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Facing the Animal You See in the Mirror

A Lecture by Christine M. Korsgaard

This lecture was delivered as part of the Facing Animals Panel Discussion, held at Harvard University on April 24, 2007.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE AN ANIMAL? ABOUT 600 MILLION YEARS AGO, CERTAIN organic life forms on this planet began to wake up, and to become aware of their surroundings. They found themselves to be hungry, and to be the target of unwelcome interest on the part of others who were hungry. And for both of these reasons, they had to work to take care of themselves. To prod them to do that, nature made many of them capable of pain, and of terror. But some of them were also capable of the opposite feelings of pleasure and security. And out of these various feelings grew feelings of interest and boredom, of grief and joy, of family attachment and hostility to outsiders. These life forms are constructed in such a way that they cannot help but struggle to stay alive, and perhaps even to care about their lives. And a few of them know themselves to be, in spite of that, ephemeral beings. The organic life forms sharing this strange evolutionary adventure are the animals, and you and I are among them. This gives rise to a moral question: How should we interact with the others?

Many of the moral problems that we talk about in philosophy are intended to illustrate the general features of ethical theories, and do not come up much in everyday life. At critical moments of your life you may face the question whether to have an abortion, or to terminate the medical care of a dying loved one. But few of us, as individuals, will ever have to decide whether to torture a terrorist who knows the location of a ticking bomb—although we may have to vote on laws that concern that question. And I am willing to bet that no one in this room will ever have to decide whether to push a fat man into the path of a runaway trolley which is barreling towards five innocent people tied up on

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the track. But you make decisions about how you are going to interact with the other animals many times every day.¹ You make these decisions when you decide which cosmetics to use in the morning, when you put on your shoes and pick up your handbag or your briefcase, at breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and on many other occasions that you may not even be aware of. Moral decisions about how we should treat the other animals are inescapable, and that is why it is essential that we give the matter some thought.

There are two general sets of moral problems that arise about non-human animals. One is broadly ecological and mainly concerns the relationship of the human species with other species taken as a whole. The other set of problems concerns our relationships with individual non-human animals. These two sets of problems can overlap: our growing population and the resulting encroachment on animal habitats is threatening the extinction of many other species, but of course, it is doing that by causing the premature deaths of many individuals of those other species. But the solutions to these two kinds of problems can also be tragically at odds. In order to preserve the ecological balance among various species—a balance we ourselves have messed up—we may be faced with the necessity of culling populations by killing off individuals. In order to reintroduce orphaned predators to the wild, we may have to supply them with prey to practice on, just as their mothers sometimes do. In my remarks today, I am going to set aside the ecological questions, pressing as they are, and talk about the ethics of our relationships to individual non-human animals. In these brief remarks I will not have time to say much about what we may and may not do: instead, I want to talk in a general way about why we have duties to the other animals at all, and why these duties might not be as weak as many people seem to think they are.

So why does it matter how we relate to individual non-human animals? It matters because, as I have already suggested, many of these individuals are complex centers of subjectivity, conscious beings, who experience pleasure and pain, fear and hunger, joy and grief, attachments to particular others, curiosity, fun and play, satisfaction and frustration, and the enjoyment of life. And these are all things that, when we experience them, we take to ground moral claims on the consideration of others. We think it is wrong when people kill us or make us suffer to promote their own ends, or when they separate us involuntarily from those whom we love. Is it wrong only because we are human beings? Why exactly would that be? Our own capacity for these kinds of experiences is firmly grounded in our own animal nature—and that is a point I will come back to. So I take it that the burden of proof is on those who think that we do not have duties to the other animals. Our human nature certainly changes the way we experience pain and pleasure, attachment and grief, and life and death themselves, in deep and important ways, and that affects the details of our duties to the other animals. But why should we think these differences are ones that make it wrong to impose death, loss, or suffering on another human being but not on another animal? What difference between us and them could make that true?

Few people, I think, agree with Descartes' famous view that non-human animals are mere mechanisms, with no form of consciousness whatever. But I think many people talk themselves into thinking that the other animals have a consciousness so dim and fragmentary that all that really matters is that

we spare them unnecessary pain. Even if that were true, many of our present practices would be called into question—experiments on animals that are wholly unnecessary, for example, like the testing of cosmetic products. But I do not think the facts bear the view out in any case. The biologist Thomas Eisner thinks that even insects probably suffer from pain,² and there is good evidence that fish do as well. So should we believe that highly intelligent mammals and birds, who lead complex social lives, have no more sophisticated form of consciousness than a bug or a fish? The evidence suggests otherwise: many mammals and birds suffer not just from painful sensations, but from stress and boredom and terror and from being deprived of the company of those to whom they are attached, just as they may enjoy play and exploration and love and family and fun. I am not asking you to take this from me, of course; it is an empirical question. Given how pressing the moral questions are, I would encourage everyone to read about non-human animals, to find out what they are actually like. A growing scientific literature suggests that many of us have underestimated the intelligence and emotional complexity of the other animals.

Many people would grant that the other animals are conscious and can suffer pain and terror and loss, and that this is a reason for compassionate treatment. But they also seem to think that this reason is very weak—so weak that it is outweighed by almost any reason human beings might have for killing the other animals or making them suffer—even as trivial a reason as that we enjoy eating them. What makes it the case that the reasons against inflicting death and suffering on human beings are so strong, and the ones against inflicting death and suffering on the other animals are so weak? It is common for people to think that this question somehow depends on whether there is some really big difference between human beings and the other animals. So philosophical defenders of animal rights or animal welfare often argue that there is no such big difference: they are, as we might call them, “gradualists” about the human/animal distinction.

I have already said some things that might make you think I hold such a “gradualist” view about human and animal differences. And I do think a gradualist story is plausible about intelligence, emotion, and complex social capacities such as sympathy and altruism and the ability to find one’s place in a social order.³ But actually I am among those who do think there is probably one really big difference between human beings and the other animals. But the big difference in question does not support the view that we have no duties to the other animals, or that our duties towards them are very weak. Let me try to explain what I think this difference is.

It is sometimes said that human beings are the only animals who are self-conscious. Animals are aware of the world but not of themselves. But actually the issue is much more complicated than that, for self-consciousness like other attributes comes in degrees and takes many different forms. One form of self-consciousness is revealed by the mirror test.⁴ But I think it can be argued that animals who cannot pass the mirror test have rudimentary forms of self-consciousness. A tiger who stands downwind of her intended prey is not merely aware of her prey—she is also locating herself with respect to her prey in physical space, and that is a rudimentary form of self-consciousness. A social animal who

makes gestures of submission when a more dominant animal enters the scene is locating himself in social space, and that too is a form of self-consciousness. Parallel to these abilities would be a capacity to locate yourself in mental space, to locate yourself with respect to your own thoughts and emotions, and in particular, to know them as your own. This is what we more commonly think of as self-consciousness, a reflective awareness of our own awareness, so to speak. Do the other animals have this ability to locate themselves in subjective, mental space? Some of the language-trained animals can express the idea “I want”—Koko the gorilla and Alex the African gray parrot, two famous language-trained animals, can both do this—so perhaps they have the ability to think about their own mental states. But it is also possible that they have just learned that such utterances will produce the desired effect, just as my cat knows that meowing at me when I am near the cabinet where the treats are kept will produce the desired effect. Some scientists have also pointed to cases of deception to suggest that some animals are aware of the thoughts of others, and therefore, presumably, of their own. The evidence on these questions is, I think, inconclusive.

But there is no question that we human beings are aware of our location in mental space in a very important way—we are, or can be, aware of the grounds of our beliefs and choices, of our reasons for thinking and acting as we do.⁵ When I am aware, not just that I have a certain desire or fear, say, but that I am tempted to do something on the basis of that desire or fear, then it becomes open to me to step back from that connection and evaluate it: to ask whether my desire or fear provides me with a good reason to perform the action in question. And this enables me to take responsibility for what I do. This form of self-consciousness, I think, is what makes human beings rational and moral animals, and this is the one big difference that I have in mind. The other animals lead lives that are governed, I believe, by their instincts, desires, emotions, and attachments. Because we have the capacity to evaluate the influence of our instincts, desires, emotions and attachments on our actions, we are not completely governed by them. We have the capacity to be governed instead by normative standards and values, by a conception of what we ought to do.⁶ We are moral animals.

This is a big difference. But what follows from this difference is not that we have no duties to the other animals: what follows is most obviously that they have no duties to us, or to each other. Does it follow from that fact that we owe them nothing, or very little? Kant believed that only beings who can make moral demands on themselves can make moral demands on each other, and therefore that only our fellow rational beings can give us obligations. Each of us regards himself or herself as an end in itself, a being with inherent value, and on that ground demands recognition and respect from others who are also capable of valuing. What this leaves out, though, is that what we demand, when we demand that recognition, is that our natural concerns—the objects of our natural desires and interests and affections—be accorded the status of values, values that must be respected as far as possible by others. And many of those natural concerns—the desire to avoid pain is an obvious example—spring from our animal nature, not from our rational nature. That it is wrong to make an animal suffer is something you already believe, since there is an animal—yourself—whose suffering you declare to be morally objectionable. So while it is our rational nature that enables

us to value ourselves and each other as ends in ourselves, what we value, what we declare to be an end in itself, includes our animal nature as well as our rational and human nature.⁷

It is a different question whether we may reasonably value human lives more highly than animal lives when the choice confronts us. But even if we may, that does not mean we may be prodigal with animal lives. Perhaps it is true that a human being who loses her life loses something more complex, rich, and connected than another animal who loses his life does. But, on the other hand, a human being and a non-human animal who lose their lives both lose everything that they have. There is something imponderable about the comparison.

At the beginning of my remarks I said that we make ethical decisions about how we interact with other animals many times every day. For that very reason, some people are reluctant to face the idea that perhaps we owe better treatment to the other animals than we are giving them now. Cruelty to animals is built into the fabric of our lives in ways that make it hard to avoid, and there are two reasons for this. The first is that it is built into our social, cultural, and economic institutions. Indeed, it is built into the language, just like sexism is: as I wrote up these remarks, the automatic editor in my word processor kept complaining that I was making a grammatical error every time I referred to a non-human animal as a “who” or “she” or “he” rather than as a “that” or an “it.” A grammatical error! If you decide that you should not kill animals or make them suffer, you will find your decision impeded by the culture. It takes work to find products that have not been tested on animals or that are not made of animals. It is pretty much impossible to avoid benefiting from medical research that is based on experiments on animals that have involved horrible suffering. That is one reason. The second reason is that cruelty among animals is built into nature itself. Life preys on life: that is the system of nature. I think it is important to keep these facts in mind, and to admit that it is genuinely difficult to avoid harming the other animals. We should not be too hard on ourselves, or each other; each of us has to find his or her own way to negotiate these difficult issues. But I do not think the fact that it is so hard to treat the other animals rightly is a reason not to try to do much better than we do.

And some of the ways we can do better are easy. In rich modern western societies, fresh produce from all over the world is available year round, and the delicious cuisines of many vegetarian cultures are available to us. In rich modern western societies, animals used for food are processed by the system of factory farming, one of the most wholesale systems of cruelty we have ever devised, and a genuine scandal to our humanity. Put those two things together on one side and what is there to set against them on the other side—that you like the taste of chicken?

Some people would argue that the fact that I mentioned earlier—that it is simply the system of nature for life to prey on life—is an excuse for eating animals and even for treating them however we please. It is natural. But to put it somewhat paradoxically, it is precisely our nature, human nature, to impose higher standards on ourselves than the ones that nature gives us. In the end, humanity will be what we make of it. Should we just be the cleverest of all species, who have found efficient and profitable ways to make use of many other species, and

are muscling the rest of them off the surface of the planet? Or should we be the species who tries to respond with respect and compassion to the other animals who share our fate as conscious living beings? The organizers of this session have called it “facing animals.” One of the animals you have to face is the one you see in the mirror every morning. And one thing that can make it a little easier to do that is to do as much as we can to avoid living at the expense of the other animals.φ

Notes

¹ I owe this formulation to Charlotte Brown.

² Eisner, *For Love of Insects* (Harvard, 2003), pp. 249-253.

³ Some have pointed to the evolution of these complex social capacities, especially altruism, to show that a gradualist story about what I am calling the one big difference—the fact that we are moral animals—is also possible. I do think that these things are relevant to the evolution of morality, but I think this is largely because they are probably relevant to the evolution of the special form of self-consciousness I am about to describe in the text. I do not share the common view that the roots of morality in animal nature are best shown by altruism. I think the nearest thing to morality in the animal world shows up in the phenomenon of the response to dominant animals. An animal that learns to refrain from an action he clearly wants to do in the presence of a dominant has learned a thought very much like the thought “I am not supposed to do that.” In his account of moral development in *A Theory of Justice* (Harvard, 1971, 1999), John Rawls identifies “the morality of authority” as the first stage in a human child’s moral development. At this stage a child has some sense that he “should” do what his loving parents wish him to do. “The morality of dominance” might be seen as a biological stage just prior to that, or, in the case of say, dogs, even overlapping with it.

⁴ In the mirror test the scientists paint a red spot on an animal’s body and then put her in front of a mirror. If the animal reaches for the spot or looks back at it or whatever, that is evidence that the animal recognizes herself in the mirror, and is curious about what has happened to her body. (Obviously the experiment needs more controls than I have described—you can go to the literature to see what they are.) Apes, elephants, and dolphins have passed this test, so it is argued that they have some form of self-consciousness. Other animals never recognize themselves, and some instead keep offering to fight with the image in the mirror, or engage in some other sort of social behavior with it. The mirror test does seem to show a form of self-consciousness that goes beyond the physical and social “self-location” abilities I describe in the text, but I find it interestingly difficult to articulate exactly why. Perhaps our sense is that an animal that can recognize itself in the mirror—that’s *me*—is recognizing its body as the locus of its subjectivity, and is therefore aware of its own subjectivity.

⁵ Strictly speaking, I do not think the grounds of our actions count as *reasons* for them until we have endorsed them in reflection.

⁶ This is a summary of a view I defend in *The Sources of Normativity*, Cambridge 1996.

⁷ This view is defended at greater length in my “Fellow Creatures: Kantian Ethics and Our Duties to Animals” in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, ed. Grethe B. Peterson. Volume 25/26 (2004). Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press; and on the Tanner Lecture website at www.TannerLectures.utah.edu.