

Become a Prospect subscriber today to get ahead of the big issues of our time

HOME > PHILOSOPHY

# The philosophical necessity of animal rights

What could justify humanity's cruel treatment of other creatures? Absolutely nothing

by Christine Korsgaard / July 4, 2018 / Leave a comment



Photo: C3726 Tierschutzreporter/DPA/PA Images

Immanuel Kant's argument that no human being should be used as a mere means to the ends of others has become a part of our moral culture. Speaking informally, you are using a person as a mere means when you are using that person in a way that is contrary to his/her own good and to which he/she could not possibly consent. But every human being, as a rational being, is an "end-in-itself," as Kant put it, and so has an inherent value that forbids such treatment.

But we human beings have not been willing to exercise this kind of restraint or grant this kind of value to the other animals who share the planet with us. Instead, we have eaten them, experimented on them, tested medications on them, kept ourselves warm with their fur and skin and feathers, used them for transport and for heavy work like pulling plows, enlisted them in our wars, employed them to sniff out bombs and drugs and to track the missing, made them fight and race for our amusement, and found joy and comfort in their companionship.

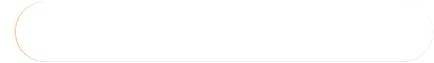
These uses have to a large extent been at the expense of the interests of the animals

Become a Prospect subscriber today to get ahead of the big issues of our time

Prospect

### PROSPECT'S FREE NEWSLETTER

The big ideas that are shaping our world—straight to your inbox. PLUS a free e-book and 7 articles of your choosing on the Prospect website.



Prospect may process your personal information for our legitimate business purposes, to provide you with our newsletter, subscription offers and other relevant information. Click to learn more about these interests and how we use your data. You will be able to object to this processing on the next page and in all our communications.

### THIS MONTH'S MAGAZINE



Will Brexit break the Conservatives? With Europe's centre-right under threat, Prospect asks what the future holds for moderate conservatism. Plus: Julian Baggini, Samira Shackle, and Cal Flynn on learning Gaelic

SUBSCRIBE

themselves, whom we have genetically altered by selective breeding to suit our own purposes, made to work beyond their capacity, subjected to torments in laboratories, and confined to factory farms where they lead short lives in deplorable conditions. Even when we do not *use* the other animals, we have been heedless of their welfare, freely killing them whenever they are a nuisance to us, and depriving them of the habitat on which they and their communities depend for leading their own lives.

What could justify this difference in the way we treat other human beings, or anyway in the way we think we ought to treat them, and the way we treat the other animals?

Immanuel Kant argued that only rational beings have moral value and that we are free to use the other animals however we please. Most people are uncomfortable with that conclusion, because most agree that it is morally wrong to subject an animal to wanton or unnecessary cruelty. Animals, at least many of them, are sentient beings, capable of suffering and joy, with lives and interests of their own, and that should surely give them some standing not to be harmed “unnecessarily.” But if that is so, why don’t we treat them as ends in themselves?

## “Animals are sentient beings, capable of suffering and joy”

Some people think that animals have some value but people just have more. Some people point to the higher capacities of human beings and argue that our lives have more value than the lives of animals. In *Fellow Creatures*, I argue that none of these arguments work. People are not more important than the other animals, are not superior to the other animals, are not even better off than the other animals. This is not exactly because people and animals are “equal” but because there are no grounds for making these comparisons at all. Comparisons of this sort require that the two things being compared are subject to a common standard, which one of them meets to a higher extent than the other. There are no shared standards that ground the comparisons I just mentioned.

Let’s go back to Kant for a moment. His argument was something like this. I am a rational being. When I judge that something is *good for* me and my loved ones, I treat it as something that is *good absolutely*. That is, I decide that I have a good reason to pursue it, as long as I am neither harming nor wronging anyone else. Furthermore, I feel that I may demand that others must respect my pursuit of it, by not interfering with my actions or attempting to manipulate my choices, and possibly even by helping me to achieve my ends when I am in need.

In this way, when we choose to pursue our ends, we make a set of demands on ourselves and others—a set of laws by which we mutually obligate one another to respect and assistance. The interlocking set of laws that rational beings make for one another constitutes us as a moral community, pursuing common ends under common moral laws. Kant called it the “Kingdom of Ends.” We accord one another the standing of “ends-in-ourselves,” as fellow authors of the moral law.

Kant thought that animals should not be treated as ends in themselves, because they cannot be part of this community. Not being autonomous rational beings, they cannot make and respond to laws.

But Kant’s story was incomplete. When I make a choice, I make it a law for myself that I should try to realise a certain end, and a law for others that they should not interfere with me, and possibly even that they should help me. But prior to that decision is another: the decision that something should be treated as *good absolutely*, by myself and others, simply because it is *good for me* or for someone I care about. This is a prior way in which I claim the standing of an “end-in-itself.”

Simply because I am a creature for whom things can be good or bad, I claim that my

### MOST POPULAR

Read

Commented

**The Chequers summit cannot save May’s premiership**

**Would British trade thrive on WTO terms? Absolutely not**

**In praise of (occasional) bad manners**

**Why you should be allowed to “marry” your sister**

**The problem with “multiverse theories”: they’re just not science**

### About this author



#### Christine Korsgaard

Christine Korsgaard is Arthur Kingsley Porter Professor of Philosophy at Harvard. Her new book is *Fellow Creatures: Our Obligations to the Other Animals*

[More by this author](#)

### NEXT PROSPECT EVENTS

**Prospect in conversation with George Magnus**  
London, 2018-10-30

Details

**Prospect Book Club—Oliver Bullough**  
London, 2018-10-15

Details

**Prospect Book Club—Edith Hall**  
London, 2018-09-17

Details

[See more events](#)

### SPONSORED FEATURES

**The UK and next generation space launch technology**

**Prosperity from space**

**Defeating the digital deficit**

**My journey through regeneration**

**How regeneration should be done**

good should be treated as good absolutely. But human beings are not the only creatures for whom things can be good or bad: that is true of all of the animals. There is no reason why what is good for rational beings should be treated as good absolutely while what is good for the other animals may be ignored or discounted. Animals are ends-in-themselves in this sense too.

Kant was right that animals cannot join with us in making laws for one another in the Kingdom of Ends. Our moral relations to people are different from our moral relations to the other animals. But we have reason for treating what is good for an animal as good absolutely. That reason is simply that it is somebody's good, the good of a creature for whom things can be good or bad.

Some of the ways we treat animals differently can be justified on the basis of differences between people and the other animals—differences in what is good or bad for them, and in some cases, differences in how good or bad it can be. But the terrible ways we have in fact treated the other is a moral atrocity of epic and growing proportions, and it is time for a radical shift in the ways we think about and interact with them.

**Christine Korsgaard is Arthur Kingsley Porter Professor of Philosophy at Harvard. Her new book is *Fellow Creatures: Our Obligations to the Other Animals***

Dods Monitoring. ✕

Request a  
**FREE** consultation

Get in touch ➔

---

### Related articles



#### **Ibn Khaldun: the man who invented modern history**

**Sameer Rahim** / April 30, 2018

From Reagan to Zuckerberg, the enduring relevance of a 14th-century Arab historian



#### **The enduring brilliance of Ludwig Wittgenstein**

**Julian Baggini** / May 7, 2018

As with all geniuses, it is taking the rest of us many years to catch him up

---

SHARE WITH FRIENDS



---

### Comments

No comments yet

---

### Leave a comment

You can **log in** to post a comment under your subscriber name.

Name \*

Mail (will not be published) \*

Human verification - please type the words/numbers from the image:



Become a *Prospect* subscriber today  
to get ahead of the big issues of our time



## Prospect

Prospect was originally founded by Editor David Goodhart and Publisher Derek Coombs, as a home for intelligent debate. The magazine is owned and supported by the Resolution Group, as part of its not-for-profit, public interest activities. The aim is to tackle the big challenges confronting society, through rigorous thinking and fine writing.

Follow us    

### Editorial

Editor: Tom Clark  
Deputy Editor: Steve Bloomfield  
Executive Editor: Jay Elwes  
Managing Editor (Arts & Books): Sameer Rahim  
Head of Digital: Stephanie Boland  
Deputy Digital Editor (Political Correspondent): Alex Dean  
Design: Mike Turner  
Production Editor: Chris Tilbury  
US Writer-at-Large: Sam Tanenhaus

### Commercial

Commercial Director: Alex Stevenson  
Finance Manager: Pauline Joy  
Head of Marketing: Paul Mortimer  
Marketing and Circulations Executive: James Hawkins  
Head of Research and Engagement: Saskia Perriard-Abdoh  
Events Coordinator: Oliver Ward  
Head of Advertising Sales: Adam Kinlan 020 3372 2934  
Senior Account Manager: Sophie Ryan 020 3372 2927  
Senior Account Manager: Dominic Slonecki 0203 372 2972  
Account Manager: Scott Smith 020 3372 2931