

Should We Use the Other Animals as Means to Our Ends?

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Immanuel Kant's argument that no human being should be used as a mere means to the ends of other people 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 own good and to which he could not possibly consent. What makes this wrong, according to Kant, is that every human being is an "end in itself," that is, that every human being should be accorded an inherent value that forbids such treatment. For a human being, being an "end in yourself" means that your choices should be respected and your ends promoted, that you have rights that the community should be prepared to uphold, that your happiness is valuable and your suffering should be cured or met with tenderness when it is beyond cure. When we do use other people to serve our own purposes—for of course we do—it must be done in a way that is consistent with all this, and then we are not treating them as *mere* means, but at the same time as ends in themselves.

But we human beings have not been willing to grant this kind of value to the other animals. 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 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 depend for leading their own lives.

What could justify this difference between the way we treat human beings, or anyway the way we think we ought to treat them, and the way we treat the other animals? Kant argued that only rational beings are ends in themselves and that we are therefore free to use the other animals however we please. Most people are uncomfortable with that conclusion, because most people 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, as people say, “unnecessarily.” But if that is so, why don’t we treat them as ends in themselves?

Some people would reply that although animals have some value, people just have more. People, they think, are more important than the other animals. But everything that is important must be important to someone, or from some point of view. Things are important *to* people and animals, who show this by responding to the things that happen to them and their loved ones with pleasure or pain, desire or aversion, terror or confidence, seeking out the things that seem good to them and avoiding the things that seem bad. Things matter to animals, because animals, like people, *experience* the goodness and badness of what happens to

them. It is of course true that among the things that are important to people and animals are other people and animals. Sometimes, too, we give the preference to those who are more important *to us*—to our own friends and families, our own communities, our own countries. But this is not, usually, because we think that our own friends and families, or communities, or countries, are objectively more important than other people's friends and families, or communities, or countries. It is because we think it is permissible, in certain circumstances, to act on reasons of love or loyalty. But from what point of view could it possibly be true that people are simply, objectively, more important than animals, or that there is in general some sort of rank ordering of the importance of different kinds of creatures?

Some people point to the higher capacities of human beings and argue that our lives have more value than the lives of animals. We human beings have the capacity to create and enjoy art and music, to try to understand and explore the world around us, to build societies that aspire to protect the rights and interests of all of their members, to form deep and intimate relationships that may last for a lifetime, to try to solve philosophical problems, to live up to moral values, and to wonder about the meaning of life. The other animals, so far as we can tell, do none of this. What matters to them is to eat and avoid being eaten, to try to stay as comfortable as possible, to raise a brood of offspring every year or so, whom they will perhaps forget when the next brood arrives. Since human lives have more value, or so those who accept this argument claim, what happens to people matters more. But there are two problems with this argument. First of all, what it shows is that our lives have more value in terms of the things that human beings value. For just as everything that is important must be important *to* someone, everything that has value must have value *for* someone. The sorts of things that

supposedly make human life more valuable—artistic creation and appreciation, scientific and philosophical understanding, and so on—matter deeply to us human beings, but they do not matter to the other animals. Their lives are not less valuable *for them* because their lives do not exhibit these values. The lives of the other animals may have as much value, or more, in terms of the things that are important to them. But, second, if animals do matter morally, then how is it supposed to follow, from the fact that our lives exhibit these values, that we have the right to use animals as means to our ends?

Let's go back to Kant, and ask why he thought we should treat people, and only people, as ends in themselves. Kant believed that human beings, as rational beings, make moral laws together. It works 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*, in the sense that I take it to be worthy of pursuit. I decide that I have a right to pursue it, and to ask others not to hinder me from pursuing 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 this end, by not interfering with my actions or attempting to manipulate my choices, and possibly even by helping me to achieve my end when I am in need of help. I take myself to have a good reason to do this, to demand that others respect my value as an end in myself, as long as I accord the same sort of value to them. 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 shared moral laws. Kant called this community the "Kingdom of Ends." Kant thought that animals should not be treated as ends

in themselves, because they cannot be part of this community. Because they are not rational beings, they cannot participate in moral legislations and cannot respond to the laws that we make together.

But Kant's story was incomplete. When I make a choice, I make it a law for myself that I should try to realize 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* and 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 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 or human 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. Because people are rational, we have reason to respect their choices and their right to run their own lives. We must be concerned with people's freedom and not just their interests. Human beings are ends in themselves in two senses: as rational beings we can require things of themselves and each other, and as animals, we can experience the goodness and badness of what happens to us. But we have the same reason for treating what is good

for an animal as something important, something worthy of pursuit, as we have for treating our own good as worthy of pursuit. That reason is simply that it is somebody's good, the good of a creature for whom things can be good or bad. So while some of the ways we treat people and animals differently can be justified on the basis of differences between people and the other animals, the systematic use and abuse of animals for human ends is unjustified. Radical changes in our ancient relationship to our fellow creatures are morally required.