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Treated like Animals, Guest Post by Christine Korsgaard

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Guest Post: Christine Korsgaard, Harvard University

On November 5, 2014, [RT reported](#) that Filipino workers in Saudi Arabia claimed that they were being “treated like animals.” On November 14, [The Independent reported](#) that the members of Pussy Riot complained that while in prison in Russia they were “treated like animals.” On November 17, [the BBC reported](#) that Nepalese migrant workers building the infrastructure for the World Cup meeting in Qatar complained of being “treated like cattle.” On November 25, [The Indian Express reported](#) that Indian tennis star Sania Merza complained that women in India are “treated like animals.”

What does it mean to be “treated like an animal”? The Filipino workers gave as an example that their “feet were chained.” Members of Pussy Riot complained that in Russian prisons, the wardens “very casually beat people up. They don’t have a sense that they [inmates] are human.” Earlier they claimed that prison administrations “just treat prisoners as they want with impunity.” By being “treated like cattle” the Nepalese migrant workers meant “working up to 12 hours a day, seven days a week, including during Qatar’s hot summer months.” On December 24, [Time reported](#) that the Nepalese migrant workers are dying at the rate of one every two days. Sania Merza said that women in India face discrimination and violence. She also said, “I hope one day everyone will say that we are equal and women are not treated as objects.”

Merza’s last remark raises a question. As these examples suggest, people whose rights are violated, people whose interests are ignored or overridden, people who are abused, harmed, neglected, and unjustly imprisoned, standardly protest that they are being treated “like animals.” Why do we so often formulate our

protest that way, rather than saying, as Merza also said, and as people sometimes do, that we are being treated “like objects”? After all, it is objects that may, in the words of Pussy Riot, be treated “just as [we] want with impunity,” if indeed anything can. Perhaps it’s because people feel that that fails to completely capture the force of their protest. After all, an object cannot suffer from being beaten up or chained or caged, or die from overwork in harsh working conditions. In the relevant sense, you cannot treat an object badly, even if you do treat it “just as you want with impunity.” But when we treat animals just as we want we can treat them badly. But in that case, the implication of the phrase seems to be that animals are the beings that it is all right to treat badly, and the complainant is insisting that he or she is not one of those.

As Nietzsche pointed out in the *Genealogy of Morals*, we think about moral matters in terms that are borrowed from economics – we say, for instance, that human beings have “value.” A number of philosophers – Nietzsche himself, Hobbes, and Rousseau, for instance – have tried to trace the idea of human value to economic and social origins, to explain how, psychologically, people came to take the value of their holdings – their land, money, influence, and consequent power – to attach to themselves, to their self-conceptions. Originally, according to these philosophers, to have value was to have high rank, prestige, and privilege. But then the concept took a different turn. For value in the economic sense is relative to supply and demand, and some things – and so, as long as we stay within a conception of value rooted in economics, some people – have more of it than others. Kant argued in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* that moral value isn’t like that. Human beings have a value that is not merely relative, a form of “dignity” which grounds our claims to be treated with respect, but which is not comparative, and which all of us have equally.

But if I’m right about the phrase “treated like animals,” a comparative thought is still at work when we say that. “You shouldn’t treat me that way, for I am not just an animal!” It’s as if we were unable to assert our own claims to dignity and respect without invoking a contrast with other creatures who could conceivably be treated with respect, or kindness, or consideration, but, morally speaking – or so we suppose – need not be. It’s as if we were unable to affirm our own value without thinking of ourselves as more valuable than someone else. It’s as if we thought of our own humanity as the last bastion of rank and privilege.

Is that why we need to deny value to the animals – because that’s the only way we can claim it for ourselves? On the contrary: there is no surer sign that a human being understands the nature of his own dignity – his non-comparative value – than the fact that he accords exactly the same value to everyone else. Animals are the sort of thing that can be treated with respect, and kindness, and consideration, for some of the same reasons that we are. Of course people shouldn’t be treated like animals. But then, neither should animals.

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Posted in [Animal Ethics](#), [Guest Post](#)

2 Responses to *Treated like Animals*, Guest Post by Christine Korsgaard

- *Anders Sandberg* says:
[January 9, 2015 at 5:53 pm](#)

An interesting question is what animals animals treat like animals? Watching insects, lizards and cats

shows a fascinating diversity of approaches to what things are regarded as some kind of similar beings or just moving furniture. Different animals seem to have very different “understandings” of other animals. They of course do not conceptualize anything like dignity but simple instinctually categorize entities in certain ways. Yet these evolved categories may be found in our human intuitions too, perhaps affecting our judgements.

- *John Doyle* says:
[January 26, 2015 at 11:34 am](#)

Its difficult to not read the beginning of this post as a callously indifferent to the sufferings of those cited as being “treated as animals”. I’m sure it goes without saying that you are not indifferent to their suffering, but it’s still unfortunate that it did in fact go without saying, and acknowledging the hardship of those mistreated a workers and prisoners in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Russia. As for your main point, it’s very difficult to avoid the use of economic terminology in moral discourse; it shows up in some surprising places. Christianity is awash with talk of the *redemption* and *saving* of souls, and of the *wages* of sin. Even the phrase *salt* of the earth is an economically derived term; salt was used as currency in ancient Rome, hence the english term, *salary*. Moreover, I don’t think that Kantians altogether escapes this kind of terminology. The english, *duty* is a clear example of a borrowed economic term, qua something that is due. While there is a sense of binding conveyed in the greek, *deon*, its original usage was roughly interchangeable with “advantageous” or “opportune”. There is a way out of this for Kant and christianity. They can accept the adoption of this type of terminology, but preface it on the concept of “freedom”, which though based on economic terminology, frames the *value* of the moral agent as a gift, a given.

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