

4

CHRISTINE M. KORSGAARD

The Status of Animals

David Edmonds: *Many moral philosophers argue that it really matters how we treat animals. We can't justify factory farms, or much of our experimentation on animals, and so forth. Christine Korsgaard agrees, but not for the usual reasons.*

Nigel Warburton: *The topic we're going to focus on is the moral status of animals. Now, post-Darwin, we know that biologically nonhuman animals are very closely related to us. Yet we're still developing a clear notion of what the moral status of nonhuman animals is. What's your main stance on this?*

Christine M. Korsgaard: Well, unlike many defenders of animal rights, I do think there are strong and distinctive differences between human beings and the other animals. I use the traditional word 'rational' to describe these differences, but I don't think it follows from those differences that human beings have a superior moral status to animals.

NW: *What does it mean to be rational in this context?*

CMK: To be rational is to have a certain form of self-consciousness, namely consciousness of the grounds of your beliefs and actions, so that you're aware of the things that

CHRISTINE M. KORSGAARD

prompt you to believe and act as you do, and therefore have the capacity to evaluate those grounds and assess them and decide whether they're good reasons or not.

NW: Now, in the area of animal rights and considerations about animal welfare, I think it's fair to say that Utilitarianism dominates the field. There's a sense that what makes it wrong to harm an animal is a matter of the consequences—the pain that the animal feels—namely that more suffering is brought into the world than would otherwise be the case.

CMK: I hold a view in general about good and bad, which is that nothing is good unless it's good for *someone*, or bad unless it's bad for *someone*, and that the value actually attaches to the 'someone', not to the pleasure and pain themselves. And Utilitarianism misconceives consciousness as the place where value happens, whereas the Kantian focus is on the creatures themselves and their value as ends in themselves.

NW: What is it to be an end in yourself?

CMK: To be an end in yourself is to have a sort of value for your own sake, and not to be something that's appropriate to use as a mere means to someone else's ends. That's the main part of it. It leads to various duties in the human case—it means that you get to make your own choices, that you shouldn't be coerced or deceived or forced to pursue someone else's ends, that you shouldn't be abused in various ways, and that your rights should be respected. In the animal case, it means that the way in which the animal is used should always be compatible with the animal's own good.

NW: Now, Kant himself didn't extend this notion of having a right to be treated in a certain way to other animals. And yet you want to ground respect for animals in this Kantian terminology and in this Kantian stance.

THE STATUS OF ANIMALS

CMK: That's right. Kant formulates the Categorical Imperative in various ways. One of them is the formula of humanity as an end in itself. And in making the argument for the formula of humanity as an end in itself, I think Kant overlooked something important about the implications of that argument. Kant said that it's a feature of human choice that we represent ourselves as ends in ourselves—that this is a subjective principle, he called it, of human action. I take it that what he means is something like this: what we know, ordinarily when we make a choice, is that something is good for us. As rational beings, though, we only actually pursue an end if we think it's something good absolutely. So it's built into the nature of choice that we take the things that are good for us to be good absolutely—that is, they are things that anyone has to view as good and as reason-giving. The side of that which Kant focused on was that in doing that, we in effect make laws for each other. Because if I choose something and I say, 'Okay, I choose this now, it's good absolutely', it's now something that you have to regard as a source of reasons. So I made a law for you by making a choice. Kant thought of making choices as involving all beings who could follow laws, and our status as beings who make laws for each other. But there's something else going on when you make a choice of that kind, which is not between you and the other fellow, but between you and yourself, which is just that you are taking what's good for you to be good absolutely, and therefore declaring yourself to be an end in yourself. In this sense, you are an end in yourself just as a being who has 'a good', and I take that to have the implication that all beings who have 'a good' are ends in themselves.

NW: *So rationality isn't a prerequisite for having 'a good' for yourself?*

CHRISTINE M. KORSGAARD

CMK: Ah, no, rationality is certainly not a prerequisite of having ‘a good’ for yourself. The prerequisite of having ‘a good’ for yourself is just that you are the kind of organism that pursues its own good in the functional sense of good—health and welfare—through action; that is, by finding the things that are good for you attractive and the things that are bad for you aversive. That’s what gives you ‘a good’.

NW: *How do you determine what the good for an animal is, though, beyond its mere health interests? Because there are many different ways any particular member of a species could live and survive in a reasonably healthy way. But what is the good for a cat, for instance?*

CMK: I don’t have detailed views about that, ordinarily. I think an animal’s good is, really, just to lead some kind of healthy life in an environment that’s conducive to her leading a healthy life. There are particular complications in the cases of animals that are out of place in some way. So, determining the good for a pet animal, for instance, is a little bit challenging, because ordinarily for an animal in the wild, its good is to survive and reproduce. That’s what animals like to do—they like to survive and reproduce. But when you bring an animal into the human world, one of the first things you’re told when you become a pet owner is ‘get your pet fixed—it’s the best thing for her’. So the pet is not allowed to reproduce anymore, because she fits into the human world better that way. Therefore, there are some differences when you take an animal out of its natural environment and ask what is good for it.

NW: *It’s interesting what you’re saying about fitting into the human world, because on many versions of our relations with animals, what matters is what they are to us, not what they are to themselves.*

THE STATUS OF ANIMALS

CMK: And I think that's wrong. I do think it is possible to have an animal as a companion and be just as concerned with the shape of her life as with the shape of your own.

NW: *Does your approach end up with different conclusions from, say, a Utilitarian like Peter Singer, a very famous exponent of animal welfare? Do we get a different conclusion from treating animals as ends in themselves, as opposed to treating their interests as just as relevant as our own?*

CMK: You do get different conclusions in some cases. In particular, Peter Singer has, on some occasions, said that he thinks it's all right to kill an animal as long as you do so humanely. He imagines a scene where he's talking to his daughter about their dog Max, and the daughter is wondering about Max's life and its value, and Singer says, well, you know, if Max died, we could breed another dog and put the dog in Max's place, and then that dog would have dog pleasures, and there would still be dog pleasures going on in the world... That sort of thing is not permitted on the Kantian account, because the animal is an end in itself, not just a place where there are pleasures happening.

NW: *Does this have difficult implications in terms of dealing with animals which are pests? For instance, in order to grow food on an allotment, you're going to have to probably kill some rats and then some slugs in order to produce food for us to eat.*

CMK: Yes, it has very difficult implications for that. In fact, generally speaking, it seems to me important to acknowledge that human moral standards and nature are, to this extent, at odds with each other. Human moral standards demand that we look for solutions to our problems that are, as far as possible, good for all concerned, and nature sets us at odds

CHRISTINE M. KORSGAARD

with each other in terms of our interests. I think we just have to do the best we can about that. In order to think that there wouldn't be grave difficulties, you have to think the natural world has a moral structure already—and I *don't* think that.

NW: Some people might see keeping a cow as a source of milk as a fairly obvious case of using an animal as a means to an end. Would that use be prohibited by your outlook?

CMK: Well, you can even use people as a means to ends, as long as you act in such a way that they could consent to what you're doing. We can't use quite the same criterion for an animal because animals are not capable of consenting in the relevant sense. But I do think that you can use an animal as a means, if you can do it in a way that's compatible with the animal's own good. Now, whether things like keeping cows for their milk, or sheep for their wool, chickens for eggs, etc. are compatible with the animal's own good is kind of an empirical question that people hotly disagree about nowadays and I don't feel like I know the answer. But the one thing I'm pretty sure of is that if we kept animals for those purposes in ways that were compatible with their own good, then milk and eggs and wool would be a lot more expensive than they are now.

NW: I could imagine somebody wanting to extend your argument beyond animals to plants, and to environments as well. Is there any reason why we shouldn't treat a forest as an end in itself in the same sense?

CMK: I think to have 'a good' in the sense that's relevant to morality involves consciousness and experience. Basically, I think the good is something like 'life's positive experience of itself'. Plants have 'a good' in a functional sense; that is, the things that are good for them are the things that enable them

THE STATUS OF ANIMALS

to survive and reproduce, but they don't have 'a good' in what I call the 'final sense', the moral sense, because they don't experience their own good as a positive thing for themselves.

NW: When we're talking about the good for human beings, that does involve rationality, unlike nonhuman animals, and yet we know that some human beings lack the capacity for rational thought, sometimes through tragedy, or through some kind of genetic defects, or whatever. What status do such human beings have in your view?

CMK: I think those human beings may lack the capacity for rational thought in the sense of the capacity to get rational thought 'right', but they don't lack the capacity for rational thought in the most fundamental sense, which involves having the capacity to be aware of the reasons for what you do. That is a certain kind of self-consciousness that makes you aware of the grounds on which you believe or act. So rationality has more to do, fundamentally, with the ability to ask a certain kind of question rather than to answer it correctly. As a result, I think that rational beings who, in various ways, are unable to reason well nevertheless are still rational beings. They're rational beings in a defective condition—their condition gives us obligations of care. But I think it's important always to keep in mind that any kind of organism is a functional unity—its parts and its systems work together to enable it to lead whatever life is characteristic of its kind. It's not just a heap of capacities. So it's not like you can just remove one capacity and have a different kind of being altogether. Frankly, it is not like you can subtract rationality from a human being and what's left is a dog. I think there's an important metaphysical difference between a defectively rational human being and a nonhuman animal.

CHRISTINE M. KORSGAARD

NW: *That seems to undermine the kind of argument which says, well, look, there are some apes who are more intelligent, more capable of using language, better at solving puzzles, etc. than, say, some unfortunate young children who've got brain damage.*

CMK: *It does* undermine that kind of argument. I think that kind of argument is not a good way of thinking about the subject.

NW: *Would it be fair to characterize what you were saying as that we do need to get back to a notion of animal rights, not just animal welfare, and that should be grounded on a recognition that all animals, or nearly all animals, are ends in themselves and shouldn't be used by human beings in any way without recognizing the good for that particular animal?*

CMK: I do think that's right. I also think there are good grounds for animal rights in the more specific sense of 'right', where a 'right' means a claim that should be upheld by the law. I think they're rights of a peculiar kind. Most of the rights that we ordinarily think about are either held by every individual against every individual (like your civil rights), or by specific individuals against specific individuals (like when you've made a contract or a promise). I think that animals have rights that are held against the human species collectively on the grounds that we have, in effect, taken over the world and taken control of their lives, and now exercise an authority over them which we can't legitimately exercise unless we also protect them.

NW: *And protect them by the law, not just by the moral law?*

CMK: Yes, to protect them by the law, not just by the moral law. There's really no other effective way to protect them. I mean, it's not like we're going to wait around until everyone gets humane impulses after all.

THE STATUS OF ANIMALS

Further Resources

J. M. Coetzee (1999) *The Lives of Animals*, Princeton University Press.

Christine M. Korsgaard (2018) *Fellow Creatures: Our Obligations to the Other Animals*, Oxford University Press.

Lori Gruen (2011) *Ethics and Animals: An Introduction*, Cambridge University Press.

Peter Singer (2011) *Practical Ethics*, 3rd edition, Cambridge University Press.