

Our Relationships with Animals



For my creaturely friends, Nina, Lily, Bella, Olivia, Peck-Peck, Pudding....and St Francis of Assisi

I cannot identify an exact moment when I began to think differently about animals. It was a gradual process, marked by several relationships with the domestic and ‘wild’ fraternity, where I came to appreciate the tie between us, and the intuitive sense I developed of *their* capacity for self-awareness, for identity. In addition, cases of animal abuse for the purposes of profit – the most glaring case being the systemic abuse of live-sheep exports to the Middle East – stopped me in my tracks, and made me think again, and again and again. Gradually, I came to the conclusion that animals do not exist solely for us, but rather, have innate value; that animals are more than a means to our ends, but are in fact, ends in themselves.

Sensitive to the charge that I may be becoming something suspiciously proximate to an animal liberationist – something that I admit did not sit well with me, although I am unsure as to exactly why – I decided that I owed myself, but more importantly, the animals around me, some sort of cerebral effort in thinking this through. So, here goes.

In the west, there are two broad approaches to ethics: the so called, utilitarians – a clearer term being consequentialists – who think about ethics in terms of results, and then the deontologists (*deon* - duty), who think about ethics in terms of duty. Years ago, I read the first work to come out on animal ethics by the Australian ethicist, Peter Singer. Since then, vegetarianism and veganism, have increased, and there has been an improvement in the protection of animals from cruel treatment in factory farms and scientific research, both through legislation and pressure upon industries. But even so, most people are not vegetarian, and in the U.S. alone, 9.5 billion animals die annually in food production. Most people who eat meat, when given to think about it, console themselves in the belief that the cruelties of factory farming are being ameliorated, and if that is done, then there is nothing wrong with painlessly killing animals for food.

To this debate, Christine M. Korsgaard, a distinguished philosopher from Harvard, has made her offering, through the publication, *Fellow Creatures: Our Obligations to the Other Animals* (Oxford University Press, 2018). Pretty much unknown to the broad public, Korsgaard has written some significant work during her academic career, and as a scholar in the school of duty or obligation, she asks, some compelling questions. So, what does Korsgaard have to say about animals and humans, about our duty to animals?

The first point to make, is that Korsgaard’s approach is very different from that of Singer. For Singer, the consequentialist, what makes actions right or wrong, is the sum total of happiness in the world, through causing pleasure or pain, gratification or suffering. For this line of thought, what matters is less the affect upon an individual human or animal as such, but rather the impersonal balance of good and bad experiences that morality wants us to make as positive as possible. In other words, what stands front and centre, is less the creature and more the balance between the good and bad. Accordingly, if you killed an animal painlessly and replaced it with another, whose experiences were as pleasant as the first animal would have had, had it not been killed, the total balance, or calculus of happiness would not be affected, and you would have done nothing wrong.

Korsgaard rejects this sort of idea of the objective calculation of pleasure or pain. For her, there is no such thing as something just being good or bad, period. Rather she speaks of value as always “tethered”, meaning that things are good or bad *for* someone, for some person, for some animal: your pleasure is good for you, my pain is bad for me. The only possible way, she adds, that something can be absolutely good, is if it were good for everyone.

Second, Korsgaard, suggests that “life itself is good for almost any animal that is in reasonably good shape”. While humans enjoy a consciousness of their lives as extended in time through long-term memory and their capacity to plan for the future, other animals are also quite capable of remembering and learning, with temporally extended conscious lives, not simply successions of momentary experiences. What happens to an animal at a given time, changes its point of view at later times, so that it acquires “an ongoing character that makes it a more unified self as it matures. It is of course a matter of degree, but the lives of most mammals and birds, have this kind of unity, so we can think of them as having good or bad lives, not just good or bad experiences. The big difference of course, Korsgaard reminds us, is that we humans are self-conscious in a way that they are not. This she tells us is the distinction between rational and instinctive lives. Unlike the other animals, we act, not just on the basis of our present perceptions, desires and inclinations, but can step back from immediate appearances and deny endorsement of them, if we judge that they do not provide adequate justification for action. It is precisely this sort of rational self-assessment that has given rise to both science and morality. Other animals, by contrast appear not to evaluate their own beliefs and motives before acting on them.

But does this difference mean that human lives are more important or valuable than those of animals? In keeping with her observation about tethered value, her question is, “more important or valuable to whom”? Your life is more valuable to you, than it is to a rabbit, but the rabbit’s life is more valuable to the rabbit, than it is to you. In response to this, if you were to protest that the rabbit’s life is not as important to the rabbit, as yours is to you, Korsgaard responds that even though you have a conception of your life as a whole, that the rabbit lacks, this in itself does not show that your life is more valuable: “For even if the rabbit’s life is not as important to her, as yours is to you, nevertheless, for her it contains absolutely everything of value, all that can be good or bad for her, except possibly the lives of her offspring. The end of her life is the end of all value and goodness”.

Third, Korsgaard, a thinker in the tradition of Emmanuel Kant (1724-1804) – who has shaped the way we think more than we moderns understand – returns to her intellectual mentor, in her consideration of the way we humans are wired. Kant’s insight, with which Korsgaard agrees, is that we ourselves as rational beings, are the source of the requirements of our morality. In other words, because we are conscious of the motives for our actions, we cannot act without actually endorsing those motives, as in some way or another, an adequate justification for what we propose to do. It is in this way, that we assign absolute value to our ends. But, clearly – and this is the point – our own personal ends and actions, can never enjoy absolute value, simply because they are limited by everyone else’s. There is not just one person in the moral community – me – but thousands, millions of others who rub up against me.

So, what does this mean for the way we think about other animals, the way we act toward them? Kant, back in his time-zone, took the view that because other animals are not rational creatures, they can never be a part of the moral community: they have no duties as such, and we have no duties to them. Korsgaard disagrees. She distinguishes two ways in which one can be a member of the moral community: active and passive. The active sense, means I am one in the community of reciprocal lawgivers, obligated as such, to obey the moral law, we collectively establish. To be a member of the moral community in a passive sense, on the other hand, is to be one of those to whom duties are owed, those whom the moral community must treat as an end in themselves, not just a means. In short, the moral law that we rational beings give to ourselves, gives us duties of concern for other, non-rational beings: it does not end just with us. But beyond this, the very distinction between rational and non-rational beings, Korsgaard points out, is a bit of a furphy. The reality is always more nuanced. Certainly, we humans enjoy rationality, but the distinction between us can be and is exaggerated. Like other animals, a large part of us is about the *animate*: food, sex, comfort, freedom from

pain and fear, are all things that are good for us insofar as we *are* animals; just like our ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’, as St Francis of Assisi, might put it.

I find Korsgaard persuasive in her distinction about active and passive members of the moral community and the insight that we animals – for that is what and who we are – have much more in common: than we like to acknowledge. It goes a long way in countering the bedrock barbarous idea predominant in contemporary cultures and market economies, that animals are no more than commodities to be raised, exchanged and killed in massive numbers for profit and our gastronomical delight.

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