

Christine Korsgaard

Fellow Creatures: Our Obligations to the Other Animals

New York: Oxford University Press, 2018

ISBN 978-0-19-875385-8 (HB) £19.99. xiii + 252 pp.

Immanuel Kant infamously denies that non-rational entities – a class that includes all non-human animals (hereafter ‘animals’) – have moral standing. He claims that human beings have only indirect duties with regard to animals. Roughly put, on his view we can have moral reasons to treat animals in certain ways, but these reasons depend entirely on duties we owe to ourselves and other human beings. Arguably because of this stance, most animal ethicists have had little use for Kant. Christine Korsgaard’s most recent book, *Fellow Creatures: Our Obligations to the Other Animals*, aims to show that Kant’s moral philosophy provides compelling grounds for recognising direct duties to animals, contrary to what Kant himself and his critics believe.

The book is divided into three parts. The first, ‘Human Beings and the Other Animals’, investigates alleged and actual differences between humans and animals, including the question of whether the former are of greater importance than the latter. Korsgaard argues against the superiority of human beings, not because humans and animals are equal, but rather because the attempted comparison makes (almost) no sense. This is because something can be of importance only if it is important *to* someone. In other words, Korsgaard believes that values relevant to importance are ‘tethered’ to the valuing subjects. It may be that our own lives are more important to us than the lives of animals, but it seems likely that the lives of animals are more important to them than the lives of humans. If, as Korsgaard thinks, there is no perspective-free, ‘untethered’ position from which to make judgments of importance, then it makes little sense to claim that humans are more important than animals.

The book’s second part, ‘Immanuel Kant and the Animals’, explores the prospects for a Kantian approach to animal ethics. I take this to be the core of the work. Korsgaard accepts Kant’s view that rationality plays an important role in morality, but she rejects Kant’s view that only rational beings can be owed direct duties. She provides an interesting account of the former view. Contrary to what many readers of Kant have believed, it is not the case that rationality is some intrinsically valuable *property* that somehow confers moral standing on those entities that happen to possess it. Instead, rationality is a necessary condition for moral obligations to arise in the first place, with rational beings placing one another under obligation by means of practical reason. This is a constructivist and anti-realist view of morality. Readers of Korsgaard’s previous work, especially *The Sources of Normativity*, will be familiar with this idea, although such familiarity is not necessary for following her arguments in *Fellow Creatures*. Although Kant seems to assume that only beings who are subject to obligation can be deserving of moral consideration, Korsgaard plausibly argues that this need not be so. This opens the possibility that humans have direct duties to non-rational entities, such as animals. While Korsgaard does not use this language, the idea is similar to the somewhat common view that animals can be moral patients even if they are not moral agents.

In order to show that humans do in fact owe direct duties to animals, Korsgaard argues that each of us is already committed to the view that what is good for oneself is absolutely good, and we take this to provide reasons for others to respect and even promote our good. Of course, other persons have an equally strong claim to this same type of consideration. It would be arbitrary for one person to take his own good to warrant moral consideration while denying the same for other persons. Korsgaard then points out that animals also possess a good, in the sense that certain things are good *for* them by allowing them to function. Now because human beings are themselves animals, part of what we take to be absolutely good in our own cases are functions that are part of our animal nature. Accordingly, we should recognise that the good of animals is also absolutely good, and therefore animals are owed direct duties. This argument is very similar to one used by Korsgaard in her 2004 Tanner Lecture, 'Fellow Creatures: Kantian Ethics and Our Duties to Animals', although in the earlier case she relied on a notion of a 'natural good' shared by humans and other animals, a term that is not employed in this book.

The most controversial move in the foregoing argument is the claim that endorsing our own good as absolutely good requires doing the same for the good of animals. Why not think, for example, that some animal good is absolutely good only if it belongs to a rational being? Korsgaard suggests that such a move would be arbitrary. Doing so would be similar to claiming that only one's own good is absolutely good, refusing to acknowledge the relevant similarities exhibited by other persons. However, it seems natural for Kantians to say that the animal good of humans is of moral relevance only because that good happens to belong to autonomous, rational beings. It is not clear that drawing this division would be arbitrary.

The book's third and final part, 'Consequences', examines practical implications of Korsgaard's position. Topics include whether it would be a good thing to abolish predation in the wild, the value of species, and the use of animals for food and experimental purposes.

Oddly, the book almost entirely ignores contributions from other philosophers who have written on Kant and animal ethics, such as Matthew Altman, Lara Denis, Patrick Kain, Onora O'Neill, J. Skidmore, Holly Wilson, Allen Wood and myself. This is not merely a failure to acknowledge the relevant work of others. More importantly, these other philosophers defend some positions that are at odds with Korsgaard's own views. It would be interesting to learn what Korsgaard thinks of the claim that Kant's account of indirect duties regarding animals is much more robust than typically thought (Svoboda 2015), or that we should afford animals moral concern because they display 'fragments' of rationality (Wood 1998). Presumably, such engagement would have strengthened the book's central claims by fending off competitors. Instead, the reader is left to speculate why Korsgaard does not favour these other views.

Fellow Creatures may be of somewhat limited interest to some environmental philosophers, because it is almost exclusively concerned with animal ethics. Although Korsgaard acknowledges that her arguments may have broader ecological implications, such as regarding the moral standing of non-animal organisms, the book focuses on moral questions

with respect to animals. This is not a criticism, but it is likely to be relevant information for some readers of this journal.

Despite the mild criticisms I have offered above, *Fellow Creatures* is an interesting, well-argued book. It should be read by any philosopher who works on animal ethics.

TOBY SVOBODA
Fairfield University, Connecticut

REFERENCES

Svoboda, Toby. *Duties Regarding Nature: A Kantian Environmental Ethic*. New York: Routledge, 2015.

Wood, Allen W. 'Kant on duties regarding nonrational nature', *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, vol. 72, no. 1, pp. 189–210.