

## Kant on Vegetarianism

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Kant's moral theory aims at highest good, and he believes that good will is the most unconditioned kind of good in the world. According to Kant, human beings are continually subject to the reason's demand, and they should try to cultivate their humanity following the universal moral laws. However, he doesn't leave us with an ambiguity about the definition of these universal laws; proposing his categorical imperative, he leads us to the universal laws. He believes that we would go toward unconditionality and the highest good following these rules. By the way, there are different interpretations of his categorical imperatives as well as some their extensions. There are two possible interpretations of the third formulation of categorical imperatives and its relation to the animal rights in general, and the vegetarians' viewpoint in particular. Some people might believe that "being end in itself" is incompatible with vegetarianism. They will invoke some quotes from Kant's work which support their views. In *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant explicitly prescribes killing the animals and making use of them, and it can be served as strong evidence to the idea that Kant's moral theory is inconsistent with vegetarianism. However, I don't think so. According to the second possible interpretation, I believe that Kant's moral theory is incompatible with the interpretations proposed by those who think it is not compatible with vegetarianism. In the first part of this paper, I briefly explain the relationship of reason and nature in Kant's moral theory. Then in the second part, I shall explain two concepts of "person" and "things" in his texts, and briefly, state the difference between rational being and non-rational being in his philosophy. Then. In the third part, I will explore some pieces by my Kantian opponent of vegetarianism, and I shall show that their interpretation is some kind of oversimplification. On the basis of some passages of Kant's writings, using one mental experiment, and one counterexample, I hope to show that Kant is completely sympathetic to vegetarianism.

**Key words:** Kant, vegetarianism, reason, nature, good will

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## 1. Kant's moral theory

Kant's moral theory aims at good or highest good. So we cannot get his main idea in moral theory without knowing his definition of good. Kant is a classical humanist, and it means that for him human beings is the measurement of all things. In one scene, it was a revolution in the modern era; in the premodern moral philosophy, the measurement of human being's actions was outside of human being.

According to Kant, there are two significant entities in the human being: reason and nature; and he believes in two things: first, the primacy and unconditionally of the human beings' reason, and secondly, the finitude and conditionality of human beings' nature. Kant in both practical reasoning (moral theory) and theoretical reasoning (epistemology) emphasis on these two points.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, he believes that we only experience the external worlds as they appear to us. He states that there is no such thing as pure knowledge of the external world. All that we know are conditioned. It means that we have some forms of intuitions (like space, time, causality, etc.) and all things that we can know would be organized in the forms that are already in our mind - some *a priori* conceptual schema. So, it is human being's forms of intuitions which determine the forms of our knowledge. Thus, for us, as the subject of knowing, all the things in the external world are placeholders and time-holders. Being time-dependent and place-dependent is two forms of our intuitions, and it means that we cannot "know" anything without these conditions.

Likewise, we have not to take "causality" as a subject matter of our research. The relationship of causality is *a priori* concept in our mind, which without it we cannot know anything. These categories are some innate frameworks that we already have in our mind. This epistemic limitation has originated from the conditional nature of human beings. Understanding, logic and mathematic include some other forms of our intuitions in theoretical reasoning.

Unconditionality in our nature is not limited just to the epistemic and cognitive scopes. Nature is conditioned in practice as well. We all are subject to our inclinations as well as motivations. And they force us to do something or not to do some other things. However, according to Kant, in the case of human beings, there is no necessary relation between our natures and the actions we do.

Kant says: "reason, restlessly seeking the unconditionally necessary." (Kant, 2008, 52) He thinks of reason as the unconditioned part of human beings. The final goal of the reason is unconditionality both in the individuals and the societies as a whole. Reason always place demands on us. Reason's goal is to get out of the conditionality of nature. What the reason ultimately demands is unconditionality in a whole.

However, we are finite human beings, and it means that as long as we are human beings, we never can grasp that kind of unconditionality. But, the important thing is to go toward that worthy goal which reason demands.

Kant defines freedom in terms of unconditionally. For Kant a rational agent is free, and it means that she, in spite of non-rational animals, is not completely subject to her inclinations and motivations. Reason in human beings makes some room for freewill and unconditionality. And this is why human beings have both duty and right.

Another important thing in his moral philosophy is the relationship between *is* and *ought*. In the *groundwork of the metaphysics of moral*, he tries to show that we cannot get the ought from the is. He believes that the moral authority comes from the inside of the human beings. Whatever which comes from outside of the human beings is not ethics. For Kant, moral concepts are *a priori* concepts. The normativity of morality comes from our innate intuitions, and not from some external calculations. Kant's moral theory is the opposite view of utilitarianism. For Kant, morality includes some universal laws which are independent of any external items such as religion, gender, time, space, etc. they are relative to context. However, utilitarian believes in some laws which provide the highest interns (or the highest expected utility, in its technical form,) in different contexts. The normativity of moral laws in Kant theory is not dependent on external entities as well.

According to Kant, *good* comes from our *will*. And the most absolute good is *good will*. Kant says:

“ [...] the highest good - what is unconditionally good - can be found only in such a will. So this wonderful good, which we call moral goodness, can't consist in anything but the thought of law in itself that only a rational being can have - with the will being moved to act by this thought and not by the hoped-for effect the action.” (Kant, 2008, 10)

For Kant, good will is the most absolute good. It is good in itself without any limitation and condition. It has originated form an unconditional reason, and it seems that it is not damaged by the conditionality of the nature, before coming to the practical levels of our actions.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>. Further readings on Kant are as follows: (Ameriks 1978; Aquila 1983; Beck 1960; Beiser1987; Bennett 1966; Engstrom 1992; Hill 1992; Korsgaard 1996; Langton 1998; Laywine 1993). For an ethical approach in human development see, (Alizadeh 2020.)

## 1.1 Rationality in Kant's ethics

*Rational* agent, for Kant, refers to an agent who is subject to the demands of reason while she has to follow it. She does the duties which are determined by the reason. She is also subject to her nature; however, she resists the motivations which are against the reason's demand. According to Kant, the criterion of rationality is human being's reason. The reason is the only authority for good will (Afroogh 2019; Afroogh 2020) And it means that we cannot ascribe being good or bad to the non-rational animals. They have no reason, and so, they are not moral agents. In *the groundwork of the metaphysics of moral*, Kant says:

“Will is a kind of causality that living beings exert if they are rational”  
(Kant, 2008, 41)

and he adds that:

“What makes a good will good? It isn't what it brings about, its usefulness in achieving some intended end. Rather, good will is good because of how it wills - i.e., it is good in itself.” (Kant, 2008, 5)

Kant believes that good will is the best kind of goodness in the world, and he states that all the other extensions of goodness have originated from good will. He says:

“Nothing in the world - or out of it! - can possibly be conceived that could be called ‘good’ without qualification except a *good will*. Mental talents such as intelligence, wit, and judgment, and temperaments such as courage, resoluteness, and perseverance are doubtless in many ways good and desirable; but they can become extremely bad and harmful if the person's character isn't good - i.e. if the will that is to make use of these •gifts of nature isn't good. Similarly with •gifts of fortune. Power, riches, honour, even health, and the over-all well-being and contentment with one's condition that we call ‘happiness’, create pride, often leading to arrogance, if there isn't a good will to correct their influence on the mind . . . . Not to mention the fact that the sight of someone who shows no sign of a pure and good will and yet enjoys

uninterrupted prosperity will never give pleasure to an impartial rational observer. So it seems that without a good will one can't even be worthy of being happy.” (Kant, 2008, 5)

Kant believes that human beings, in spite of non-rational beings, are subject to both reason and nature. But animals are subject just to their nature, and in fact, they are governed just by their nature and instincts. According to Kant,

“reason is given to us as a practical faculty, that is, one that is meant to have an influence on the will. Its proper function must be to produce a will that is good in itself and not good as a means” (Kant, 2008, 7)

Kant doesn't leave us with an ambiguity about the good will. He tries to provide us with some grounds for the universal moral laws which leads us to the good will. For him to be good is to follow the moral laws, and by proposing categorical imperatives, Kant leads us to the moral laws which reason demands us to follow.

Kant believes that people generally act according to some laws, no matter they are physicals or metaphysical laws. It seems that Moral laws are usually against our inclinations and motivations, and the categorical imperative provide us with some justifications for these moral laws. There is a continuously conflicts between reason and nature. And the moral law is the results of the causality of reason. We are always subject to the demands of reason as well as our inclinations. Unconditionality is the goal of reason, and happiness is the goal of our conditioned nature. Kant explains it as follows:

“This good will needn't be the sole and complete good, but it must be the condition of all others, even of the desire for happiness. So we have to consider two purposes: (1) the unconditional purpose of producing a good will, and (2) the conditional purpose of being happy. Of these, (1) requires the cultivation of reason, which - at least in this life - in many ways, limits and can indeed almost eliminate (2) the goal of happiness. This state of affairs is entirely compatible with the wisdom of nature; it doesn't have nature pursuing its goal clumsily; because reason, recognizing that its highest practical calling is to establish a good will, can by achieving that goal get a contentment of its own kind (the kind that comes from attaining a goal set by reason), even though this gets in the way of things that the person merely prefers.” (Kant, 2008, 7)

One of these conflicts between reason and nature is about animal rights in general and the vegetarianism in particular.

## 1-2 The Categorical Imperatives

Kant proposes some principles for our moral duties, and he calls them as the categorical imperative. Categorical means that they are unconditioned and imperative means that they are some kinds of commands. Kant says:

“the categorical imperative isn’t restricted by or made dependent on any condition. As absolutely (though practically) necessary, it can be called a ‘command’ in the strict sense.” (Kant, 2008, 20)

In *the groundwork of the metaphysics of morals*, Kant expresses several formulas for categorical imperatives. However, he believes that all of them aim the same goal. Three famous formulations are as follows.

1- “Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (Kant, 2008, 24)

The good agent always follows the universal law. She has removed all the subjective motivations as well as her inclinations. She doesn’t think just about her personal interest whenever she wants to do something. To be good means to act in accordance with a maxim which that can be a universal law.

2. “Act as though the maxim of your action were to become, through your will, a universal law of nature.” (Kant, 2008, 24)

Which is called as the autonomy formula means “This sounds very similar to the first formulation. However, in this case we focus on our status as universal law *givers* rather than universal law *followers*.” (Johenson, 2017)

3. “Act in such a way as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of anyone else, always as an end and never merely as a means.” (Kant, 2008, 29)

And the third formula of the categorical imperative which is important for my purpose in this essay concentrates on the concept of an end in itself. In this formula, Kant emphasizes on the point that moral law is not that which take a human being as a mean to end. The human being is different form other things in the world. She

has a reason, and she can have good will. She should change the world toward the highest good, and she is end in itself. The human being has innate worth, not just a conditional worth. So, a maxim is universal moral law if and only if it considers human beings as end in itself.

## 2. Rational *persons* and irrational *things*

According to Kant, there is a significant difference between rational human beings and non-rational animals. Human beings have reason, and because of this, they have both duty and right. However, the important question is that does this distinction between human beings and animals entails to the different moral approaches toward them? Some people might think that because non-rational animals are not moral agents, they have no duty, and so, they have no right as well. According to this viewpoint, we can kill the animals to eat them, and vegetarianism is bullshit. What is Kant's viewpoint in this issue?

In what follows I want to elaborate two possible answers to this question, and I will try to show the which of them is more close to the author's intention.

First of all, I need to distinguish two main concepts in this issue - i.e., *persons* and *things*.

Kant says:

Beings whose existence depends not on our will but on nature, if they are not rational beings, have only relative value as means, and are therefore called 'things' [Sachen]; whereas rational beings are called 'persons', because their nature already marks them out as ends in themselves (i.e. as not to be used merely as means)—which makes such a being an object of respect, and something that sets limits to what anyone can choose to do. (Kant, 2008, 28)

Kant believes in a major difference between rational beings and non-rational beings. He calls the former as *persons*, and he refers to the latter by *things*. Such a naming simply shows his perspective towards them. According to Kant, rational beings are not means, and they should not be misused as mere tools. They are ends in themselves, and these high positions are given to them due to the reason they have. They have the capacity of being good. They deserve to have goodwill, and they can change the world towards highest good. But the non-rational beings (like animals) have no reasons, and they have just a relative "values as means". They are not end in themselves. We can find them as means to our goals as well as tools to do our duties. This distinction causes two major interpretations about Kant's view on animal rights. (Gruen, SEP, 2017)

## 2-1 Against **vegetarianism**.

The first possible interpretation concentrates on Kant's categorical imperative and claims that according to the third formulation of the categorical imperatives, we should take human beings as end in itself. Kant says:

“Act in such a way as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of anyone else, always as an end and never merely as a means.” (Kant, 2008,29)

and he takes “the capacity to set oneself an end” as the unique feature of human beings:

“the capacity to set oneself an end – any end whatsoever – is what characterizes humanity (as distinguished from animality). Hence there is also bound up the end of humanity in our own person the rational will, and so the duty, to make ourselves worthy of humanity by culture in general, by procuring or promoting the capacity to realize all sorts of possible ends, so far as this is to be found in the human being himself.” (Kant, 1999, 523)

According to the first interpretation, we have not to consider the non-rational beings equal to the rational human beings. Killing is absolutely bad, but just about human beings. We can't extend such moral rules to non-rational beings. Animals are not morally considered, and due to that, we cannot forbid human beings from eating the animals. So, vegetarianism is not a universal categorical imperative. They still might claim a stronger thing and say that vegetarianism is not moral approach; for they (i.e., vegetarians) impose something to the human beings which are not morally correct. Vegetarians ignore the dignity of human beings, and take them equal to the non-rational beings. They should take human beings as end to themselves, not as things equal to the non-rational beings.

This interpretation of the third formulation of categorical imperatives is dependent upon some strong evidence indicated in Kant's writings. Kant in several pages of his books points out the differences between rational beings and animals. In addition to some of the above-mentioned quotes, he states:

“just as we say that since vegetables and domestic animals are, as regards their abundance, a human product, which he can use, wear out or destroy (kill), it seems we can also say that since most of his subjects are his own product, the supreme authority in a state, the sovereign, has the right to lead into war as he would take on a hunt, and into battles as on a pleasure trip.”

According to this passage, we are the owner of the domestic animals, and we can make use of them to satisfy our desires. Rational human beings are the only species who have reason, and they are end in themselves. Other non-rational animals have no reason, and they are not end in themselves. In one other passage, Kant explicitly prescribes killing the animals, and he says:

“the human beings are authorized to kill animals quickly (without pain)...”  
(Kant, 1999, 564)

So, it seems that according to this formulation of categorical imperative we can't propose a universal law to defend vegetarianism. Animals are not end in themselves and it means that we can use of them just as means to satisfy the desires of rational beings.

### **3. In defense of vegetarianism**

However, I believe that the opponents of vegetarianism end up in an oversimplification. Their interpretation is not accurate. And we need to see Kant's system as a holistic and consistent one. Accordant to the second interpretation, we can divide Kant's writing in this issue into two parts. First, the principles which he tries to teach us, and secondly, some extensions of those principles in his context, and in his specific contexts. The first part which includes the major part of his writings (including categorical imperatives, conceptual frameworks, discourses on duty and will, etc.) are universal. I mean these parts include his main theories which we need take seriously if we want to evaluate his philosophy. But some other parts of his philosophy (like some extensions in his books) are completely relative to the contexts, and they are just some examples of those universals theories at that time. I believe that Kant's categorical imperative is not inconsistent with animal rights in general, and vegetarianism in particular. To shed light on this view let me explain some quotes. Kant in *The Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* states:

“With regard to contingent (meritorious) duty to oneself it isn't sufficient that the action not conflict with humanity in our person as an end in itself; it must also

harmonize with it. In human nature there are predispositions to greater perfection that are part of nature's purpose for humanity ...; to neglect these might perhaps be consistent with the preservation of humanity as an end in itself but not with the furtherance of that end." (Kant, 2008, 30)

And,

"With regard to meritorious duty to others: - Humanity might survive even if

- no-one contributed to the happiness of others, but also
- no-one intentionally took anything away from the happiness of others;

and this is a likely enough state of affairs, because the end or purpose that all men naturally have is their own happiness. This would put human conduct into harmony with humanity as an end in itself, but only in a negative manner. For a positive harmony with humanity as an end in itself, what is required is that everyone positively tries to further the ends of others as far as he can. For the ends of any person, who is an end in himself, must as far as possible be also my ends, if that thought of him as an end in himself is to have its full effect on me." (Kant, 2008, 30)

and in the critique of pure reason he says:

"§17 [...] a propensity to wanton destruction of what is beautiful in inanimate nature [...] is opposed to a human being's duty to himself; for it weakens and uproots that feeling in hum, which, though not of itself moral, is still a disposition of sensibility that greatly promotes morality or at least prepares the way for it[...]. 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 this shared feelings of their suffering and so weakens and gradually uproots a natural predisposition that is very serviceable to morality in one's relations with other men. [...] – Even gratitude for the long service of a horse or dog 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."([13]: 6:443) pp 564

Kant emphasis on the point that "the human being is end in itself", however, we should not intemperate it in a negative meaning which ends up to some intuitively immoral actions. It seems that Kant doesn't mean that we have this right to use of all the other "things" just due to the fact that we are "person", irrespective to their

rights. By stressing on this slogan, Kant wants to prevent the misusing of human beings, not letting human beings to misuse other things. Even though, he explicitly states that the “human beings are authorized to kill the animals”, but it is not some part of his philosophical principles. It is just one example of a universal law which he is committed to.

In the first chapter of *the doctrine of the virtue*, Kant says:

A human being has a duty to cultivate his natural powers (powers of spirit, mind and body) as means to all sorts of possible ends.  
(Kant, 1999, 665)

The first, though not the principle, duty of a human being to himself as an animal being is to preserve himself to his animal nature. (Kant, 1999, 546)

It seems that in virtue of such a principle, Kant concludes that we (i.e., human beings) are authorized to kill the animals. As it is clear in the last quotes, he is not sympathetic with killing or misusing of the animals, and he permits it just in the cases that he thinks it is necessary for the human being's living on the earth.

A mental experiment would help us to have a better understanding of Kant’s moral theory on this issue.

Consider that we could make meat using some chemical experiments in the labs, and this kind of meat was so similar to the real meat and it was as healthy as the real meat derived from animals. Moreover, consider that we could make such meat using some non-living materials derived from earth without killing any living-beings including plants or animals. We can produce such meat very cheaply as well. Now, imagine that Kant is alive and he is asked about killing animals to eat while we can easily make it through a chemical process. What would be his answer?

Focusing on Kant’s writing, specifically on the last above-mentioned quotes, it seems that he definitely considers It (i.e., killing the animals) as an immoral action.

So, according to this interpretation, It seems that a person who says "doesn’t strain them [i.e. the animals] beyond their capacities” would be definitely sympathetic with the core idea of vegetarianism.

An important part of the content of “end in itself” is to respect to our being a human being. Kant state that we should respect the animals if we want to respect ourselves. We are “end to ourselves” means that we should cultivate our humanity throw good will as well as good actions. He explicitly states that we should avoid form some works and actions which are not harmonic with our humanity. It seems that we

cannot cultivate the moral aspects of our humanity while we don't respect to other things' rights.

Kant says "all duties to others also have an aspect of duties to ourselves". So, my good treatment with some people who need some help, is one kind of my duties to myself. I need to cultivate my humanity and doing good action helps me a lot to get it.

### **A counterexample against the opponent:**

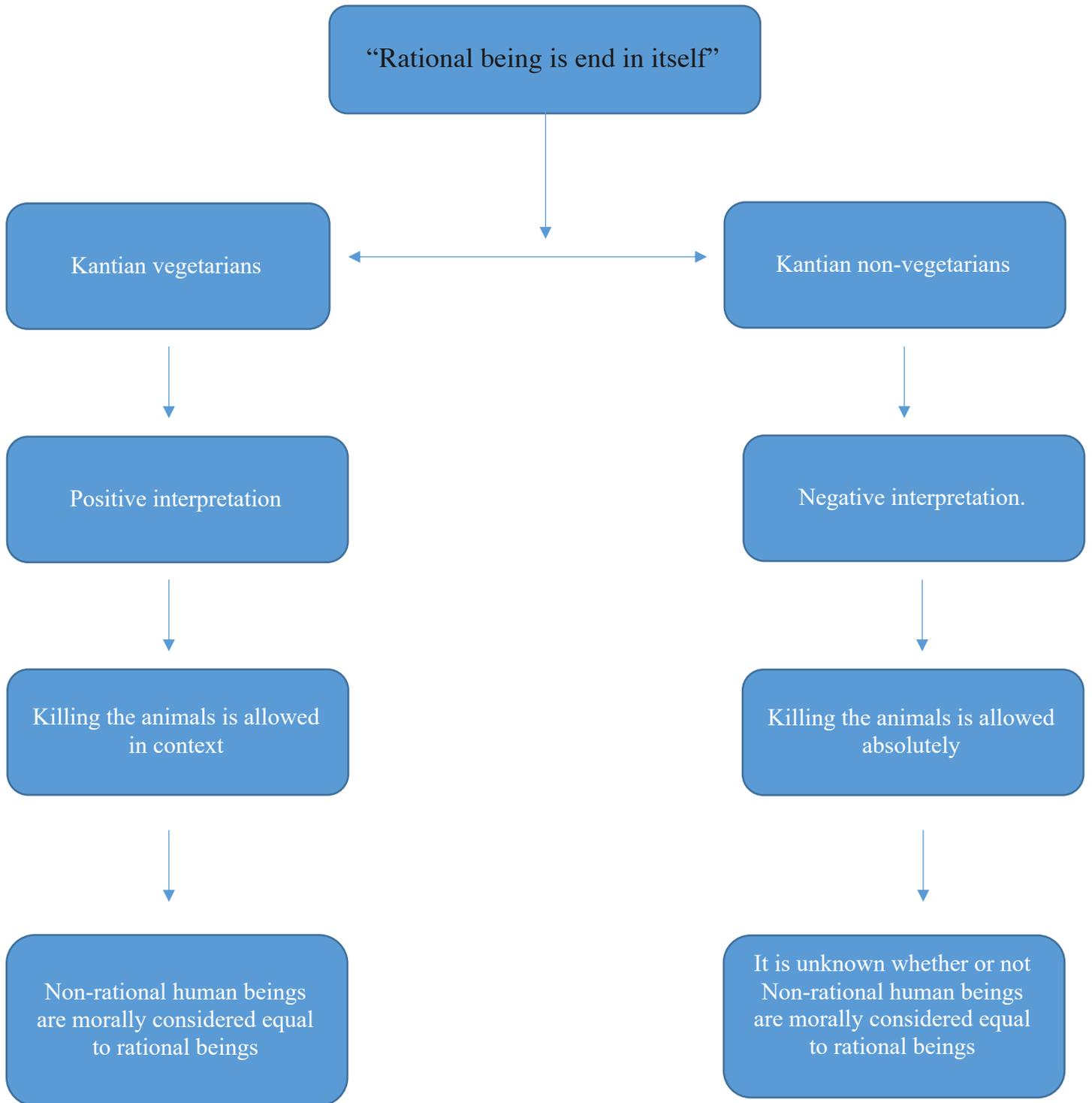
As I explained it in section 2, Kant distinguishes between two concepts of person and things. he refers to the rational beings by the "person" and he uses "things" to point out the non-rational beings. he talks about human beings and animal as two famous kinds of these two categories; however, his main concepts are not human beings and animals. We know that many humans don't have reasons and they are not rational beings; so, are not *persons*. Infants, children, and some crazy people, are not rational. And it seems that, according to Kant, we should put them in the categories of "things" who have neither reason nor moral duties. But, what about the rights? Do they have rights as the same as rational beings?

It seems that they (Infants, children, etc.) are obviously human beings and due to that they deserve to have human rights. They are not rational, and they are not considered as moral agents; however, it doesn't mean that we shouldn't consider their moral and human rights.

The same sentence is true about animals as well. They are not rational, and it means that they are not moral agents; however, it doesn't mean that we can violate their obvious rights; And the right of living is the most obvious right for every living-being.

A kantian opponent of vegetarianism states that "end in itself" means that rational beings are not equal to the animals, and it means that we can kill them, and it is nothing wrong with it. So, if their logic were correct, they could ascribe to the Kant that infants, children, and crazy people are not morally equal to the rational people, and they have no human rights. It seems implausible.

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