



Précis of fellow creatures: Our obligations to the other animals

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Précis of *Fellow Creatures: Our Obligations to the Other Animals*

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In *Fellow Creatures: Our Obligations to the Other Animals*, I offer a Kantian account of the grounds of our obligations to non-human animals, as well as some reflections on what those obligations are.

Like most defenders of the moral claims of animals, I consider those claims to be much more extensive than most people do. The philosophical defender of animals faces an odd problem. In other philosophical debates, at least many of them, the opposing sides are fairly well represented in the literature, so that you know what you have to argue against. But this is not true in the case of what has come to be called “animal ethics.” People who think that the way we now treat animals is morally justified do not tend to write about it. So part of my task in Part I, “Human Beings and the Other Animals,” is to identify the grounds of the opposing view and say what I think is wrong with them. In Chapter 1, I raise the question whether people are more important than the other animals—whether what is good-for us just matters more than what is good-for them—and I argue that these claims do not really make sense. This is because goodness and importance are, as I call it, “tethered.” What I mean by that is that everything that is good must be good-for someone, and everything that is important must be important-to someone. There is no point of view from which we can plausibly give a rank ordering of the subjects *for* whom things are good, or *to* whom things are important.

In Chapter 2, I offer a theory of the good which supports this “tethered” conception of value. The theory is derived from Aristotle. Any object is in a functionally good condition when it

is able to perform its function well, and things that promote or help maintain that condition are functionally good-for it. According to the Aristotelian conception of what an organism is, the function of an organism is its own survival and reproduction. Final goods—the ends of action—came into the world when animals evolved, because animals are beings who function in part by taking what is functionally good-for them as the ends of their actions. In response to the worry that the idea that organisms have a function is unscientific, I argue that the function exists from the point of view of the organisms themselves, a point of view that came into existence as the conscious self evolved. The subjects who have a final good are therefore beings with conscious selves. Since a creature's well-functioning is her good and is also essentially the same thing as her life, life itself is the good.

Starting at the end of Chapter 2, and throughout Chapter 3, I lay out an account of what is different about human beings. As rational beings, we humans are aware of the considerations that move us to act, able to evaluate them, and able to modify our conduct in accordance with our evaluations. I trace the way this leads us to form an evaluative conception of ourselves, and to play an active role in our own self-constitution.¹

In Chapter 4, I ask whether it makes any sense to say that human beings are superior to the other animals, or whether our lives are better than theirs, and argue that neither claim makes sense. The usual reason for thinking that human beings are superior to the other animals appeals to the fact that we have a moral nature and they do not. I explain why animal actions are not

¹ I am using “self-constitution” here in the sense that I develop in my book *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity*.

subject to moral standards, and I argue that it does not make sense to evaluate animals according to a standard that does not apply to them at all. The usual reason for thinking that our lives are better than theirs is that we have access to goods that they cannot appreciate—art, music, and scientific understanding, for example. I argue that the good-for a creature is relative to its nature, so that these things are not good-for animals who cannot appreciate them, whose lives are not therefore worse for the want of them.

In Part II, “Kant and the Other Animals,” I turn to what Kant and Kantianism have to say about the treatment of animals. I begin in Chapter 5 by examining an argument commonly deployed against Kant (among others) in the animal ethics literature, the so-called “marginal cases” argument. According to this argument, the claim that moral standing is conferred on us by our rational nature must be false or insincere, since we accord moral standing to many human beings who are not rational—infants, the insane, and so on. Although I don’t believe that only human beings have moral standing, I criticize this argument for the way it conceives the objects we identify as having moral standing. An infant is a being at a certain life stage, not a kind of being. An insane or demented person is a defective being, and a defective being should not be confused with a different kind of being. An object is a functional unity, not a collection of properties, and a defective being is one who, in a fairly clear sense, *should* function in a certain way—in the human case, rationally—but cannot. I then develop an account of the proper object of moral standing as the atemporal subject of a life, and discuss some of the moral implications of that idea.

I then turn to Kant's notorious position that we can have no obligations to the other animals. In Chapter 6, I criticize Kant's view that our duties to animals are "indirect." The indirect duty view has two separable parts: the first part holds although we have duties to be kind to animals, we do not owe these duties to the animals but rather to ourselves; the second holds that the reason we have these duties to ourselves is that cruelty, indifference, and ingratitude to animals promotes cruelty, indifference, and ingratitude to other human beings and so makes us less capable of virtue. I argue that the second part is incoherent. If animals are like human beings in ways that makes them possible objects of cruelty, for example, then the same objections will apply to cruelty to animals as apply to cruelty to human beings.

In Chapter 7, I discuss Kant's most plausible ground for rejecting duties to animals, his view that moral duties to others are generated by the fact that moral laws are the products of reciprocal legislation by autonomous beings, who legislate moral laws for themselves and each other. After explaining the view, I argue that it is insufficient to rule out the possibility that animals, although not participants in this kind of legislation, fall under the protection of our moral laws.

In Chapter 8, I offer a case that animals do fall under the protection of moral laws. In his argument for the Formula of Humanity, Kant argues that a presupposition of rational action is a conception of ourselves as ends-in-ourselves. I argue that this conception has both an active and a passive aspect. The active aspect is a view of ourselves as in a position to legislate for ourselves and others through our choices. The passive aspect is a view of ourselves as creatures whose good is absolutely valuable and worthy of pursuit. The ground of the passive conception is simply

that we are creatures for whom things can be good or bad. That is a condition we share with the other animals, whose good we must therefore treat as absolutely valuable as well.

If this is right, we should accord moral standing to all sentient beings. Since this is also the view of utilitarian defenders of animals, in Chapter 9 I compare and contrast my view to the utilitarian view. There are two main points of contrast. One is that the view of value as tethered does not permit aggregating goods across the boundaries between creatures. The other is that on my view, pleasure is not the good. The good is, rather, a creature's well-functioning. I then explain what role pleasure and pain play in the good. Pleasure is both a kind of perception of the good, guiding a healthy animal to the things that are good for her, and an important part of her good, since feeling pleasure on the right occasions is an essential part of well-functioning.

In Part III, "Consequences," I explore some of the moral implications of my view. In Chapter 10, I discuss what I call "the animal antinomy." Utilitarian defenders of animals think that a commitment to animal welfare requires us to eliminate predation from the natural world, or rather, that it would require it if we knew how to do that. Since predation is main check on the overpopulation of prey species, this would require us to take control of the reproductive lives of wild animals, effectively rendering them domestic. I call this "Creation Ethics" since we would effectively be taking a god-like control over the planet by determining which species exist on it. "Abolitionists," who think that any use of animals for our own purposes is morally wrong, by contrast, think that there should be no domestic animals. So the defenders of animals divide into those who think that a concern for animals should lead us to make them all domestic, and those who think a concern for animals should lead us to leave them all wild. In the rest of Chapter 10, I

offer some tentative and admittedly incomplete arguments against the Creationist stance. The main worry is that we cannot do animals any good by extensively changing their natures, since this just amounts to substituting other animals for them, not to benefitting them. But because part of what is at stake here is a question about duties to groups or to animals conceived as members of groups (“animals” “tigers”), I cannot complete the case until I examine the question of what kind of value a species has and whether a concern for animals gives us reason to preserve the existing species.

I take up those questions in Chapter 11. I argue that it is confused to conflate the good of a species with the good of its members, and that we do not have a reason to preserve species as such. However, we do have a reason to do something close to that, which is to preserve the continuing existence of the communities on which the welfare of individual animals depends. This puts me in a position to complete the argument of Chapter 10. Creation ethics is a form of gentrification, moving the members of one community out so that we can move a more morally tractable community in, in its place. This doesn’t do anyone any good.

In Chapter 12, I return to the animal antinomy, arguing that the impulse to remake nature reflects the fact that it is simply impossible for us to treat all animals in the way that our moral standards require. Nature resists the application of human moral concepts. But we should not take this as an excuse to treat animals with the ruthlessness that we do. I then examine some particular moral questions: whether we should eat animals, make them work, use them in scientific experiments, and keep them as pets. My conclusions—I won’t try to summarize all the arguments here—are that we should not eat animals and that so-called humane farming does

not make eating animals permissible; that we should not use them in scientific experiments; that we should make them work and keep them as pets only if that can be made compatible with their good, and only if we have social institutions that do not leave them wholly at the mercy of individual human beings.

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