

A Kantian Response to Futility Worries?
Penultimate Draft
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In Ch. XX, we saw that there is a serious question whether act utilitarians cannot justifiably move from the claim that we, collectively, shouldn't purchase or consume meat to the claim that we, individually, shouldn't purchase or consume meat. Having observed this, it is natural to wonder whether similar kinds of problems are going to arise for other sorts of ethical theories. For instance, ethicists in the Kantian tradition might seem well-situated to respond to this sort of worry and to justify this transition from the way that we ought, collectively, to act to the way we ought, individually, to act. The purpose of this chapter will be to explore whether this is really the case.

One way of putting the basic Kantian suggestion is as follows: one should act only in such a way that one could coherently will that everyone else act in this same manner in relevantly similar situations.¹ Suppose, therefore, that we want to know whether we should purchase or consume meat. If we were all to purchase or consume meat, the Kantian will reason, then many, many animals will have to be killed in order to feed us. Supposing that we can provide some further reason for thinking that we, together, would be acting badly or irrationally if we were to kill many, many animals merely in order to feed ourselves, then we will have reason to think that we, collectively, should refrain from purchasing and eating meat. Since it would prove impossible to coherently will that everyone purchase or consume meat, the idea goes, we should refrain from purchasing or consuming meat ourselves. Prima facie then, it looks like the Kantian is in a significantly better position than the act utilitarian to offer a full-throated defense of vegetarianism.

We need, therefore, first to ask whether there are good Kantian reasons for thinking that it is bad or somehow incoherent for us, collectively, to kill numerous non-human animals in order to feed ourselves. Kant himself is often taken to think that the only sort of value that non-human animals can obtain is as *mere means*. That is, non-human animals are valuable only in relation to rational creatures like human beings, who are valuable in and of themselves. Here is how Kant puts the point:

Beings the existence of which rests not on our will but on nature, if they are beings without reason, still 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, that is, as something that may not be used merely as a means.²

It is largely due to reasoning like this that the Kantian strain of ethical theory was long thought to be hostile to vegetarianism.

Recently, however, Christine Korsgaard has claimed both that Kant himself has been misunderstood to some degree and that there is absolutely nothing at odds between Kantian ethical theory and vegetarianism. In particular, Korsgaard has argued that respecting each other ineliminably requires respecting not just each other's rational selves, but also our animal selves. Korsgaard's basic idea seems to be that part of what it is for us to respect each other is for us to respect each other in ways that have little or nothing to do with each other's rationality.

So, for instance, we should not cause each other to suffer; to do so would be to evince a fundamental lack of respect for each other. But, while causing each other to suffer might well impair the other's rationality, the harm done seems to be fundamentally against the other's animal self, which incurs some basic natural harm when it is caused to suffer. Putting the point slightly differently, we can coherently imagine some sub-group of human beings who have been trained to exhibit equal rationality whether or not they are suffering physical pain. Still, causing these beings to physically suffer would be to do them harm, and thus to exhibit extreme disrespect for them. If that's right, then part of what it is to respect each other as human beings is to respect each other in ways that are not essentially tied to our rationality, in ways that we can respect or disrespect animals as well as human beings.³

Korsgaard's argument can then be completed as follows: in failing to respect each other's animal selves, we are failing to respect each other. We are disrespecting part of what makes us valuable. In failing to respect the animal selves of non-human animals, then, we likewise evince a lack of respect for each other, since we treat the non-rational part of us—which still helps to make human beings valuable—as though it were of little or no value. Since we cannot rationally will that we all disrespect each other, we likewise cannot rationally will that we all disrespect non-human animals. To treat non-human animals as though they lacked value via their animal selves *just is* to treat the animal self as lacking in value—which is thus, in turn, to treat human beings as though they lacked a certain sort of value which they in fact possess.⁴

It seems at least plausible, therefore, that Kantian ethicists can offer a reasonable explanation for why it is that we, collectively, shouldn't purchase and eat animals. To purchase and eat animals is to disrespect their animal selves—and thus to disrespect our own animal selves. What though of what we should do not collectively, but individually, on the Kantian picture?

The worry here is basically this: supposing that one knows a sufficient amount about the way that animals are treated in one's society—enough to know that one's purchasing some meat is overwhelmingly unlikely to make any difference—is it still reasonable to think that one might be able to consume and eat meat *without* evincing disrespect for animals? After all, one knows, among other things, that: if I don't eat this meat, then it is overwhelmingly likely to go to waste. What could be more disrespectful towards an animal than not only to cause it to suffer and die prematurely, but then to let its meat go to waste?

Sometimes, it seems to be ethically important not just what we physically do, but also how we think about what we're doing. Many philosophers in fact think of actions as being partly individuated by the mental states standing behind them. One might, for instance, perform the very same set of bodily actions when *accidentally* tripping as opposed to *intentionally* tripping. Nonetheless, these look like very different sorts of actions. Or consider an example with more ethical weight: suppose that you are an air force general deciding what to bomb. You might (i) choose to bomb a factory located right next to a school because you think that factory is of great strategic value, or (ii) choose to bomb the factory *because* it is located right next to a school, and you expect that the loss of their children's lives will help to demoralize the enemy. In both cases, one gives the same order and expects the same relevant results: a destroyed factory and a number of dead children. Many people, however, think that, even if (i) is objectionable, it is a decidedly better thing to do than (ii).

Now back to our main topic. Suppose that one knows a good amount about how how overwhelmingly unlikely it is that one is going to affect any animals' lives by refraining from

purchasing or eating meat. Can one now intend: to purchase or consume meat *so as to minimize meat waste*? And, supposing that one can form such an intention, would acting on that intention exhibit disrespect for animals' selves in the same way that purchasing or consuming meat *because one finds it tasty* more plausibly does?

Kantians like Korsgaard have hardly addressed this question, so we can only speculate as to how they might be tempted to respond. One possibility would be for the Kantian to claim that, in a modern capitalist society like ours, it is simply understood that, in purchasing a good, one is implicitly endorsing the way in which that very good is produced. Certainly, many will, on reflection, deny that they endorse the horrid labor conditions that went into producing their clothing or sneakers. Perhaps they will claim that they weren't even aware of these conditions. But such protestations are in bad faith, the Kantian might claim; even if they weren't aware of the conditions under which their clothing was made, these individuals *ought to have known*. Sometimes it is appropriate to hold individuals accountable for what they ought to have known, not just what they happened to know.⁵ When it comes to purchasing and consuming meat, ignorance will be no excuse and nor will a surfeit of knowledge. Knowing that one will not make a difference is simply not enough to exculpate oneself from endorsing the way treat animals when one chooses to either purchase or consume meat.

Still, a worry remains I think. Suppose that one were living in a society where, unlike our own, one's purchasing choices were viewed as no reflection at all of what one implicitly endorses. Chicken purchases in the Chicken Demon scenario considered in ch. XX might constitute one example of this. Or consider a society in which no one would even think of accusing someone else of hypocrisy were that other to wear a fur coat to a rally against the continued production of fur. A society like this is likely to seem strange to us, I grant, but it is hardly inconceivable. The worry, however is this: in this sort of society, it is not at all clear that one would be exhibiting any disrespect for the animal selves of non-human animals if one were to purchase or consume meat *so as to minimize meat waste*. If that is correct, then the Kantian ethicist, like the act consequentialist, proves to be in no position to offer us an argument for vegetarianism *per se*. Rather, it turns out that the Kantian ethicist can only offer us a contingent argument for vegetarianism, one that depends for its validity on certain things in the world turning out to be the case. Like the act utilitarian then, it looks like it is going to be either difficult or impossible for the Kantian to endorse a maxim like the following: do not, under any normal circumstances, purchase or eat animals. Rather, the best she will be able to do is: do not, under normal circumstances in a society relevantly similar to our own, purchase or eat animals. For many of us, this apparent failure of generality is more than a tad disappointing.⁶

Notes

¹ See Ch. XX for more on the Kantian categorical imperative.

² Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996; 4: 428, p. 36.

³ Korsgaard, C. "Interacting with Animals: A Kantian Account," in *The Oxford Handbook of Animal Ethics*, ed. T. Beauchamp and R. G. Frey, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011; pp. 108-9.

⁴ Korsgaard, C. 2011; p. 109.

⁵ Child negligence laws are a good example of this. If one were to starve one's child to death, it is no excuse to claim—even truthfully—that one was somehow unaware that children need food to survive. Rather, the fact that one *ought to have known* this will turn out to be enough.

⁶ Similar issues are explored with respect to deontological theories in general, not just Kantian ones, in M. Budolfson, "The Inefficacy Objection to Deontology," manuscript, Princeton University.