

What We Owe a Rabbit

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Fellow Creatures: Our Obligations to the Other Animals

by Christine M. Korsgaard

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Christine Korsgaard is a distinguished philosopher who has taught at Harvard for most of her career. Though not known to the general public, she is eminent within the field for her penetrating and analytically dense writings on ethical theory and her critical interpretations of the works of Immanuel Kant. Now, for the first time, she has written a book about a question that anyone can understand. *Fellow Creatures: Our Obligations to the Other Animals* is a blend of moral passion and rigorous theoretical argument. Though it is often difficult—not because of any lack of clarity in the writing but because of the intrinsic complexity of the issues—this book provides the opportunity for a wider audience to see how philosophical reflection can enrich the response to a problem that everyone should be concerned about.



Walton Ford/Kasmin Gallery

Walton Ford: *Loss of the Lisbon Rhinoceros*, 2008. For more on Ford's work, see Lucy Jakub's 'Walton Ford: Twenty-First-Century Naturalist' on the NYR Daily ([nybooks.com/ford-daily](https://www.nybooks.com/ford-daily)).

Since the publication of Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* in 1975, there has been a notable increase in vegetarianism or veganism as a personal choice by individuals, and in the protection of animals from cruel treatment in factory farms and scientific research, both through law and through public pressure on businesses and institutions. Yet most people are not vegetarians: approximately 9.5 billion animals die annually in food production in the United States, and the carnivores who think about it tend to console themselves with the belief that the cruelties of factory farming are being ameliorated, and that if this is done, there is nothing wrong with killing animals painlessly for food. Korsgaard firmly rejects this outlook, not just because it ignores the scale of suffering still imposed on farmed animals, but because it depends on a false contrast between the values of human and animal lives, according to which killing a human is wrong in a way that killing an animal is not.

Korsgaard deploys a complex account of morality to deal with this and many other questions. What makes the book especially interesting is the contrast between her approach and Singer's. She writes, and Singer would certainly agree, that "the way human beings now treat the other animals is a moral atrocity of enormous proportions." But beneath this agreement lie

profound differences. Singer is a utilitarian and Korsgaard is a Kantian, and the deep division in contemporary ethical theory between these two conceptions of morality marks their different accounts of why we should radically change our treatment of animals. (Equally interesting is Korsgaard's sharp divergence from Kant's own implausible views on the subject. As we shall see, she argues persuasively that Kant's general theory of the foundations of morality supports conclusions for this case completely different from what he supposed.)

ADVERTISING

Utilitarianism is the view that what makes actions right or wrong is their tendency to promote or diminish the total amount of happiness in the world, by causing pleasure or pain, gratification or suffering. Such experiences are taken to be good or bad absolutely, and not just for the being who undergoes them. The inclusion of nonhuman animals in the scope of moral concern is straightforward: the pleasure or pain of any conscious being is part of the impersonal balance of good and bad experiences that morality tells us to make as positive as possible.

But the existence or survival of such creatures matters only because they are vessels for the occurrence of good experiences. According to utilitarianism, if you kill an animal painlessly and replace it with another whose experiences are just as pleasant as those the first animal would have had if it had not been killed, the total balance of happiness is not affected, and you have done nothing wrong. Even in the case of humans, what makes killing them wrong is not the mere ending of their lives but the distress the prospect of death causes them because of their strong conscious sense of their own future existence, as well as the emotional pain their deaths cause to other humans connected with them.

Korsgaard, in contrast, denies that we can build morality on a foundation of the absolute value of anything, including pleasure and pain. She holds that there is no such thing as absolute or impersonal value in the sense proposed by utilitarianism—something being just good or bad, period. All value, she says, is “tethered.” Things are good or bad *for* some person or animal: your pleasure is “good-for” you, my pain is “bad-for” me. Korsgaard says that the only sense in which something could be absolutely good is if it were “good-for” everyone. In the end she will maintain that the lives and happiness of all conscious creatures *are* absolutely good in this sense, but she reaches this conclusion only by a complex ethical argument; it is not an axiom from which morality begins, as in utilitarianism.

Before getting to that argument, however, let us consider how she understands the value of life for humans and for the other animals. Korsgaard believes that “life itself is a good for almost any animal who is in reasonably good shape.” Humans, with their capacity for language, historical record-keeping, long-term memory, and planning for the future, have a strong consciousness of their lives as extended in time. But because the other animals are capable of learning and remembering, we know that they also have temporally extended conscious lives, not just successions of momentary experiences; what happens to an animal at one time changes its point of view at later times, so that it acquires “an ongoing character that makes it a more unified self over time.” It is a matter of degree, but the lives of most mammals and birds, at least, 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 between us and the other animals is that we are self-conscious in a way they are not. Korsgaard marks this as the distinction between instinctive and rational lives. Unlike the other animals, we act not just on the basis of our present perceptions, desires, and inclinations. We can step back from the immediate appearances and withhold endorsement from them as grounds for belief or action if we judge that they do not provide adequate justifying reasons—as when we discount a visual impression as an optical illusion or a negative evaluation as the product of jealousy. This type of rational self-assessment has given rise to both science and morality. Animals, by contrast, as far as we know, do not evaluate their own beliefs and motives before acting on them.

So the lives of humans and of other animals are very different. But does that mean that human lives are more important or more valuable than the lives of animals? Korsgaard asks, in keeping with her skepticism about untethered absolute value, “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. And if you protest that the rabbit’s life is not as important to the rabbit as your life is to you, Korsgaard’s response is that even though you have a conception of your life as a whole that the rabbit lacks, this 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 ever 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 for her. So there is something imponderable about these comparisons.

Korsgaard denies that the human capacity to appreciate literature, music, and science makes human lives more valuable. She observes that in comparing humans with one another, most of us do not think that one individual is more valuable simply because more good things happen in his or her life, and she holds that we should take the same view when comparing humans with other animals. There are just different individuals, and the life of each of them is of ultimate value to the creature itself.

But if we start from a conception of value according to which what is good or bad is always what is good or bad for particular individuals, and nothing is good or bad in itself, it is not clear where we can find a basis for morality and for our obligations to others. What reason do we have to care about anything but what is good or bad for ourselves, or for a limited group

of others who matter to us because of some connection or identification? The history of moral philosophy offers various answers to this question, most of which I will not discuss. Korsgaard endorses the one provided by Kant.

Kant held that we ourselves are the source of the requirements of morality, by virtue of our status as rational beings. As Korsgaard puts it:

Because of the way in which we are conscious of the motives for our actions, we cannot act without endorsing those motives as adequate to justify what we propose to do. But this is just what it means to value something—to endorse our natural motives for wanting it or caring about it, and to see them as good reasons. So as rational beings, we cannot act without setting some sort of value on the ends of our actions.

Most important, Kant believes that the value we cannot help assigning to our ends is absolute value—value from everyone's point of view. This is a condition of our ability to endorse our actions from an external point of view toward ourselves, which is the essence of rationality. And it has a momentous consequence:

Your right to confer absolute value on *your* ends and actions is limited by everyone else's (as Kant thinks of it, every other rational being's) right to confer absolute value on *her* ends and actions in exactly the same way. So in order to count as a genuinely rational choice, the principle on which you act must be acceptable from anyone's (any rational being's) point of view—it must be consistent with the standing of others as ends in themselves.

This gives us Kant's fundamental principle of morality¹ in two of its familiar formulations: act in such a way that you can will your principle as universal law; and treat all rational beings as ends and never merely as means. To treat others as ends in themselves is to regard the achievement of their goals or ends as good in itself, and not just for them. The practical upshot is that each of us has a strong reason to pursue our own ends in a way that does not interfere with the pursuit by others of their ends, and some reason to help them if they need help.

But what does this imply about animals? In Kant's view, we impose the moral law on ourselves: it applies to us because of our rational nature. The other animals, because they are not rational, cannot engage in this kind of self-legislation. Kant concluded that they are not part of the moral community; they have no duties and we have no duties toward them.²

It is here that Korsgaard parts company with him. She distinguishes two senses in which someone can be a member of the moral community, an active and a passive sense. To be a member in the active sense is to be one of the community of reciprocal lawgivers who is obligated to obey the moral law. To be a member in the passive sense is to be one of those to whom duties are owed, who must be treated as an end. Kant believed that these two senses coincide, but Korsgaard says this is a mistake. The moral law that we rational beings give to ourselves can give us duties of concern for other, nonrational beings who are not themselves bound by the moral law—duties to treat them as ends in themselves:

There is no reason to think that because it is only autonomous rational beings who must

make the normative presupposition that we are ends in ourselves, the normative presupposition is only *about* autonomous rational beings. And in fact it seems arbitrary, because of course we also value ourselves as animate beings. This becomes especially clear when we reflect on the fact that many of the things that we take to be good-for us are not good for us in our capacity as autonomous rational beings. Food, sex, comfort, freedom from pain and fear, are all things that are good for us insofar as we are animals.



I find this argument for a revision of Kant's position completely convincing. Korsgaard sums up:

On a Kantian conception, what is special about human beings is not that we are the universe's darlings, whose fate is absolutely more important than the fates of the other creatures who like us experience their own existence. It is exactly the opposite: What is special about us is the empathy that enables us to grasp that other creatures are important to themselves in just the way we are important to ourselves, and the reason that enables us to draw the conclusion that follows: that every animal must be regarded as an end in herself, whose fate matters, and matters absolutely, if anything matters at all.

Having secured the admission of the other animals to the Kantian moral community as passive members, Korsgaard turns to a further problem: "Nature," she says, "is recalcitrant to moral standards." Not only are the other animals not subject to the moral law; their interests are irreconcilably opposed in a way that makes impossible the kind of moral harmony that we can aspire to as an ideal for the human world. What is good for the lion is necessarily bad for the antelope, and even if we recognize our own duty to treat both of them as ends in themselves, that doesn't provide a moral resolution of the conflict.

Korsgaard concludes her book with discussion of responses to this problem by those who write about animal ethics, some of which outsiders to the field may find bizarre. One proposal is to eliminate predation by arranging the gradual extinction of predator species. Other defenders of the rights of animals believe we should preserve their habitats and otherwise leave them alone entirely, so that all animals are wild.

Korsgaard rejects both these extremes. She believes we obviously shouldn't kill or exploit animals for food, but we have no obligation to take up the position of a creator by bringing it about that the world is populated by creatures who are better off than the ones who would otherwise be there. She also believes that it's all right to keep animals as pets, provided the society ensures that they are not abused. (Her book is dedicated, by name, to the five cats she has lived with over the past thirty-five years.)

Korsgaard also notes the curious fact that many people are much more concerned with the preservation of species from extinction than they are with the welfare of individual animals, and she thinks this makes no moral sense. Species don't have a point of view, and their survival doesn't have value for them:

If you accept the idea that everything that is good must be good for someone, for some creature, then you must deny that it makes sense to say that species or ecosystems have intrinsic value. According to the view I have been advocating, it is plain that the health of an ecosystem matters because it matters to the creatures who depend upon it, and the extinction of a species matters when it threatens the biodiversity and so the health of the ecosystem and with it the welfare of its members.

Her claim is that species have no value in themselves. They may have value for individuals, but only individuals have value in themselves. (This leaves aside aesthetic value, which I suspect plays a part in many people's attachment to species as such.)

Korsgaard's position is undeniably powerful, and if it prevailed it would be one of the largest moral transformations in the history of humanity. Let me close by describing two possible grounds of resistance to it. They would also apply to the utilitarian argument for somewhat different but equally radical conclusions about how we should treat animals.

The first ground would be a rejection of the crucial idea of absolute value, either as a moral starting point or as the conclusion of a Kantian moral argument. According to this view, all we have to work with in justifying moral requirements are the interests, motives, or feelings of the individuals to whom they are supposed to apply, rather than some transcendent or impersonal point of view. This does not mean moral principles can't be justified. If, for example, it is in the collective interest of members of a human community to govern their interactions by certain rules that permit peaceful coexistence and cooperation, that would provide a basis for morality that depends only on what is good-for individuals, and not what is good absolutely. And if there is a shared human sentiment of empathy toward the other animals, or some of them, then that would support a requirement of humane treatment as part of morality, though its content would depend on the strength and scope of the sentiment, not on the absolute badness of animal suffering.

Korsgaard acknowledges this type of position in her discussion of reciprocity as a basis for morality. She points out that it has an implication that most people would find unacceptable: namely that if we encountered rational beings so powerful that they had nothing to fear from us, and who didn't feel any sympathy for us, they could kill or enslave or experiment on us without doing anything wrong. But those who deny that anything has absolute value may be willing to accept that consequence.

The second possible ground of resistance is also mentioned by Korsgaard. One might hold that although humans are not more important or more valuable than other animals, it is morally permissible for us to be partial to our fellow humans and to count their interests more, out of a "sense of solidarity with our own kind." We recognize the moral acceptability of such partiality toward the interests of our own families, for example, and Korsgaard considers the possibility that in situations of life-or-death emergency (rats spreading plague)

we would be morally justified in putting the interests of our own species first, to lethal effect. But even if this is granted, it is a far cry from endorsing a degree of partiality for the human species that allows the lives of other animals to be routinely sacrificed to the pleasures of the table. In effect, that seems to be the principle to which most carnivores adhere, though they are probably helped by the assumption that Korsgaard has gone to great lengths to combat: that the loss of life is not really so bad for an animal.

Moral disagreement is a constant feature of the human condition, as we struggle to find the right way to live. Whether we should kill animals for food is one of the deepest disagreements of our time; but we should not be surprised if the issue is rendered moot within the next few decades, when cultured meat (also called clean meat, synthetic meat, or *in vitro* meat) becomes less expensive to produce than meat from slaughtered animals, and equally palatable. When that happens, I suspect that our present practices, being no longer gastronomically necessary, will suddenly become morally unimaginable.

1 It is called “the categorical imperative” for reasons that need not detain us. ↩

2 Though Kant says we may treat animals purely as means to our ends, he qualifies this by adding that we have a duty *to ourselves* not to treat them cruelly, since cruelty to animals results in a callousness that may affect the treatment of our fellow humans. Korsgaard suggests plausibly that this is “a product of desperation” on Kant’s part, “an attempt to explain the everyday intuition that we really *do* have at least some obligation to be kind to animals.” ↩