's main defense of her Kantian approach to explaining the existence and nature of our ethical obligations toward animals.

Before getting to the specifics of Korsgaard's distinction between rational and non-rational minds, let me first spell out some of the elements of her view of subjectivity that form the backdrop to this distinction. In the first part of the book, Korsgaard argues for what she calls a "tethered" conception of value—nothing can be important or good without being good-for (or bad-for) some living creature. Animals are creatures that act in the light of their (sensory) representations of their world and do so in a valenced or evaluative way. Korsgaard argues that tethered values—things that can be good or bad for a creature—are those that can in principle show up in the evaluative perspective of the animal, as a part of how it represents its environment or itself.

Korsgaard conceives of value here as functional, in the sense that goods promote the maintenance, reproduction, and flourishing of the organism and ills the opposite. Ultimately all animals have a final good that "constitutes or contributes to the well-functioning of an entity who experiences her own functional condition in a valenced way, and pursues her own functional goods through action" (p. 22).⁴

While something can be good-for an animal only in the sense of contributing to its functional, and ultimately final, good, this is merely a necessary condition for considering an animal an object of moral concern. Korsgaard also thinks that what sets such functional goods for animals apart from goods for non-living things like kitchen knives or hammers is the fact that the animal's functional good is specifically tied to a subject or self as a locus of consciousness. A self has "an integrated point of view, at a time, and over time" (p. 29), which enables it to find its way around its environment and pursue its relevant ends. The functional goods for an animal are what help it to maintain and otherwise support this integrated point of view—i.e., its self.

Korsgaard argues that many animals qualify as having selves insofar as they exhibit some sort of functional unity of point of view over time. She also thinks that many animals exhibit self-consciousness, at least to some degree (e.g., in passing the "mirror test" of visually recognizing themselves in a reflection as distinct from other objects). What Korsgaard denies is present in any non-rational animal is the ability to reflectively control one's attitudes—one's beliefs and desires (p. 30). Korsgaard quotes Kant's claim that "the fact that man can have the idea "I" raises him infinitely above all the other beings living on earth" (7:127). In her view, though Kant errs in some of the ways he develops his view of self-consciousness, his central contribution to our understanding of rationality is in showing how the kind of metarepresentational abilities constituting one's grasp of the first-person concept allow one to endorse, control, and thus take responsibility for one's doxastic and conative mental states.

Setting aside the difficult question of whether Korsgaard has gotten Kant right on this score, we can ask whether she is right to think that there is a link between metarepresentation (via application of the concept <I>) and control over one's mental states that serves to distinguish rational from non-rational creatures. There is at least some evidence for thinking that Korsgaard conflates two distinct, and independent, elements of (what is now called) metacognition—viz. executive control over one's cognitive processes, and the metarepresentation of oneself as the subject of those processes.⁵ Of particular interest in recent cognitive ethology has been the way in which many animals perform similarly to humans in experiments eliciting "epistemic feelings"—e.g., feelings of knowing such as hunches, confidence, and uncertainty.⁶

For example, when directed to make difficult pattern discriminations, a variety of animals—including dolphins, chimpanzees, monkeys, and rats—make adaptive use of a "bail-out" option. This option is one that quickly provides them a new trial without the penalty typical of an incorrect answer. Of note is the fact that, in such difficult cases, where their discrimination reliability drops to chance, animals take the bail-out option in a manner consistent with that of humans reporting feelings of uncertainty in deliberating upon how to complete these tasks.⁷ The explanation of this close fit is that such animals, like humans, are able to both detect a clash between two subjective takes on the same stimulus or content and by cognitive effort inhibit their initial take in favor of a more considered one.

If these experiments are correct in their conclusions, then animals that lack any (or any significant) metarepresentational capacities are nevertheless able to exert control over their representational states or attitudes. This suggests that Korsgaard may be drawing the line between the rational and the non-rational in the wrong place.

Perhaps it is not metarepresentation that is rationally distinctive, but rather executive control, and such a capacity for control may exist in more phylogenetically primitive beings than the capacity for metarepresentation. One salutary consequence of this would be that, all other things being equal, a Kantian framework that regards only rational beings as direct objects of moral concern might nevertheless include a much wider extent of the animal world if the demarcation line between the rational and the non-rational were suitably redrawn according to the presence of a capacity for executive control rather than that of metarepresentation.

Given Korsgaard's commitment to a reflective, and thus metarepresentational, model of rationality, her strategy for resolving the problem of indirectness lies not in reconceiving the distinction between the rational and the non-rational. Rather, she argues, in the second part of the book, for a reevaluation of the Kantian explanation of the relationship between a right and an obligation. To see how Korsgaard does this, we need to first appreciate what she calls the "reciprocity argument", which we can summarize as follows:

1. Rights and obligations are reciprocally related.
2. Non-rational animals cannot be obligated to do anything.
3. Therefore, non-rational animals cannot have rights (1, 2).

The reciprocity argument then immediately leads to the view that animals are not direct objects of moral concern:

4. If non-rational animals cannot have rights, then they cannot be wronged.
5. Animals cannot be wronged (3, 4).
6. Therefore, there is nothing we morally owe to non-rational animals, that is, there are no "direct" moral requirements or principles governing their treatment.

At the core of this argument is the view that having a right means making (and being able to make) a claim on other beings. But in conceiving of rights in this way, Korsgaard points out that the claimant must also recognize others as possible sources of claims—as possible bearers of rights. As she puts it, "in making these laws, we already concede authority to the point of view of others" (p. 125). According to Korsgaard, animals, lacking the capacity to reflect on their beliefs and desires, are in no position to reciprocally recognize the authority of other points of view. It would thus seem that animals can never be part of the moral community, understood as a community of reciprocally obliged beings.

As Korsgaard goes on to argue, however, the final step—that nothing is morally owed to animals—is too quick. She points to Kant's political conception of a "passive citizen" as a guide. Such a citizen (e.g., a woman, child, or servant) is one to whom certain legal and political protections are extended, even though the citizen cannot engage in the practice of voting or otherwise determining the laws of the polity. Insofar as the basic idea is coherent (putting aside the issue of whether this political category is one we would or should nowadays endorse), it encourages the question of whether the same might be said of animals—could they be sources of obligation even if they lack the capacities to recognize themselves or others as such sources of obligation, and thus engage in the kinds of activity necessary for constituting (or recognizing) moral laws?

As Korsgaard argues:

each of us stands in a relation to him- or herself that is the ultimate basis of all value. That relation is that we each take the things that are good-for us to be good absolutely, rationally endorsing the natural tendency of conscious living beings, of creatures, to pursue their own good as if it were good absolutely. We recognize that this is a condition we share with all other creatures. Our reason for including animals in the moral community is just that: that we recognize them to be fellow creatures, with a good of their own just like ours. (p. 148).

I understand her argument as follows:

1. A rational being is one capable of acting “autonomously”, at least in the sense of being able to set ends for itself.
2. A condition of setting an end for oneself is that one take oneself to be a source of value—one takes oneself as an “end in itself.”
3. In taking oneself to be a source of value, one takes the goods and ills that show up in one's evaluative perspective on the world—i.e., one's functional goods and ills—to be reasons for and against acting in particular ways.
4. Non-rational creatures also have functional goods and ills that show up in their evaluative perspective on the world.
5. The very same basis for something's being a reason to act in the rational case—i.e., it is being good-for or bad-for the agent—is also present in the animal case.
6. Therefore, if one takes a functional good as a reason to treat oneself or another rational agent in a specific way, then one is also committed to taking that good as a reason to treat an animal in a specific way.

There are different ways one might object to Korsgaard's argument, so understood.⁸ But even if we accept the above argument as is, it is fair to ask whether the conclusion avoids the original worry generated by Kant's ethical theory—viz. that it cannot properly accommodate animals as direct objects of moral concern. Has Korsgaard's approach avoided this problem? I'm not convinced it has.

For Korsgaard, as we have seen, there is no intrinsic value possessed by any being as such. Value is instead “tethered” to the evaluative perspective of the conscious agent. Korsgaard further holds that what makes whatever shows up in the evaluative perspective of a creature—its functional goods and ills—into reasons for believing or acting in particular ways is that the creature be able to reflectively endorse such goods as reasons. But what this means is the fact that a non-reflective creature has a perspective in which things show up as good-for or bad-for the creature is, in and of itself, no reason for treating that creature one way or another (even for the creature in question!). Reasons, and thus the currency of moral evaluation (at least according to the Kantian framework), only enter the picture by way of the commitments of reflective creatures like us. It is true that Korsgaard's alternative interpretation of Kant's position allows her to avoid a certain kind of indirectness in our duties or obligations—on her view we can have direct duties to animals to treat them certain ways. But this directness of duty itself depends on something about us and not other animals—viz. that we are creatures capable of self-conscious reflection even if they are not. Hence, there still seems to be a kind of objectionable indirectness in the view.

For example, on this view, what is wrong in the treatment of factory-farmed animals is that it is incompatible with rationally endorsing “the natural tendency of conscious living beings, of creatures, to pursue their own good as if it were good absolutely” (p. 148). The wrongness of the act (i.e., the sense in which industrial treatment of animals fails to respect what reasons we have for treating animals appropriately) thus still depends on us rather than on the animals wronged. Hence, though Korsgaard may indeed have found a way to generate direct duties to animals, she never resolves what one might have thought was driving the original worry about Kant's ethical theory in the first place—viz. that it inappropriately takes our reasons for treating animals in a way that respects their good as grounded in facts about us, as rational beings, rather than in facts about the animals themselves. Perhaps here we have come to the limits of what is possible on a Kantian approach.

These worries aside, *Fellow Creatures* is an excellent book that provides a rewarding take on many of the central issues regarding our moral relationship to other animals. Though the book is worth reading on its own merits, Korsgaard's characteristically engaging style also makes the book well suited for both undergraduate and graduate teaching in ethics, including the teaching of topics that are not immediately related to the issue of animal welfare (e.g., the nature of rationality, animal minds, the value and disvalue of pleasure and pain). Moreover, her discussion provides a decidedly non-consequentialist and non-speciesist view of what we owe to others, and thus of the moral community as a genuine fellowship of creatures, one that extends widely to other living beings, and not simply to those capable of recognizing themselves as such.

Colin McLear

University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Quotations from Kant's work are from the *Akademie Ausgabe*, with works cited by volume and page.
- ² See, for example, Broadie and Pybus (1974), Coetzee (1999), O'Hagan (2009), and Timmermann (2005); compare Denis (2000).
- ³ Material drawn on includes her similarly titled 2004 Tanner lectures, her 2009 book *Self-Constitution*, and a 2011 essay for the *Oxford Handbook of Animal Ethics*, "Interacting with Animals."
- ⁴ All references in parenthesis will be, unless otherwise noted, to Korsgaard (2018).
- ⁵ See Carruthers (2014) for this way of drawing the distinction. For extensive defense of the position that executive control is both independent of metarepresentation and possessed by a wide variety of non-human animals, see Proust (2013).
- ⁶ For discussion of epistemic feelings, see Arango-Muñoz (2014).
- ⁷ See the overview in Beran (2019), Beran (2015), and the articles in Beran, Brandl, Perner, and Proust (2012); see also Foote and Crystal (2007), Shea et al. (2014), and Smith, Couchman, and Beran (2014). The conclusion that at least some animals exhibit executive control in ways relevant to rational cognition and inference is extensively discussed and defended by Buckner (2019), to which my discussion here is indebted.
- ⁸ See, for example, O'Hagan (2009).

REFERENCES

- Arango-Muñoz, S. (2014). The nature of epistemic feelings. *Philosophical Psychology*, 27(2), 193–211. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2012.732002>
- Beran, M. J. (2015). Chimpanzee cognitive control. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 24(5), 352–357. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721415593897>
- Beran, M. (2019). Animal metacognition: A decade of progress, problems, and the development of new prospects. *Animal Behavior and Cognition*, 6(4), 223–229. <https://doi.org/10.26451/abc.06.04.01.2019>
- Beran, M. J., Brandl, J., Perner, J., & Proust, J. (Eds.). (2012). *Foundations of metacognition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Broadie, A., & Pybus, E. M. (1974). Kant's treatment of animals. *Philosophy*, 49(190), 375–383. <https://doi.org/10.2307/27744866>
- Buckner, C. (2019). Rational inference: The lowest bounds. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 98(3), 697–724. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12455>
- Carruthers, P. (2014). Two concepts of metacognition. *Journal of Comparative Psychology*, 128(2), 138–139; discussion 140. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0033877>
- Coetzee, J. M. (1999). In A. Gutmann (Ed.), *The lives of animals*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Denis, L. (2000). Kant's conception of duties regarding animals: Reconstruction and reconsideration. *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 17(4), 405–423. <https://doi.org/10.2307/27744866>
- Foote, A. L., & Crystal, J. D. (2007). Metacognition in the rat. *Current Biology*, 17(6), 551–555. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2007.01.061>
- Korsgaard, C. M. (2004). Fellow creatures: Kantian ethics and our duties to animals. *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, 25, 26.
- Korsgaard, C. M. (2009). *Self-constitution: Agency, identity, and integrity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Korsgaard, C. M. (2011). Interacting with animals: A Kantian account. In T. L. Beauchamp & R. G. Frey (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of animal ethics* (pp. 91–118). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Korsgaard, C. M. (2018). *Fellow creatures*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- O'Hagan, E. (2009). Animals, agency, and obligation in Kantian ethics. *Social Theory and Practice*, 35(4), 531–554. https://www.pdcnet.org/soctheorpract/content/soctheorpract_2009_0035_0004_0531_0554
- Proust, J. (2013). *The philosophy of metacognition: Mental agency and self-awareness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Shea, N., Boldt, A., Bang, D., Yeung, N., Heyes, C., & Frith, C. D. (2014). Supra-personal cognitive control and metacognition. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 18(4), 186–193. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2014.01.006>
- Smith, J. D., Couchman, J. J., & Beran, M. J. (2014). Animal metacognition: A tale of two comparative psychologies. *Journal of Comparative Psychology*, 128(2), 115–131. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0033105>
- Timmermann, J. (2005). When the tail wags the dog: Animal welfare and indirect duty in Kantian ethics. *Kantian Review*, 10, 128–149. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1369415400002168>