Kant's Account of Our Moral Obligations Concerning Animals: *Animals in Kantian Ethics*

*Zaid Mir**

Abstract

Immanuel Kant holds that rational agency is a necessary condition to merit direct moral consideration;[1] therefore, he claims that we have no direct duties to animals. Nevertheless, he argues that we still ought to treat animals well, but only because we have duties to protect and develop our own moral character. Thus, what appear to be duties to animals themselves are, according to Kant, only indirect duties to them. However, the substantial challenge here is figuring out whether Kant's indirect duties can provide a clear and adequate scope of our moral obligations concerning animals. In this paper, I argue that it cannot: if animals matter morally only in relation to our moral development, then our obligations regarding animals would be too vague and inadequate. To make my argument, I will examine some of Kant's normative claims regarding how we should treat animals, and then demonstrate that what may appear morally enhancing can or may morally desensitize us. By demonstrating that the causes of moral desensitization are not categorical,[2] I will show that it is insufficient to place our moral development as the only basis for our concern regarding animals. Furthermore, Kant's indirect duties are a corollary of his metaethical[3] commitments; therefore, by revealing problems that result from his indirect duties, I will infer that his metaethics need to be revised. My task in this paper is not to revise Kant's ethics concerning animals, but to prove that it requires revision.

[1] To say that a being deserves moral consideration is to say that there is a moral claim that this being can make on those who can recognize such claims. A morally considerable being is a being who can be wronged. Gruen, Lori, "The Moral Status of Animals", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/moral-animal/

[2] The causes of moral desensitization are not explicit and direct.

[3] Metaethics is a branch of analytic philosophy that explores the status, foundations, and scope of moral values, properties, and words. https://www.iep.utm.edu/metaethi/

*Department of Philosophy, College of Arts and Science, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, SK, Canada
Correspondence: **zaid.mir@hotmail.com**

University of Saskatchewan Undergraduate Research Journal
Volume 5, Issue 1, 2018

Kant's Metaethics and Animals

In the *Metaphysics of Morals* section,"On an amphiboly in moral concepts of reflection, taking what is human being's duty to himself for a duty to other beings," Kant addresses humankind's duties concerning animals. He writes:

> As far as reason alone can judge, man has duties only to men (himself and other men), since his duty to any subject is moral constraint by that subject's will … we know of no being other than man that would be capable of obligation (active or passive). Man can therefore have no duty to any beings other than men; and if he thinks he has such duties, it is because of an *amphiboly* in his *concepts of reflections,* and his supposed duty to other beings is only a duty to himself. He is led to this misunderstanding by mistaking his duty *with regard to* other beings for a duty *to* those beings.[4]

Some non-human animals share similar characteristics to humans, such as their perception of pain and pleasure, but their lack of a rational will, according to Kant, is what disqualifies them as beings that deserve direct moral consideration. One may speculate on what drives the necessity for a rational will as a requisite to merit and bestow direct moral consideration. That, however, is grounded in Kant's metaethical commitments.

To begin with his metaethics, the inferior moral status of animals in Kant's moral philosophy can be seen in his categorical imperative. His categorical imperative can be understood as a tool to evaluate or justify actions. There exists more than one formulation of the categorical imperative. For the present purpose, consider his *humanity as an end* formulation: "a human being, and in general every rational being, does exist as an end in himself, *not merely as a means* to be used by this or that will as it pleases."[5] He argues that we must always treat *humanity* with respect, and never as mere means. It seems necessary to explore Kant's notion of "humanity," to fully grasp why Kant excludes animals as beings that merit direct respect or moral consideration. "Humanity" serves as a ground for morality in Kant's moral philosophy. However, for Kant, "humanity" is not human beings, but the distinct features that distinguish a human being. The capacity to engage in autonomous-rational behaviour, which includes the ability to set ends, is the distinct feature that makes humans possess "humanity." Therefore, even if rational autonomous aliens existed, they, too, would possess "humanity" in Kantian philosophy.

To clarify the significant interdependence between Kant's "humanity" and morality, imagine, for example, a dog that has attacked a person. Can the dog be morally accountable for harming a person? Although dogs possess intelligence, their capacity to rationally exercise what is moral is either missing, or insufficient to hold them answerable for their actions. They are governed not by reason, but by their desires;[6] therefore, they are not free. Thus, their lack of a rational agency frees them from moral assessment, which, in turn, prevents them from producing morality. Humans also have inclinations, but they can either endorse or reject these inclinations through reason. Their ability to perform actions from reason is what makes them part of humanity, which, in turn, makes them sources of morality. This ability forces them to have moral obligations to themselves and other rational-autonomous agents, but not beings that lack rational will.

Christine Korsgaard emphasises this separation between humans and animals in terms of normativity. She writes:

> A lower animal's attention is fixed on the world. Its perceptions are its beliefs and its desires are its will. It is engaged in conscious activities, but it is not conscious *of* them. That is, they are not the objects of its attention. But we human animals turn our attention on to our perceptions and desires themselves, on to our own mental activities, and we are conscious *of* them. That is why we can think *about* them…And this sets us a problem that no other animal has. It is the problem of the normative… The reflective mind cannot

[4] Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals,* Mary Gregor ed. *The Cambridge Edition of the works of Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Ak. 6:443.

[5] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Thomas E. Hill Jr. and Arnulf Zweig: *Oxford Philosophical Texts: The complete editions for students* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), Ak. 4:429.

[6] The word "desire" here refers to sensory desires, such as, taste, sex, and smell; animals act on their sensory desires or their instincts, rather than using reason.

*Department of Philosophy, College of Arts and Science, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, SK, Canada
Correspondence: **zaid.mir@hotmail.com**

> settle for perception and desire, not just as such. It needs a reason.[7]

Animals cannot make claims for their rights or their moral status. As Kant puts it, the fact that humans have the capacity to use 'I' to represent themselves[8] puts them at odds with animals, which ultimately makes them superior. So, although Kant's categorical imperative is unconditional upon the agent's aim, it does not mean the agents *must* necessarily consent to universal moral laws for them to become universal moral laws, but simply that rational agents *could* in principle consent to such laws or norms. Since animals cannot rationally accept or consent to Kant's categorical laws, or moral norms in general, he contends that they cannot morally obligate humans. So, since Kant claims that moral consideration is exclusively for rational agents, why, then, does he propose that we have duties only with regard to animals, which, according to him, are duties only to oneself?

Before taking up this question in the next section, it is worth noting that Kant's moral philosophy is a type of moral perfectionism. His perfectionist moral theory, like many perfectionist ethics, concerns itself with both developing one's moral character, which is one's duties to oneself as well as duties to others. In the same body of work, *The Metaphysics of Morals,* in the section, "On the First Command of All Duties to Oneself" he commands:

> This command is 'know (scrutinize, fathom) yourself,' not in terms of your natural perfection … but rather in terms of your moral perfection in relation to your duty. That is, know your heart – whether it is good or evil, whether the source of your actions is pure or impure, and what can be imputed to you as belonging originally to the substance of a human being or as derived (acquired or developed) and belonging to your moral condition. Moral cognition of oneself … is the beginning of all human wisdom.[9]

Kant demands that we ought to self-reflect and develop our perfect self. It appears that he has an ideal for rational beings, which requires an agent to study their motives and intentions, and thus engage in self-correction. Contrary to the utilitarian mode of ethics, having the right intentions is part of perfecting one's moral character. Hence, his command to self-evaluate would counteract egoism and diminish contempt for others, which ultimately would enhance a person's moral character.[10] That, in brief, is Kant's moral perfectionism. The point, however, is that even though he argues that rational beings do not owe direct moral consideration to non-human animals, he contends that we still have indirect duties towards them; in addition to his meta-ethical position, perfectionism in his moral philosophy plays a role in shaping his contention. This will be examined in the following section.

Indirect Duties and Duties to Oneself

Kant expresses a concern for the effects that could result from wanton destruction of inanimate nature, as well as non-sentient beings, such as, flora. What follows from Kant's meta-ethical commitments and his perfectionist moral philosophy, is that humans have obligations exclusively to themselves and other rational agents. Therefore, his concern regarding the perfection of one's moral character, which includes abstaining from wanton destruction of nature are only duties to oneself. He presents his concern in more detail as follows:

> A propensity to wanton destruction of what is *beautiful* in inanimate nature (*spiritus destructionis*) is opposed to a human being's duty to himself; for it weakens or uproots that feeling in him which, through not of itself moral, is still a disposition of sensibility that greatly promotes morality or at least prepares the way for it: the disposition, namely to something (e.g., beautiful crystal formations, the indescribable beauty of plants) even apart from any intention to use it.[11]

What seems to be the case behind Kant's rationale for having indirect duties towards inanimate objects, is that human beings *are,* in theory, the only sources of morality. However, despite humans being potentially the only sources of morality, it does not follow that they always *do* act morally. Therefore, engaging in wanton destruction of flora and inanimate objects of nature could, according to Kant,

[7] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "The Moral Status of Animals," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed March 21, 2018, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-animal/.

[8] Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Mary Gregor ed. *The Cambridge Edition of the works of Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Ak. 6:443.

[9] Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak. 6:441.

[10] Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak. 6:441.

[11] Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak. 6:443.

degrade one's ability to appreciate beauty, which consequently could hinder one's potential to practically act morally; the desensitization of a person most likely would interfere with one's direct duties to rational agents. Thus, as a moral perfectionist, Kant asserts that disregarding our indirect duties to nature would be a violation of our duties to our self.[12]

Following the same line of reasoning, Kant extends his indirect duties to animals. In § 17 of his Doctrine of Virtue, he writes:

> With regard to the animate but non-rational part of creation, violent and cruel treatment of animals is far more intimately opposed to a human being's duty to himself, and he has a duty to refrain from this; for it dulls his shared feeling of their suffering and so weakens and gradually uproots a natural predisposition that is very serviceable to morality in one's relations with other people.[13]

Since animals can express their suffering in a similar fashion to humans, Kant proposes that the effects of mistreating animals is far worse than causing wanton destruction to inanimate objects and non-sentient beings. Exposure to animal cruelty, as Kant thought, would lead humans to mistreat each other, and consequently violate their moral duties to one another. Therefore, Kant asserts that abstaining from such acts would be a duty to oneself, rather than to the animal.

However, problems arise when he makes normative claims regarding animals. In the same section of his Doctrine of Virtue, his normative commands proceed as follows:

> The human being is authorized to kill animals quickly (without pain) and to put them to work that does not strain them beyond their capacities … Even gratitude for the long service of an old horse or dog (just as if they were members of the household) belongs indirectly to a human being's duty with regard to these animals: considered as a *direct* duty, however, it is always only a duty of the human being to himself.[14]

For the sake of brevity, I will focus on only two of Kant's normative claims: he argues that we must kill animals quickly and without pain, and that we should treat our service animals as if they are household members. Since Kant exclusively looks at the agent's moral character to determine our duties concerning animals, his underlying rationale for both claims is not that failing to follow them would harm the animal, but that it would harm the agent's moral character. In the following sections I will demonstrate that what Kant thought as morally desensitizing can or may be morally enhancing. Therefore, I will show that placing our moral development as the only basis for our concern regarding animals leads to confusing and inadequate results.

Confusion in Kant's Indirect Duties

In this section, I will explain how Kant's notion of having indirect duties can lead to confusion. If we grant that Kant is right and accept that duties to animals are only duties to oneself, then unpacking Kant's indirect duties to animal would, in terms of language, be difficult to comprehend. Since Kant puts animals in a position where they do not deserve any direct moral consideration, it appears that giving a clear explanation of what qualifies as mistreating an animal would not be an easy task. Consider, for example, a case where a dog dies because its owner left him in a parked car on a warm day. If we interpret this case in light of Kant's indirect duties, it raises the question which O'Hagan asks: did we wrong the animal or ourselves?[15] When considering such cases in the orthodox Kantian sense, the agent is both the victim and the offender: the agent has obligations to enhance their moral character, while the animal is used to help the agent do so.

Nevertheless, if we were to accept that we have duties only with regard to animals, it would not force or support the normative claims that Kant makes concerning animals. In the same section where he discusses our indirect duties to animals, he claims: "gratitude for the long service of an old horse or dog (just as if they were members of the household) belongs *indirectly* to a human being's duty *with regard to* theses animals; considered as a direct duty, however, it is always only a duty of the human being to himself."[16] It appears that Kant based his normative claim on picturing a chain of events which lead to a bad consequence: if one has a service animal that has been of great help, one ought to continue expressing gratitude towards the animal as

[12] Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak. 6:443, p. 564.
[13] Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak. 6:443, p. 564.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Emer O'Hagan, "Animals, Agency, and Obligation in Kantian Ethics," Social Theory and Practice 35, no. 4 (2009): 531-54. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23562119, p. 535.
[16] Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*., Ak. 6:443.

if the animal is part of one's household, even when they become weak and useless. Failing to do so would damage the agent's moral character. Kant does not specifically mention that failing to treat one's service animal like a member of the household would damage one's moral character; however, since he regards animals simply as means for rational agents to enhance their moral character, it follows that failing to treat one's service animal like a household member would damage the agent's moral character. In this chain of events that supposedly leads to moral decay, it seems that there is a wide gap of evidence between the antecedent and the consequent. The proposition that one ought to treat their service animals as a member of the household or consequently damage their moral character is rather weak. Kant is not entitled to such a claim, since tracing the causes of moral decadence is not as easy as he thought.

To understand why, consider O'Hagan's take on Kant's normative claim. In her article, *Animals, Agency, and Obligation in Kantian Ethics*, she writes:

> If our treatment of non-human animals is only morally significant as an opportunity to develop and maintain a moral response to humans, then the demand that these animals be treated like members of the household seem unwarrantedly strong. One could treat the animal well while it was capable of service and then, with fond memories and gratitude in one's heart abandon it, as one might solemnly haul an old car to the garbage dump. Because the duty is not a duty to the animal itself, but a duty with regard to it, the invocation to treat it like a member of the family seems excessive and hence unsupported.[17]

The necessity of treating one's service animal like a member of the household to solely enhance or protect one's moral character is in question. Consider a person that uses a guide dog because he has impaired hearing: several years go by, and with the advancement of hearing aids, the person no longer needs their dog. In this scenario, the work animal is no longer needed; however, arguing that one still ought not to abandon it, but rather, continue to treat their dog like they are part of the family just to enhance one's moral character is unjustified. Kant does not provide any reasoning whatsoever to support why failing to treat our pets or service animals like household members would morally desensitize us.

O'Hagan further adds that "part of the problem results from the fact that as an opportunity to develop one's moral character, the good treatment of animals is one option among many." Along the same line of reasoning, I argue that abandoning one's service animal can, contrary to what Kant thought, be morally enhancing. Consider, for example, the truth behind the aphorism: 'you don't know what you have until it's gone.' If an animal is of great help to someone, its absence could make the owner realize the former work-animal's full worth. Also, if the work animal is no longer needed, giving it away to those that need it would be a morally enhancing action. My point is not that we ought to give away our work animals to enhance our moral character, but that if animals are mere mediums with which agents enhance their moral character, then, as O'Hagan pointed out, there is more than one way to achieve moral improvement. Therefore, Kant's reasoning behind his normative claim concerning service animals or pets is vastly deficient because he exclusively puts our moral development to determine our obligations to animals. Thus, his indirect duties fail to provide a clear and adequate scope of our moral obligations concerning animals.

Exposure to Animal Suffering

In this section, I will further expand on why tracing the causes of moral desensitization are not categorical, and therefore show that Kant's notion of having indirect duties, and ultimately his ethics concerning animals, require revision. Contrary to what Kant thought, exposure to animal suffering could in fact make humans more emotionally responsive. Consider the following: Kant does not specify what sort of pain-free method ought to be used to kill animals, but it is reasonable to presume a method that incorporates modern medicine, e.g. anesthesia, or carbon dioxide exposure. Kant specifically regarded the mistreatment of animals to be far worse than wanton destruction of inanimate objects because both humans and animals can openly express sentience. He writes: "for it dulls his shared feeling of their suffering …"[18] The ability to experience pain and suffering is where animals and humans share a common ground. However, gassing an animal with carbon dioxide would temporarily devoid the animal of those shared characteristics which are primarily consciousness and perception of pain. The gassed animal, which is devoid of feelings, expression, and awareness is, although alive, reduced to an inanimate object. However, if animals and humans have an affinity because of shared characteristics, then how can inducing the loss of those shared characteristics before killing the animal protect the agent's moral character?

Kant's normative claim that we can kill animals painlessly to avoid moral decay is rather questionable. In the

[17] O'Hagan, "*Animals, Agency, and Obligation in Kantian Ethics*," p. 536.
[18] Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak. 6:443, p. 564.

same passage, he states that "violent and cruel treatment of animals ... so weakens and gradually uproots a natural predisposition that is very serviceable to morality in one's relations with other people."[19] However, exposure to animal suffering could in fact eventually sensitize humans. The veracity of my claim can be seen in many of the laws that prohibit activists to videotape or take pictures of what happens inside slaughterhouses. The rationale for such laws is that the exposure of animal suffering causes a decline in meat and dairy sales. It then follows that exposure to animal suffering does not necessarily desensitize humans but *could* potentially force humans to question the necessity for killing animals or supporting animal cruelty.

By contrast, the cut and packaged animal products at stores are viewed merely as products sold predominantly for taste, or as objects to be exploited merely for one's comfort, but not as sentient beings that once lived and thrived. Experiencing the animal's agony would most likely cause humans to appreciate animals as sentient beings which living things, including human beings, depend on. Moreover, such experiences could be valuable lessons that humans are animals that evolved differently; witnessing first-hand the similarities between humans and animals, which are consciousness and perception of pain, could potentially create affinity and sympathy towards animals.

Of course, one can certainly make a sophisticated argument to show that exposure to animal cruelty and suffering can cause desensitization. However, such an argument would only further prove my point. My point is not that we must see animal suffering to sensitize us, but rather that the exposure to animal suffering is not always harmful. It is Kant's strict metaethical commitments that place him in a difficult position. This is because context matters when determining what causes moral desensitization, and Kant's ethics do not adequately explore the psychology behind desensitization. Therefore, Kant's complete reliance on our moral development to determine our obligations concerning animals will not give us a clear and adequate scope of our moral duties regarding animals.

To summarise Kant's point, he argues that animals should be killed quickly and without pain because failing to do so would harm not the animal, but the agent's moral character; exposure to animal suffering, as Kant thought, would consequently decay an agent's moral character. However, the concealment of animal suffering could cause desensitization. Thus, by establishing our moral development as the only basis for our concern regarding animals, Kant's normative claim on how animals should be killed contradicts his proposed duties to oneself. I will, however, leave this contradiction for the Kantian revisionist.

Concluding Remarks

Kant's metaethics present a strong case in explaining the moral significance of rational beings. Autonomy, which includes the capacity to set ends, does, in fact, make humans sources of morality. But is autonomy a necessary condition to merit direct moral consideration? In my paper, I did not directly address this question, but if Kant is right, then his indirect duties to animals logically follows through from his metaethics. However, the examination of his indirect duties to animals reveals substantial problems.

Kant's indirect duties, in terms of language, are difficult to comprehend. If animals themselves are not deserving of moral consideration, then in what sense can they be mistreated? In the traditional Kantian sense, what is striking is that there is nothing inherently wrong with torturing an animal. Torturing an animal, according to Kant, is wrong only because it could damage the agent's moral character. However, this raises more problems because the causes of moral decadence are not categorical. Kant's normative claim that one should kill animals quickly and painlessly implies that the exposure to animal suffering causes desensitization. This may seem reasonable to many in terms of protecting one's moral character, but, as I argued in my paper, it is highly plausible that the opposite is true: avoiding the sight of animal suffering is what causes moral desensitization. Similarly, Kant claims that one should treat their service animal as if they are a household member. If animals are merely means for rational agents to develop their moral character, it does not follow that we ought to treat them as household members since there are many other ways to work on our moral character. This objection can be applied to all of Kant's normative claims concerning animals. Thus, merely looking at our moral development to determine our obligations to animals is vastly insufficient.

Although Kant's indirect duties do not provide us with a strong and adequate scope of our moral obligations concerning animals, revising it would be a pointless task. Kant's indirect duties arise from his metaethical commitments since he holds that rational agency or autonomy is a necessary condition to merit direct moral consideration. Consequently, his metaethics serve as a catalyst in forming his indirect duties to animals. Thus, I infer that to get a clear and adequate Kantian account of our moral obligations concerning animals, Kant's metaethics would have to be revised. I will, however, leave this task to the Kantian revisionist.

[19] Ibid.

Acknowledgments

I would like to offer my special thanks to Dr. Emer O'Hagan for her excellent feedback and support throughout writing this paper. Also, I wish to express my gratitude to Steven Sherban for his additional feedback during the editing process.

Bibliography

Kant, Immanuel. *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. *Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy.* trans. Robert B. Louden. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

——— *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. *Oxford Philosophical Texts: The complete editions for students.* trans. Thomas E. Hill Jr. and Arnulf Zweig. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

——— *The Metaphysics of Morals. The Cambridge Edition of the works of Emmanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy.* Edited by Mary Gregor. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

O'Hagan, Emer. "Animals, Agency, and Obligation in Kantian Ethics." *Social Theory and Practice* 35, no. 4 (2009): 531-54. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23562119.

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. "The Moral Status of Animals." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Accessed March 16, 2018. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-animal/.