Fellow Creatures

(Draft. Final Version available at [*Philosophy*](https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/philosophy/article/christine-m-korsgaard-fellow-creatures-our-obligations-to-the-other-animals-oxford-university-press-2018-252pp-2495-hbk-isbn-9780198753858/27A98B9D6FC595D4FF62CD8BFB967C86).)

It is good to read Korsgaard again. This book is a thoughtful, passionate, and at times radical account of the obligations we have to our fellow creatures. It combines elements of Korsgaard’s well-known views on meta-ethics and Kant’s moral philosophy, with new discussion of the other animals.

The book is divided into three sections. Each section is rich, and I will not be able to do justice to their richness here. Instead, I offer a brief summary and discussion of some key points.

*Part 1: Human Beings and the Other Animals*

Korsgaard begins the book with a distinctive meta-ethical claim, namely that “all importance is tethered” (p.10). What does that mean? Her claim is that for something to matter is for it to matter to some creature. Coffee matters, because coffee matters to us humans; and acorns matter, because acorns matter to squirrels. And that’s about the end of the story when it comes to why things matter.

This leads to a striking conclusion, namely that it does not really make sense to ask which creatures are more important.[[1]](#footnote-1) In response to the question of who matters more, humans or squirrels, Korsgaard will reply: matters for whom? Humans matter to humans, squirrels matter to squirrels, and that’s it.

This is radical. And Korsgaard is happy to accept the consequences that follow. For instance, later on in the book, she notes that:[[2]](#footnote-2)

One implication of this view is that if you compare two different scenarios with entirely different creatures in them, neither can be better than the other. (p. 183)

Imagine an empty world, populated only by one blob-fish. Now compare that world with our own. If we ask which world is better, Korsgaard will reply that our world is better for the creatures in it, and the other world is better for the blob-fish, full stop. She denies that either world is better – or matters more – than the other; indeed, to even ask which is better is to lose sight of her thought that all value is tethered to the standpoints of valuing creatures. This doesn’t seem plausible to me. With all due respect to the lonely blob-fish, I think our world is better than theirs (we have more individuals, more species, more diversity, and of course, humans). But Korsgaard disagrees. It’s hard to know what to make of this disagreement. I take the preceding example to be a worrying objection, but Korsgaard seems happy to accept it as an implication instead.

Korsgaard does think we differ from the other animals though (ch.3). She locates this difference in our rationality (pp.38-44) and our capacity for normative self-evaluation (pp.45-6). She suggests that this might make an “*enormous* difference” (p.46) between us and other creatures. But nevertheless, the tethering view of value means that, no matter how big this difference is, human lives are not better and do not matter any more than the lives of other animals (ch.4).

*Part II. Immanuel Kant and the Animals*

In the second part of the book, Korsgaard offers a sustained discussion of Kant and other animals. Overall, she looks to slightly amend her account of Kant’s moral philosophy such that it provides an adequate account of obligations to our fellow creatures.

This involves an interesting discussion of the Formula of Universal Law (ch.7). Regarding Kant’s example of false promising, Korsgaard writes:

Kant’s argument against the universalizability of false promising depends on the thought that in a world where people in need of money regularly offered false promises, lenders would eventually *get the idea*. (p. 129)

However, she notes that this doesn’t quite apply to other animals:

[…] many non-human animals are likely to be gullible even to the most universally practiced of human tricks. (p.129)

Here, our obligations to other animals and the Formula of Universal Law seem to come apart. And in response, Korsgaard sides with the animals:[[3]](#footnote-3)

[…] this appears to be an inadequacy in Kant’s test, not a vindication of playing tricks on non-human animals […] Maxims involving the treatment of non-human animals, then, have precisely the features that put Kant’s universal law test under the most strain. (p.129)

Moments like these are some of the best parts of the book. In them, we see Korsgaard honestly grappling with two of her strongest commitments: to Kant’s moral philosophy, and our fellow creatures. However, just when she’s acknowledged that there is a real tension here, she pulls back:

This doesn’t have to mean that there is something wrong with Kant’s Formula of Universal Law, considered simply as a criterion of right and wrong […] (p.129)

This is a bit unsatisfying. Korsgaard hits upon what looks like a deep-seated tension between Kant’s moral philosophy and obligations to other animals, but doesn’t follow through on it.

Instead, she turns to discuss Kant’s formula of humanity (ch.8), to make the case that all creatures are ends-in-themselves. The details of this are a little murky, but I think the basic thought is as follows. Korsgaard claims that “value comes from valuing” (p. 136). In her familiar work on Kant, she argues that we value things, and in doing so are committed to viewing ourselves as absolutely valuable. Of course, this thought has sparked a lot of discussion, but Korsgaard does not address that here (more on this later). Instead, she looks to extend this thought to the other animals:

As rational beings, we need to justify our actions, to think there are reasons for them. That requires us to suppose that some ends are worth pursuing […] That then is the starting point from which we build up our system of values – we take those things to be good or bad absolutely – and in doing that we are taking ourselves to be ends in ourselves. But we are not the only beings for whom things can be good or bad; the other animals are no different from us in that respect. So we are committed to regarding all animals as ends in themselves. (p. 145)

This leads into a discussion of *life*. Korsgaard claims that:

A creature is a substance that necessarily cares about itself, a substance whose nature it is to value itself. The creature values herself by pursuing her own functional good and the things that contribute to it as the ends of action. Valuing, according to my view, is originally an activity of life, a feature of a sentient creature’s relationship to herself. (p. 137)

She continues (in ch.9) to claim that conscious well-functioning life is the final good (pp. 162-3). I found this position intriguing, but a little hard to follow. It also feels like quite a departure from Kant, who continually emphasises the importance of pure practical reason, transcendental freedom and the moral law, not life itself. In moving away from Kant’s emphasis on reason, freedom and morality towards organic conscious life, Korsgaard seems to end up closer to certain post-Kantians, or even the *Lebensphilosophen*.

*Part III. Consequences*

In the final section of the book, Korsgaard considers some of the consequences of the views that she has laid out. She covers an impressive range of topics in this section, including: predation, the abolition of pets, what we should do about wild animals, our duties to species qua species, eating animals, working animals, animals in the military, and the use of animals in scientific experiments. I found these discussions thoughtful and passionate. Korsgaard clearly cares about these issues, and it’s hard to read this and feel otherwise.

One position worth noting is that Korsgaard thinks that species, qua species don’t matter (ch.11). What matters are individual sentient animals, and not species. This seems to be a consequence of her tethering view of value, in that she claims that it doesn’t really make sense for something to be good-for a species. Things can be good-for individual animals, but not for species, and therefore, species don’t matter in-themselves.

Towards the end of the book, Korsgaard consciously decides to occupy the moral high ground – “The air is better up there” (p. 233). I agree, and found these moments especially moving. For instance, when discussing eating animals, Korsgaard writes the following:

[…] let’s get back to the high ground. The question is not about just numbers and consequences. It is about you and a particular animal, an individual creature with a life of her own, a creature for whom things can be good or bad. It is about how you are related to that particular creature when you eat her, or use products that have been extracted from her in ways that are incompatible with her good. You are treating her as a mere means to your own ends, and that is wrong. (p.223)

She occupies this high ground well.

*Concluding Thoughts*

I want to end by saying something about Korsgaard’s way of doing philosophy. I think she herself said it best though, in an interview at *3a.m*.:[[4]](#footnote-4)

[…] when I think of other philosophers who have spent their lives developing some system, and I admire their work even though I disagree with it, I think of them as the guardians of some set of ideas and lines of thoughts that philosophers through time have found it fruitful and illuminating to think through. That seems to me a valuable thing to do, even if in the end I don’t think their views are right. […]

I think this is revealing. Korsgaard is not known for thoroughly engaging with others. This book, for instance, doesn’t really keep up with work in meta-ethics,[[5]](#footnote-5) Kant scholarship,[[6]](#footnote-6) or even work on the moral status of animals in Kant.[[7]](#footnote-7) In one way, this is unsatisfying. A lot of this other work is good, and it is a shame that she doesn’t engage with it. I don’t say this just to criticise Korsgaard, but instead to point out what feels like a missed opportunity; I think Korsgaard could learn from being in conversation with this work, but this work could also learn from being in conversation with her.

But maybe I’m missing the point. Perhaps there’s something valuable about Korsgaard keeping her distance, and developing her own ideas and lines of thought. There is currently plenty of philosophy that contributes to ongoing conversations and is well-grounded in the literature. This is a perfectly respectable way of working. But there should also be room for thinkers who step back from this, and as Korsgaard says, spend “their lives developing some system”, as “guardians of some set of ideas and lines of thought”. And if anyone deserves such a platform, surely Korsgaard does. (Of course, not everyone could have this platform, and as such, it’s not clear how universalizable the practice is. But that’s okay, not all exceptions are bad.)

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1. There is one possible exception here, where for instance, “even from the point of view of the other animals, what is good-for human beings matters more than what is good-for-those other animals themselves” (p.11). In this case, when other animals care about us more than they care about themselves, and we care about us more than we care about them, we could say that we matter more than these other animals. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cf. Her discussion of humans, dogs and pigs on pp. 67-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. She also acknowledges that the Formula of Universal Law faces other problems; “[…] maxims involving purely natural actions are hard to rule out by means of this test […] Suicide is a method of escaping your own misery that depends only on the laws of nature for its effectiveness, not on any convention. No matter how universally practiced it is, it will work.” (p. 128) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Archived here: <https://316am.site123.me/articles/treating-people-as-ends-in-themselves?c=end-times-archive> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. As far as I know, Korsgaard has never responded to Enoch (2006), Langton (2007), Stern (2015), or Timmermann (2006), amongst others. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Korsgaard doesn’t really cite any work on Kant, other than her own. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Korsgaard doesn’t engage with work on Kant and animals; notable omissions include Broadie and Pybus (1974), Denis (2000), and Timmermann (2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)