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ARTICLES

A Kantian Approach to the Moral Considerability of Non-human Nature

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Abstract
A Kantian approach can establish that non-human natural entities are morally considerable and that humans have duties to them. This is surprising, because most environmental ethicists have either rejected or overlooked Kant when it comes to this issue. Inspired by an argument of Christine Korsgaard, I claim that both humans and non-humans have a natural good, which is whatever allows an entity to function well according to the kind of entity it is. I argue that humans are required to confer normative value on the natural good of all entities that have a natural good. This is so because, as a matter of fact, humans confer normative value on their own natural good simply because it is a natural good, which commits humans to the position that any natural good deserves to have normative value conferred on it. Since non-human natural entities have a natural good, their natural good deserves to have normative value conferred on it as well, and this is sufficient to make non-human natural entities morally considerable such that humans have duties to them.

Keywords Animals · Kant · Moral considerability · Value

Introduction

An important goal of some environmental ethicists is to establish that non-human natural entities (hereafter "NNE") are morally considerable such that humans have duties to them. This paper examines a Kantian approach to this goal. Contrary to a common belief, such an approach is promising. Historically, environmental ethicists who engage with Kant are highly critical of his account of duties regarding NNE, arguing that a Kantian approach to environmental ethics is irredeemably anthropocentric, perhaps speciesist, and able to establish merely indirect duties regarding NNE. This plausibly explains why environmental ethicists in recent years have largely ignored Kantian approaches. Contrary to this standard assumption, I argue

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that a Kantian approach can plausibly secure direct moral duties to NNE, and in a way that avoids the alleged problems of anthropocentrism, speciesism, and problems associated with indirect duties. This is inspired by Christine Korsgaard's argument that, on Kantian grounds, human beings have direct duties to non-human animals.

In the first section of this paper, I present Kant's own account of indirect duties regarding nature, relying on his *Doctrine of Virtue*. In the second section, I consider why environmental ethicists have largely rejected or ignored Kantian approaches, focusing on charges of anthropocentrism, speciesism, and the inadequacy of indirect duties. Next, in section three, I discuss Korsgaard's Kantian argument for recognizing that human moral agents have direct duties to non-human animals, which depends on her claim that both humans and animals have what she calls a "natural good." Section four offers and defends my own argument, inspired by Korsgaard's, for extending direct duties to all entities with a natural good, including plants. The fifth section addresses a potential problem with accepting my account, namely that it increases conflict among duties. A brief section six offers some closing remarks, making the claim that environmental ethicists should take Kantian approaches seriously, in part because they are not monolithic.

It will be helpful to clarify several matters from the outset. The intended audience of this paper is scholars working on animal and environmental ethics, particularly those who are skeptical of a Kantian approach to establishing the moral considerability of NNE. Although the findings may be of interest to some Kant scholars, this is not an exercise in Kant scholarship, which would require far more engagement with various primary and secondary literature. Next, I defend a purportedly "Kantian" approach, which might be taken to mean various things. To reduce ambiguity, I do not claim that Kant himself would endorse my arguments, nor that he should have done so in light of his other commitments. I offer no opinion on where the historical Kant would have stood on this matter. Rather, beginning from a recognizably Kantian starting point, I make the case that there are compelling grounds for recognizing that NNE are morally considerable. In this way, my approach is similar to that of Korsgaard, as I am open to amending Kant's own ideas, particularly his claim that moral agents do not owe direct duties to NNE. Admittedly, this is a significant alteration to Kant, but there is good reason to take this approach. The most trenchant criticisms of Kant have not charged merely that Kant himself failed to see that NNE are morally considerable, but rather that basic aspects of Kant's philosophy are fundamentally incompatible with that position. I shall dispute this, and I think the resulting position reasonably warrants the moniker "Kantian," albeit in a non-dogmatic sense. For example, the approach I defend relies heavily on the idea that all normative value requires a rational valuer who "legislates" that value by means of her rational will, ideas that are readily associated with Kantianism.

Kant on Indirect Duties Regarding Non-humans

At first glance, any attempt to establish on Kantian grounds that moral agents have duties to NNE might seem unpromising. After all, Kant himself states explicitly that humans have no direct duties *to* non-rational nature, but only indirect duties

regarding non-rational nature. In §17 of the *Doctrine of Virtue*, Kant writes, "A propensity to wanton destruction of what is *beautiful* in inanimate nature (*spiritus destructionis*) is opposed to a human being's duty to himself," because it extirpates one's disposition to appreciate natural beauty "apart from any intention to use it."[1] For Kant, beautiful NNE are not themselves morally considerable, nor do moral agents have duties *to* them. A moral agent might have a duty *regarding* beautiful NNE, provided such entities are relevant for that moral agent's duties to herself or other rational entities. In Kant's example, "wanton destruction" of beautiful crystal formations or plant life is a violation of one's duty to oneself, because one has a duty to cultivate dispositions in oneself that are favorable to morality, and a propensity to wanton destruction is inimical to morality.

The case is likewise for Kant with non-human animals, "violent and cruel treatment" of which is "intimately opposed to a human being's duty to himself."[2] Non-human animals are not morally considerable, nor can moral agents have direct duties *to* them, yet cruelty to animals can make one indifferent to the suffering of rational entities, and this indifference can be inimical to morality. Since one has a duty to develop dispositions in oneself that are favorable to morality, one has a duty to abstain from cruelty to non-human animals. But, once again, this is only a duty regarding non-human animals and not a duty to them.[3]

Kant denies that moral agents can have direct duties to NNE, because "duty to any subject is moral constraint by that subject's will."[4] For Kant, only a person can so constrain others, because only persons are rational. Since NNE are not rational, moral agents cannot be constrained by their wills, and so moral agents do not have direct duties to NNE. Kant adds that human beings are the only beings "capable of obligation (active or passive)."[5] If a moral agent should suppose that he has duties to non-humans, Kant blames this on "an amphiboly in his concepts of reflection," whereby one confuses his duties *regarding* non-humans with duties *to* non-humans. All duties regarding NNE are ultimately duties to oneself or other human beings.[6]

[1] Kant (1996b), 6:443. All references to Kant's work cite the volume and page numbers (e.g., 6:443) of the German Royal Academy edition of Kant's collected works, as reproduced in the English translations. See Kant (1900).

[2] Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:443.

[3] For an older but nonetheless interesting exchange concerning Kant's position on duties regarding non-human animals, see the following: Broadie and Pybus (1974), Tom Regan (1976), Broadie and Pybus (1978). Broadie and Pybus argue that Kant is inconsistent, because he claims that humans have "indirect duties" to non-rational "things" (namely non-human animals), despite claiming elsewhere that humans can have no duties (even "indirect" ones) to non-rational entities. Regan responds that Broadie and Pybus have misunderstood Kant, who maintains that "maltreatment" of non-human animals is wrong only because it leads to maltreating persons.

[4] Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:442.

[5] It is not altogether clear why Kant believes that non-persons cannot obligate passively, i.e. be moral patients. I discuss this in conjunction with Korsgaard's arguments below. Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:442.

[6] Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:442.

This view is not unique to §17 of the *Doctrine of Virtue*, as Kant makes similar claims in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* and the *Lectures on Ethics*.[7]

The Absence of Kantian Approaches in Environmental Ethics

Given Kant's remarks, it may seem unsurprising that few environmental ethicists have sought to establish on Kantian grounds that NNE are morally considerable, although some Kantians have considered how Kant's thought might pertain to environmental issues.[8] Many environmental ethicists aim to establish that human beings have *direct* duties to NNE,[9] but Kant claims that this is impossible. It is therefore unsurprising that most animal and environmental ethicists have ignored Kant, except when they have severely criticized his approach.[10] With few exceptions, one does not find robust Kantian approaches in the field of environmental ethics.[11] Plausibly, this is because Kant's philosophy is thought to be hopelessly anthropocentric, if not outright speciesist. As Zach Vereb argues, this idea can be found in an early paper by Christina Hoff, "Kant's Invidious Humanism," published in the journal Environmental Ethics in 1983.[12] Hoff makes the case that Kant's limitation of moral considerability to humanity is "arbitrary and morally impoverished."[13] Due to this, she believes that Kant's philosophy is likely useless for environmental ethics. In the more recent environmental ethical literature, one does not find much in the way of explicit criticism of Kantian approaches. I propose that this is because Kant's irrelevance is thought to be obvious, rendering such critique unnecessary. This would explain why Kant is virtually ignored in the environmental literature, aside from some relatively old pieces that are highly critical of him.

It is true that, in recent years, some Kant scholars have written on animals, such as Korsgaard herself, Patrick Kain, James Rocha, and the various authors whose papers are collected in 2020's Kant and *Animals*.[14] However, this work does not examine what role Kant's thought might play from an environmental point of view, because it focuses almost exclusively on animals, and it often does so for the purpose of enhancing our understanding of Kant's philosophy. These projects are worthwhile, but they do not provide counterexamples to my claim that Kantian approaches are nearly absent within environmental ethics. If, as I argue below, Kant's thought can be used to develop a plausible account of direct duties to both flora and fauna, then it is a mistake for environmental ethicists to reject or ignore Kantian approaches.

[7] See Kant (1996a). See also Kant (1997), 27:458–460, 27:710.

[8] See Wood and O'Neill (1998), O'Neill (1997). See also Taylor (1986), which is generally "Kantian" in that it offers a deontological approach to environmental ethics.

[9] For example, see Rolston (1988), pp. 45–93, 160–191. Rolston argues that humans have genuine duties *to* animals, ecosystems, and species, which duties are not parasitic on duties to humans.

[10] See, for example, Heather Fieldhouse (2004), Sebo (2004), Skidmore (2001).

[11] For exceptions, see Svoboda (2014), Svoboda (2015).

[12] Vereb (2021).

[13] Hoff (1983).

[14] Callanan and Allais (2020), Kain (2010), Rocha (2015).

Let us consider the charge that Kant's position is anthropocentric. The meaning of the term "anthropocentrism" is often unclear. Tim Hayward defines anthropocentrism as "the mistake of giving exclusive or arbitrarily preferential consideration to human interests as opposed to the interests of other beings."[15] On this understanding, anthropocentrism is by definition arbitrary and mistaken. It is closely related to "speciesism," which Onora O'Neill defines as the "*unjustified* preference for the human species," which "accords humans moral standing, but unjustifiably accords animals of other species no, or only lesser, standing."[16] As O'Neill notes, critics of anthropocentrism contend that it leads directly to speciesism, because arbitrarily preferencing human interests over those of other kinds of entity leads to the unjustified denial (or lessening) of moral considerability for non-human species.

So defined, one can agree that anthropocentrism and speciesism are problematic. Typically, views that are arbitrary, mistaken, or unjustified are best avoided. But it is not clear that Kant countenances such anthropocentrism and speciesism. In fact, it seems that Kant's position is not anthropocentric, but rather, as Allen Wood argues, "logocentric," given that "it recognizes no value which is independent of the dignity of rational nature."[17] For Wood, logocentrists believe "that there is a tight connection between the fact that rational beings are capable of appreciating and accepting valid norms and values and the idea that their rational capacity, which provides the sole possible authority for such norms and values, must be seen as their ground."[18] Another way of stating this is that all value requires a rational valuer, such that all value is ultimately grounded in rationality.

Does Kant's logocentric position lead to speciesism? Recall that speciesism is the unjustified denial or diminishment of moral considerability to non-humans. As made clear in §17 of the *Doctrine of Virtue*, Kant himself denies that non-rational NNE (including non-human animals) are morally considerable, because he denies that moral agents can have duties to non-rational entities. But is this *apparently* speciesist position required by his logocentrism? Kant evidently thought his position did require this, but it is not clear why. My argument in section four assumes logocentrism while acknowledging the moral considerability of non-rational NNE. If I am right about this, then the Kantian position need not be speciesist, because it need not deny or diminish the moral considerability of non-rational NNE.

As it happens, I believe that Kant himself was not a speciesist, at least not in the sense defined by O'Neill, which involves an *unjustified* preference for some species. Kant does provide a justification for limiting moral considerability to humans, namely that non-humans are non-rational and thus lack the means to reciprocally place other beings under obligation via their wills. One might disagree with Kant, but speciesism refers to something like a prejudicial stance in which one ignores the interests of non-humans simply because they are non-human. Moreover,

[15] Hayward (1997), p. 51. Rolston instead suggests that anthropocentrism is the position "that humans are superior to animals" (and presumably other NNE as well). See Rolston, *Environmental Ethics*, p. 64.
[16] Onora O'Neill, "Environmental Values," pp. 128–129.
[17] Wood and O'Neill, "Nonrational Nature," p. 195.
[18] Wood and O'Neill, "Nonrational Nature," p. 195.

species-membership does not play a direct role in Kant's reasoning. For Kant, it is not humanity's species that makes it special, but rather the alleged fact that humanity happens to be the only rational species of which we are aware. Again, one might reject Kant's position or his reasoning, but he does not appear to be guilty of speciesism in the relevant sense. Nonetheless, my primary aim in this paper is not to defend Kant against the charge of speciesism. Rather, I want to examine whether a Kantian approach can establish that NNE are morally considerable such that humans have duties to them.

In her 2004 Tanner Lecture, Korsgaard grants that Kant's position entails that non-human animals themselves have no obligations, "because they are not conscious of their principles," but she notes that "it is not obvious why Kant should think that it follows that we [humans] have no obligations to them."[19] Granted that non-human animals are not moral agents, why can they not be moral patients? In other words, why does Kant deny that non-human animals are morally considerable such that moral agents can have direct duties to them? By itself, Kant's logocentric position, which grounds all value in rationality, does not entail this. It is perfectly conceivable that the moral considerability of anything should be grounded in rationality *and* that non-human animals should be morally considerable.[20] In the next section, I examine a Kantian argument by Korsgaard that attempts to establish just this.

However, before turning to that, it might be asked what value is to be found in direct duties. Why not instead accept Kant's claim that our obligations to NNE are merely indirect duties?[21] There are many possible reasons why one might favor direct duties to NNE. First, it might be thought that indirect duties identify the wrong reasons for caring about non-humans. Imagine that two persons choose to be vegetarians for moral reasons. The first is responsive to the idea that killing and consuming non-human animals does wrong to the animals themselves. The other person is responsive to the idea that killing and consuming animals does wrong to himself rather than to the animals. It is at least plausible to think, as James Skidmore does, that the latter person might perform the right action but for the wrong reason.[22] Second, one might think that indirect duties are relatively weak or easily overridden, thus failing to establish sufficient protection for NNE. Now perhaps this is false and an indirect-duty approach is more satisfying than it appears,[23] but it is understandable why environmental and animal ethicists have been skeptical of indirect duties regarding NNE. It is therefore worth considering whether a Kantian approach, contrary to the stand presumption, can secure such direct duties.

[19] Korsgaard (2004), p. 87.

[20] Wood blames Kant's apparent speciesism on what he calls Kant's "personification principle," which holds that "rational nature has a moral claim on us only *in the person of* a being who actually possesses it." See Wood and O'Neill, "Nonrational Nature," p. 193.

[21] As is done in Svoboda, *Duties*.

[22] Skidmore, "Duties.".

[23] See Svoboda, "Reconsideration.".

Korsgaard on Direct Duties to Animals

I will examine the central argument from Korsgaard's 2004 Tanner Lecture.[24] There she makes a helpful distinction between rationality as the enabling condition of valuing and rationality as the object that is valued.[25] Being rational might be a necessary and sufficient condition for being a moral agent, but it does not follow that rationality is a necessary condition for being an object of value (or a moral patient). As Korsgaard interprets Kant, the source of the normative value of anything is the legislation of a rational being, such that rational beings confer normative value on certain objects.[26] Now any animal (human and non-human alike) has what Korsgaard calls a "natural good," which is whatever allows that animal to function well according to the kind of animal it is. An animal "is an organic system that matters to itself, for it pursues its own good for its own sake."[27] Moreover, the natural good of an animal is good from its own point of view. This natural good does not by itself have the normative value that only rational agents can confer, but animals are predisposed naturally to pursue this good.

It is important to note that Korsgaard does not deny that non-human animals might have norms in some sense, nor does she deny that non-human animals themselves value their natural good. Her point is that the mere fact that something is the natural good of an entity is not a sufficient condition for that natural good to have the normative value that morally obligates moral agents. This distinction between natural good and normative value becomes evident when one considers the following example. A moral agent can recognize that state of affairs *y* is naturally good for animal *x*, but such a moral agent can deny coherently that he has any duty to promote *y* for *x*. In other words, a moral agent can recognize the fact that *y* is good for *x*, but this mere fact and its recognition are not sufficient to morally obligate any moral agent. According to Korsgaard, the kind of normative value that obligates moral agents is always conferred by a rational being, such that a moral agent has duties to *x* only if a rational being has conferred normative value on *x*. This is why the natural good of animals is by itself "non-normative"—it lacks the normative value that is necessary for moral agents to have duties to it.

Although Korsgaard does not give concrete examples, it seems that the natural good of an animal would consist in its survival, participation in procreation, acquiring nourishment, remaining healthy, and so on. It thus seems that threats to the natural good of an animal would be posed by disease, predators, severe weather, lack of shelter, etc. Both human and non-human animals share such a natural good. Human animals confer normative value on this natural good when they so legislate. That is, humans can and do legislate that their natural good has the normative value that obligates moral agents to respect that good. But since the object of this legislation

[24] More recently, she has provided a very similar argument in a book on the subject of Kant and animal ethics. See Korsgaard (2018).

[25] For purposes of the following discussion, see Korsgaard, "Fellow Creatures," pp. 99-106.

[26] See Korsgaard, "Fellow Creatures," p. 104.

[27] Korsgaard, "Fellow Creatures," p. 103.

is humans' good as animals, and since non-human animals share this same natural good, humans also confer normative value on the natural good of non-human animals via this legislation. In Korsgaard's words, "But it is our natural good, in this sense, that we *confer* normative value when we value ourselves as ends-in-ourselves."[28] Moral agents have duties to something if and only if that thing has normative value. Something has normative value if and only if rational beings confer normative value on that thing. Rational beings confer normative value on the natural good of non-human animals, hence moral agents (like humans) have duties to non-human animals.[29] This is to say that non-human animals are morally considerable such that humans have direct duties to them.[30] To further clarify this argument, I reformulate it as follows. I call this argument A1.

(1) If humans confer normative value on their natural good, then they confer normative value on the natural good of all animals.
(2) Humans confer normative value on their natural good.
(3) So humans confer normative value on the natural good of all animals.
(4) If the natural good of some entity has normative value, then humans have direct duties to that entity.
(5) Therefore humans have direct duties to all animals.

The first premise makes what is probably the most controversial claim in the argument. Korsgaard argues that humans confer normative value on their natural good as animals, and she implies that it would be incoherent for humans to simultaneously grant normative value to their own animal good while denying it to others' animal good. But is this true? This move is similar to one Kant employs in the *Groundwork*, in which he argues the following:

> The ground of this principle [the categorical imperative] is: *rational nature exists as an end in itself*. The human being necessarily represents his own existence in this way; so far it is thus a *subjective* principle of human actions. But every other rational being also represents his existence in this way consequent on just the same rational ground that also holds for me; thus it is at the same time an *objective* principle from which, as a supreme practical ground, it must be possible to derive all laws of the will.[31]

Kant argues that *any* rational entity is an end-in-itself, because every rational entity necessarily represents itself as an end-in-itself. It is thus an "objective principle" that all rational entities are ends-in-themselves, and any moral agent ought

[28] Korsgaard, "Fellow Creatures," p. 104.
[29] For a related discussion, see Korsgaard, *Sources*, pp. 149–157. See also Korsgaard (2010).
[30] Korsgaard glosses this as follows: "The strange fate of being an organic system that matters to itself is one that we share with the other animals. In taking ourselves to be ends-in-ourselves we *legislate* that the natural good of a creature that matters to itself [i.e., an animal] is the source of normative claims. Animal nature is an end-in-itself, because our own legislation makes it so. And that is why we have duties to the other animals." Korsgaard, "Fellow Creatures," pp. 105–106.
[31] Kant *Groundwork*, 4:429.

to recognize this. But why should the mere fact that all rational entities "represent" themselves as ends-in-themselves be sufficient to require one to recognize them as ends-in-themselves? Why can't a rational entity treat himself as an end-in-itself while denying that other rational entities are ends-in-themselves? Kant gives a clue for answering these questions when he writes that other rational entities represent themselves as ends-in-themselves "on just the same rational ground that also holds for me." This implies the following: if I believe myself rationally justified in taking myself as an end-in-itself because I meet certain conditions, then, on pain of self-contradiction, I must admit that anything else that meets these same conditions is also an end-in-itself. Now Kant suggests that I believe myself to be an end-in-itself because I am rational, which entails that I believe that rationality is a sufficient condition for being an end-in-itself. Obviously, other humans are rational as well, so there are entities besides myself who satisfy a sufficient condition for being ends-in-themselves. If I nonetheless deny that they are ends-in-themselves, while maintaining that I am an end-in-itself, then I am guilty of incoherence. This position is incoherent, because it maintains that rationality both is and is not a sufficient condition for being an end-in-itself, since I admit it in my own case but deny it in others' cases.

Korsgaard follows an analogous route in defending the first premise of her argument. If I confer normative value on my natural good, then I also confer normative value on the natural good of any entity whose natural good is of the same kind as mine. My natural good is my good as an animal, so the natural good of other animals is of the same kind as mine. Hence, in conferring normative value on my own natural good, I likewise confer normative value on the natural good of other animals as well, including non-human ones. So the force of Korsgaard's argument is that a human animal cannot coherently accept that her own natural good has normative value while denying that the natural good of other animals has normative value. If I deny that the natural good of other animals has normative value, then I must also deny that my own natural good has normative value. Since this natural good is tied to my animal nature, and since my natural good does not differ from the natural good of non-human animals in any relevant respect,[32] my conferring normative value on the natural good of any one animal commits me to conferring normative value on the natural good of all animals. In other words, it commits me to the belief that something having an *animal's* natural good is a sufficient condition for that thing having normative value. Since moral agents have duties to, or equivalently are obligated by, entities whose natural good has normative value, moral agents have duties to all animals, including non-human ones.

[32] Of course, it might be denied that my natural good does not differ from that of animals in any relevant respect, and it would be interesting to consider objections that start with this denial.

Direct Duties to All Entities with Natural Goods

Korsgaard's argument can be modified to conclude that humans have direct duties to all entities with a natural good,[33] not just animals.[34] Although Korsgaard's own focus is clearly on animals, she is open to the possibility that her argument might have implications for non-animal life as well, such as plants.[35] This is important, because it suggests that Korsgaard herself sees nothing in her argument precluding the possibility that other NNE might have natural goods, and hence deserve moral consideration. However, she does not herself make the case for this. It would take further work to determine whether that approach is fruitful. The following argument exemplifies the Kantian approach that I contend environmental ethicists should take seriously. I call this A2.

(1) If humans confer normative value on their natural good, then they confer normative value on the natural good of all entities that have a natural good.
(2) Humans confer normative value on their natural good.
(3) So humans confer normative value on the natural good of all entities that have a natural good.
(4) If the natural good of some entity has normative value, then humans have direct duties to that entity.
(5) Therefore humans have direct duties to all entities that have a natural good.

As with A1, the most controversial premise here is the first one. Why is it the case that, simply in virtue of conferring normative value on their own natural good, humans likewise confer normative value on the natural good of all entities that have a natural good? The class of entities with a natural good plausibly includes not just human and non-human animals, but also plants and microorganisms.[36] This class might also include non-living entities such as mountains or even wholes, such as species or ecosystems.[37] At the least, plants and animals have a natural good, since they may function well according to their kind. The natural good of plants involves taking root, performing photosynthesis, producing seedlings, and the like. A well-functioning plant is able to perform these activities, and its natural good is threatened if it is prevented from doing so. By itself, this natural good has no normative

[33] Similar strategies are employed by Attfield and Taylor. Attfield argues that the class of morally considerable entities is equivalent to the class of entities that have goods, whereas Taylor argues that the class of morally considerable entities is equivalent to the class of entities who are "teleological centers of life." I differ from both in that I offer a unique argument in A2. See Attfield (1987), pp. 21–22. See Taylor, *Respect*, pp. 119–129.

[34] Korsgaard has expressed sympathy for extending moral considerability to plants and even "anything that has a good," but she has neither committed herself to this move nor developed arguments defending it. See Korsgaard, "Fellow Creatures," p. 106*n*69.

[35] See Korsgaard, "Fellow Creatures," p. 106.

[36] For a discussion of this issue, see O'Neill et al. (2008), pp. 101–104.

[37] It is beyond the scope of this paper to determine exactly which entities have a natural good. I remain agnostic as to whether non-living entities or wholes have a natural good, which is why I do not consider whether moral agents have direct duties to, e.g., mountains, species or ecosystems.

value—it is not morally considerable such that humans have direct duties to plants. But the first premise of the above argument contends that, in conferring normative value on their own natural good, humans are likewise committed to conferring normative value on the natural good of all entities that have a natural good. This is because the natural good of a human is relevantly similar to the natural good of other entities. The natural good of an entity is what allows it to function well according to the kind of entity it is. In conferring normative value on my own natural good, I am committed to the belief that something's being the natural good of an entity is a sufficient condition for it to have normative value. If I encounter other entities that satisfy that sufficient condition, then I am bound to recognize that their natural good has normative value. If I deny that other entities' natural good has normative value, then I am guilty of incoherence, for I hold that something's being the natural good of an entity both is and is not a sufficient condition for it to have normative value, since I accept this in my case but deny it in others' cases. On pain of this incoherence, humans must either recognize that the natural good of any entity has normative value, or humans must deny that their own natural good has normative value. Since humans do not deny that their natural good has normative value, they must recognize that the natural good of all entities has normative value. Since humans have direct duties to entities whose natural good has normative value, humans have direct duties to all entities that have a natural good.

Let us return to the first premise. Its truth hinges on whether it is the case that humans confer normative value on their natural good simply as entities with a natural good. In Korsgaard's A1, this is not the case—humans confer normative value on their *animal* nature. For Kant, it is still less the case—humans confer normative value on their *rational* nature. So one might contend that humans do not confer normative value on their natural good as entities with a natural good *simpliciter*. Nonetheless, the first premise in A2 has some plausibility to it. It seems that humans value not only what they have in common with other rational and/or animal entities, but also what they have in common with other living beings, some of whom are non-rational and non-animal. As a matter of fact, humans do confer normative value on natural goods they share with merely living entities, such as plants. Examples include survival and reproduction.[38] Moreover, perhaps humans also confer normative value on natural goods they share with non-living entities, such as mountains. One example of this might include maintaining one's physical integrity. If a mountain has a natural good, then presumably maintaining its physical integrity is part of that good. This good would be threatened by mining via mountain-top removal, for example. Likewise, maintaining their own physical integrity seems part of humans' natural good as well. This good would be threatened by losing a limb in an accident, for example. Accordingly, it seems that humans share a natural good with some non-living entities. This is reason to think that the natural good on which humans confer

[38] Such are also part of the natural good of non-human animals, so one might claim that humans' conferring normative value on survival and reproduction can be explained in terms of their conferring normative value on their *animal* good. However, this overlooks the fact that animals are themselves living beings, and having survival and sustenance as part of one's natural good is not unique to animals.

normative value is not reducible to the natural good of a merely living, much less animal or rational, entity. There is nothing uniquely animal or rational about survival or reproduction, and there is nothing uniquely biotic about maintaining one's physical integrity, yet humans endorse all these as having normative value. Given this, it does not seem that humans' natural good is limited to their animal or biotic good, so it seems appropriate to grant that the natural good on which humans confer normative value is that of an entity with a natural good.

Let us consider the second premise of A2. What is meant by claiming that humans confer normative value on their natural good? Do all humans do this, or only some? If all humans do this, is their doing so necessary or contingent? These are fair questions, so I clarify premise 2 as follows. It is not a claim about what humans do universally nor what they do necessarily,[39] but rather a claim about what many humans in fact do. As a matter of fact, humans do confer normative value on their natural good, in the sense that they value this good and think that this places other humans under an obligation likewise to value that good. In other words, many humans endorse their functioning well in accordance with their natural good, and they believe that other humans are obligated to respect this.

It is conceivable, and perhaps there are actual cases of it, that a human should refuse to confer normative value on his own natural good. Such a person, not caring whether he functions well according to the kind of entity he is, may have no reason to accept the conclusion of A2. But given that very few if any persons are like this, the fact that exceptions to premise 2 are possible does not constitute a serious problem for the argument. It may still be a powerful tool for convincing humans that they have duties to all NNE with a natural good, because A2 holds that conferring normative value on one's own natural good (which almost everyone does) requires conferring normative value on the natural good of all entities that have a natural good. Hence, for any human who does in fact confer normative value on her own natural good, A2 provides good reason for that human to believe that she has direct duties to NNE.

An argument like A2 should be attractive to environmental ethicists for several reasons. First, if sound, it establishes that NNE are morally considerable and that humans have direct duties to NNE, a desideratum of many environmental ethicists. Second, and unsurprisingly given the previous point, the argument is non-anthropocentric and non-speciesist, for the species-membership of the recipients of direct duties is irrelevant. Third, contrary to the standard assumption, this argument shows that there *is* a Kantian approach to environmental ethics that avoids the alleged problems found in Kant's own writings. Rather than merely indirect duties regarding NNE, the foregoing argument defends direct duties to NNE. As noted above, critics have contended that indirect duties regarding NNE identify the wrong reasons for caring about non-humans. If A2 is sound, then NNE matter morally for their own sake. An indirect duty approach runs the risk of misidentifying the right reasons

[39] Here I depart from Kant, who holds that every rational entity necessarily treats itself as an end-in-itself, which commits it to treating all other rational entities as ends-in-themselves as well. See the discussion about Korsgaard's A1 above.

for caring about NNE precisely because the ultimate recipients of duties are parties other than NNE themselves. That is avoided in A2, because it recognizes direct duties to NNE. As also noted above, critics have charged that indirect duties are too weak to secure sufficient environmental protection, as they are arguably overridden in many cases by more important moral concerns. However, and once again because the duties involved are direct, this problem is avoided. In principle, direct duties to NNE hold the same status as direct duties to human beings. Accordingly, there is no reason to think that the Kantian approach discussed here will produce obligations that are relatively weak or easily overridden.

This shows that we cannot easily dismiss Kantian environmental ethics, at least not for the reasons that were provided by earlier critiques. As I have argued, more recent environmental ethicists have taken these earlier critiques for granted and consequently ignored Kantian approaches. This is an oversight. A2 is still contestable, of course, but it provides a more interesting challenge for environmental ethicists than the standard picture of Kantian approaches, which need not be invidiously humanistic, to borrow Hoff's phrase. As Korsgaard shows in the case of animals, and as I argue in the case of NNE more broadly, we can begin from recognizably Kantian foundations and still secure a plausible account of direct duties to NNE, one that avoids the problems associated with anthropocentrism, speciesism, and indirect duties.

The Problem of Conflicting Duties

An opponent of A2 may claim that the conclusion is problematic. One version of this objection would be that it is impossible for humans to have direct duties to all entities with a natural good, because then humans would have conflicting duties, fulfillment of all of which would be impossible. In other words, assuming that "ought" implies "can," the concept of a set of duties that cannot be fulfilled is incoherent. But the conclusion of A2 claims that there is such a set of duties that cannot be fulfilled. So the conclusion of A2 must be incoherent.

Before I respond, let us consider an example. Plants and humans are both entities that have a natural good, so according to A2, humans have duties to both. The natural good of both plants and humans involves survival, so presumably humans have duties to promote (or at least not hinder) the survival of both plants and humans. It seems that a given human would violate her duty to plants if she killed one.[40] It also seems that the same human would violate her duty to humans (specifically, to the individual human that is herself) if she did not take on nourishment, as this would threaten her survival. But to take on nourishment, she must kill the plant in order to eat it (and if not a plant, then some animal). So it seems impossible that humans can fulfill both their duties to humans and their duties to plants in this case.

[40] I am assuming that duties to NNE are duties to *individual* NNE. J. Baird Callicott and others hold that humans have duties not to individual NNE, but rather to certain natural wholes, such as species or ecosystems. See Callicott (1989).

Korsgaard deals with this problem in a less than satisfying way: "For Kant believed that moral standards, like all rational standards, are essentially human standards, and there is no guarantee that the world will meet them, or make it possible for us to do so."[41] Although Korsgaard claims that humans can fulfill many of their duties, she holds that facts about the world might on occasion make this impossible. Perhaps this is true, but it would be an unwelcome result, and one may hope for an alternative solution.[42]

Kant's distinction between perfect and imperfect duty may be of help here.[43] Paul Guyer identifies perfect duties as "those duties for which it is fully determinate what constitutes their fulfillment (usually omissions)" and imperfect duties as "those duties the fulfillment of which (usually commissions) is indeterminate and therefore leaves open to judgment what actions and how much is required for the fulfillment."[44] For Kant, examples of perfect duties include the duty not to lie and the duty not to commit suicide, whereas examples of imperfect duties include the duty to promote others' happiness and the duty to cultivate one's own talents.[45] At least for finite beings (such as humans), it seems impossible to fulfill imperfect duties completely.[46] For example, it seems impossible to cultivate all of one's talents or to promote the happiness of all other humans. At any rate, it is obviously impossible to cultivate *fully* all of one's talents or to promote *fully* the happiness of others. Focusing one's time and energy on one talent precludes focusing one's time and energy on a different talent, and the same applies to the happiness of one person rather than another.

I suggest that at least some[47] of humans' direct duties to NNE might be imperfect in this way. In other words, it might be impossible for one to fulfill completely all his duties to NNE, but this need not entail that humans have conflicting duties. In the example considered above, a human might have an imperfect duty to promote the flourishing of plants, but a perfect duty to maintain herself through nourishment. If so, then the human is permitted to kill the plant in order to acquire nourishment, because her perfect duty overrides her imperfect duty. Hence, the human does not have a duty that is impossible to fulfill, because she does not have conflicting *perfect* duties. Since imperfect duties are by their nature impossible to fulfill completely, one does not fail in her duty to promote the flourishing of plants if she consumes some of them for nourishment. Guyer, taking the example of beautiful NNE, thinks

[41] Korsgaard, "Fellow Creatures," p. 108.

[42] To resolve the problem of conflicting duties, Taylor suggests several "priority principles" (such as that of self-defense) that can adjudicate conflicts between different entities' goods. However, these principles risk being arbitrary, since it is not clear what justifies these principles in the first place. See Taylor, *Respect*, pp. 263-307.

[43] See Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:389-392.

[44] Guyer (1993), p. 321.

[45] See Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:421–424.

[46] Conversely, it is possible to fulfill perfect duties completely, because it is possible to always abstain from lying and committing suicide.

[47] I say "some," because it might not be necessary to treat *all* duties to NNE as imperfect in order to make those duties compatible. There might be some perfect duties to NNE, e.g. to refrain from destroying NNE for amusement.

it appropriate to characterize duties to nature[48] as imperfect in this sense: "That we have a duty to conserve natural beauty, although we are unable to say that in every case this duty must triumph, seems to me exactly right and to explain why we can never find a mechanical procedure for deciding between claims of the conservation and the development and exploitation of natural resources."[49] If it is indeed appropriate to treat (at least some) duties to NNE as imperfect, then this might preserve the coherence of A2's conclusion.

Now one might object that the foregoing response is a case of blatant speciesism, for it looks as if it necessarily values human over non-human life. This is not so. The claim is not, or at least need not be, that humans necessarily count for more than non-humans. Rather, the claim is that one's duty to maintain oneself can plausibly take precedence over a general duty to promote the flourishing of other entities, including plants. Likewise, one's duty to maintain oneself can take precedence over a general duty to promote the happiness of other humans. This does not make oneself morally superior to other humans. It simply means that a specific obligation to preserve oneself (e.g., through nourishment or rest) might in some case require us to do something that fails to promote happiness (e.g., causing displeasure by declining an invitation). Likewise, that same specific duty to maintain oneself might in some cause require us to do something that fails to promote the flourishing of plants (e.g., harming them through consumption). This is warranted not because plants automatically have a lesser moral status than humans, but rather because the nature of one specific duty has implications for whether and how other duties may be fulfilled in certain circumstances. This seems plausible, and the perfect/imperfect distinction allows us to make sense of the idea.

Closing Remarks

In this paper, I have sought to outline, on Kantian grounds, an argument that establishes that humans have direct duties to NNE. Since one important goal of many environmental ethicists is to establish that NNE are morally considerable such that humans have direct duties to them, and since a Kantian approach can achieve this goal, environmental ethicists should seriously consider such Kantian approaches to environmental ethics. If there are good objections to my approach, they will not be the objections usually leveled against Kantian accounts: anthropocentrism, speciesism, and inadequacies with indirect duties. This suggests that Kantian approaches to environmental ethics need not be monolithic. Even if the standard objections have merit against some versions, I have shown that there is at least one version of Kantianism that is not prone to those objections while remaining plausible in its own right.

[48] Although Guyer follows Kant in admitting only duties "regarding" nature rather than direct duties "to" nature.

[49] Guyer, Kant, p. 328.

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