A Reconsideration of Indirect Duties Regarding Non-Human Organisms
(Pre-Print Version)

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Introduction

Some philosophers who hold that non-human entities deserve moral consideration from human beings are sympathetic to the view that humans have direct duties to such entities (Singer 1999; Regan 2004; Taylor 1986). If this is true, then the view that humans have *only* indirect duties regarding non-humans is false. On the most infamous indirect duty view, attributed to Kant (Timmermann 2005), all duties regarding non-human entities depend upon indirect duties to oneself. Critics of indirect duty views contend that, for a variety of reasons, such views fail to accord appropriate moral consideration for non-humans (Singer 1999; Nussbaum 2004). Objections include the claim that indirect duty views misidentify the appropriate reasons for treating non-humans in certain ways and that such views offer only weak checks on how non-humans may be treated.

In this paper, I develop an indirect duty view that is not subject to these common objections. First, I clarify the distinction between direct and indirect duties. Next, I examine the orthodox interpretation of Kant's account of duties regarding nature, according to which one's sole obligation is to abstain from treating non-human organisms in ways that make one more likely to violate one's direct duties to human persons. I argue that this interpretation is flawed. Drawing upon a competing interpretation of Kant, I develop an alternative indirect duty view: given a direct duty to oneself to develop morally virtuous dispositions, one has an indirect duty

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to abstain from treating non-humans in ways that erode or weaken one's virtuous dispositions, such as actions that cause unnecessary harm to animals or plant-life. With this account in hand, I consider objections to indirect duty views. While these objections raise serious problems for the view attributed to Kant by the orthodox interpretation, I show that they are not successful against the indirect duty view I sketch. While I do not claim to establish that this account should be adopted in favor of all competing views, I do show that indirect duty views are much more robust than is often supposed, and I close by suggesting that they deserve serious consideration as competitors to positions that recognize direct duties to non-human entities.

Direct and Indirect Duties

As a first approximation, we may say that direct duties are obligations *to* some entity, while indirect duties are obligations merely *regarding* some entity. To be more exact:

> (1): A moral agent *A* has a direct duty to some entity *E* if and only if *A* morally owes something to *E* itself.

A moral agent might owe certain attitudes or actions to another person, such as an attitude of respect or actions consistent with keeping a promise made to that person. In such a case, the moral agent in question has a direct duty to that person, namely a duty to respect her or to keep a promise made to her. Given the position I defend in this paper, it is important to note that the moral agent and the entity to which some direct duty is owed can be numerically identical, as with direct duties to oneself (e.g., a duty to respect oneself). As for indirect duties:

> (2): A moral agent *A* has an indirect duty regarding some entity E_1 if and only if *A* has a direct duty to some entity E_n and this direct duty requires something pertaining to E_1.[2]

An indirect duty regarding some entity arises solely in virtue of some direct duty. In order to fulfill some direct duty to another entity, a moral agent might be morally required to perform certain actions affecting some entity other than the one to which the direct duty is owed. Such a duty is indirect in the sense that it depends on something that is owed to E_n, but indirectly by way of E_1. For example, if humans have a direct duty to themselves to develop virtuous dispositions, this direct duty might entail an indirect duty regarding non-human organisms, namely that we not treat them in ways inconsistent with the development of our virtuous dispositions. Such a duty is indirect in the sense that the moral agent morally owes something to herself, but by way of actions regarding entities other than herself. Thus, indirect duties depend necessarily upon direct duties.

Note that in (2) I hold that one has a direct duty regarding some entity E_1 if and only if one has a direct duty that "requires something pertaining" to E_1. This is intentionally open-ended, given that our conception must capture the many kinds of indirect duty that seem possible. Some indirect duties might require one to perform specific actions affecting E_1, whereas others might require one to abstain from performing actions that affect E_1 in certain ways. In the account of duties regarding non-human organisms I present below, I suggest that we at least have indirect duties of the latter kind.

[2] I write "E_n" because it is possible, but not necessary, that the entity regarding which one has an indirect duty is the same entity to which one has the direct duty that gives rise to the former.

Kant and Duties Regarding Nature

Perhaps the most familiar account of indirect duties is Kant's position on duties regarding nature. In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, 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; for it weakens or uproots that feeling in him which, though not itself moral, is still a disposition of sensibility that greatly promotes morality or at least prepares the way for it: the disposition, namely, to love something (e.g., beautiful crystal formations, the indescribable beauty of plants) even apart from any intention to use it. […] With regard to the animate but nonrational part of creation, violent and cruel treatment of animals is far more intimately opposed to a human being's duty to himself, and he has a duty to refrain from this; for it dulls his shared feeling of their suffering and so weakens and gradually uproots a natural predisposition that is very serviceable to morality in one's relations with other people. […] Even gratitude for the long service of an old horse or dog (just as if they were members of the household) belongs *indirectly* to a human being's duty *with regard to* these animals; considered as a *direct* duty, however, it is always only a duty of the human being *to* himself (Kant 1999).

In his *Lectures on Ethics*, Kant similarly contended that one should not shoot an old dog because doing so "damages the kindly and humane qualities in himself, which he ought to exercise in virtue of his duties to mankind. Lest he extinguish such qualities, he must already practice a

similar kindness towards animals; for a person who already displays such cruelty to animals is also no less hardened towards men" (Kant 1997). According to the most prominent reading (call it the orthodox interpretation) of these and similar passages, Kant here counsels us to abstain from animal cruelty and wanton destruction of plant-life solely because these actions render us more likely to violate our direct duties to humans, such as by being cruel to them (Skidmore 2001; Nussbaum 2004). Allegedly, humans have indirect duties regarding non-human organisms only insofar as our treatment of them is relevant for our treatment of human beings. For example, those who are cruel to animals might thereby reduce their sensitivity to suffering and thus render themselves more likely to be cruel to humans. Accordingly, on the orthodox interpretation of Kant, it is inadvisable to practice animal cruelty, given that engaging in it could condition one to ignore the suffering of humans, which in turn could lead one to violate her direct duties to humans.

However, while there is a substantial body of empirical research suggesting some connection between animal cruelty and cruel treatment of humans (Altman 2011), it is not clear that, on this interpretation, Kant's position would even qualify as an indirect duty view. On the definition offered in (2) above, we have duties regarding organisms only if some direct duty *requires* something pertaining to organisms. But on the orthodox interpretation, abstinence from animal cruelty and wanton destruction of flora seems not to be required but merely advised. Even granting that animal cruelty makes us more likely to be cruel to humans by reducing our sensitivity to suffering, this reduction in sensitivity seems compatible with fulfilling our direct duties to one another. Consider Kant's example of "the cold-hearted benefactor" (Stohr 2002), a person who is "by temperament cold and indifferent to the suffering of others" yet who nonetheless acts beneficently "not from inclination but from duty" (Kant 1999). Such a person

might have a more difficult time fulfilling his duties of beneficence than a person who is temperamentally inclined to beneficence, but such a temperamental inclination is not required for the fulfillment of duties of beneficence. Thus, while animal cruelty or wanton destruction of plant-life might be inadvisable inasmuch as such practices could foster inclinations that make one less likely to fulfill one's direct duties to humans, it seems that abstaining from such practices is not required in order to fulfill those direct duties.

This is striking, because it is now unclear how duties regarding nature would count as genuinely moral obligations, even indirect ones. On the orthodox interpretation of Kant, such "duties" seem to be non-moral counsels to eschew courses of action that decrease the likelihood of fulfilling one's proper duties. Such counsels seem non-moral because there would be nothing *morally* assessable about cruel treatment of animals or wanton destruction of plant-life—such actions would not be morally blameworthy, for example, but merely discouraged inasmuch as they might create obstacles to our duty-compliance. But this would reduce the indirect "duty" to abstain from animal cruelty or wanton destruction of flora to merely optional advice. It may be prudent to comply with this advice, since that would dispose one toward fulfilling her direct duties, but there is no requirement to so comply (Broadie and Pybus 1974).

This orthodox interpretation of Kant on duties regarding nature potentially raises a problem for my understanding of indirect duties in (2), which holds that an indirect duty consists of a direct duty to E_n that indirectly "*requires* something pertaining to E_1." As we have just seen, Kant's position on the orthodox interpretation does not require anything vis-à-vis non-human organisms but merely advises abstinence from animal cruelty and wanton destruction of plant-life. It cannot be the case both that (2) is a satisfactory conception of indirect duty and that this account of duties regarding nature is an indirect duty view. Three options present themselves:

Kant's account of duties regarding nature is not in fact an indirect duty view, my understanding of indirect duty in (2) is not satisfactory, or the orthodox interpretation is mistaken.

I endorse the third option. Recently, some have argued that the orthodox interpretation of Kant—namely that duties regarding nature are merely counsels against actions that decrease the likelihood of compliance with one's proper duties—misses the most important elements of Kant's account (Baranzke 2005; Svoboda 2012). Briefly put, the orthodox interpretation fails to explain Kant's prohibition of certain kinds of treatment of non-human organisms. For example, in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant insists that one "has a duty to refrain from" cruelty to animals, that "agonizing physical experiments [on animals] for the sake of mere speculation, when the end could also be achieved without these, are to be abhorred," and that wanton destruction of flora "is opposed to a human being's duty to himself" (Kant 1999). Moreover, in his *Lectures on Ethics*, Kant held, "Any action whereby we may torment animals, or let them suffer distress, or otherwise treat them without love, is demeaning to ourselves" (Kant 1997). These claims suggest that abstinence from animal cruelty or wanton destruction of plant-life is not *only* advisable as a way to avoid decreasing the likelihood of one's duty-compliance, but also that such abstinence is *required* by some duty, given that failure to so abstain is "opposed" to some duty and "demeaning to ourselves."[3] Likewise, Kant also suggests that certain positive actions or attitudes toward animals are morally required: "Even gratitude for the long service of an old horse or dog (just as if they were members of the household) belongs *indirectly* to a human being's duty *with regard to* these animals; considered as a *direct* duty, however, it is always only a duty of the human being *to* himself" (Kant 1999). The implication here is that

[3] Thus, while Kant does seem to hold both that our treatment of non-human organisms has an influence on our treatment of humans and that this fact gives us reason to treat non-humans in certain ways, he *also* indicates commitment to a stronger position, namely that our treatment of non-human organisms is morally assessable in its own right.

failure to show gratitude towards the relevant animal violates some direct duty one has to oneself. This fits poorly with the orthodox interpretation, which does not seem to allow that any action or attitude vis-à-vis non-human organisms is morally required. At most, on the orthodox interpretation, gratitude toward certain animals might be encouraged as a means to make oneself more likely to fulfill one's proper duties to humans, but Kant seems to hold a much strong position, namely that such gratitude is obligatory.

Indirect Duties and Moral Virtues

The orthodox interpretation is not adequate. In line with my definition of indirect duty in (2), Kant suggests that duties regarding nature *require* something pertaining to non-human organisms, such as abstinence from animal cruelty and wanton destruction of plant-life. Also in line with (2), Kant suggests that such indirect duties depend upon some direct duty, specifically a direct duty to oneself. As others have argued (Guyer 1993; cf. Kain 2010), the direct duty in question is most likely the duty to increase one's own "moral perfection." This direct duty to oneself requires one to adopt a maxim whereby one strives to develop morally virtuous dispositions. In keeping with (1) above, this direct duty entails that a moral agent morally owes something to herself, namely the adoption of the maxim just mentioned. The duty to moral perfection requires one to cultivate moral virtues, such as benevolence, that constitute one's moral perfection. Importantly, this duty does not merely recommend that one cultivate virtues as useful (but non-obligatory) dispositions that increase the likelihood of duty-compliance. Rather, the duty to moral perfection specifies a maxim that one is morally obligated to adopt.[4]

[4] We should not be misled into supposing that, since Kant identifies this as a so-called imperfect duty, it has a lesser deontic status than so-called perfect duties. An imperfect duty entails an obligation to adopt some maxim, whereas a perfect duty entails an obligation to perform (or abstain from performing) some kind of action. Yet the directives of imperfect duties to adopt certain maxims are no less obligatory than the directives of perfect duties.

This direct duty to moral perfection is plausibly taken to give rise to indirect duties regarding non-human organisms. Recall that, by (2), a moral agent has an indirect duty regarding some entity E_1 if and only if that moral agent has some direct duty to some entity E_n that requires something pertaining to E_1. Assume with Kant that one has a direct duty to oneself to adopt a maxim whereby one strives to cultivate moral virtues. If it can be shown that that this duty requires something (performance of some action or adoption of some attitude, for example) vis-à-vis non-human organisms, then the duty to moral perfection can ground indirect duties regarding non-human organisms. Now, it is plausible to hold that it is impermissible to engage in actions that are inconsistent with an obligatory maxim. Thus, in the case of a maxim whereby we are to act in ways that develop moral virtues, it is presumably impermissible to perform actions that either erode the virtues we already possess or develop moral vices. Accordingly, it would be impermissible to treat organisms in ways that erode our virtues or develop vices, since such treatment would be inconsistent with a maxim that we have a direct duty to adopt. Accordingly, the duty to moral perfection does entail indirect duties regarding non-human organisms. In keeping with (2), our direct duty to ourselves to cultivate virtues "requires something pertaining to" animals and plant-life, namely that we not treat them in ways that are inconsistent with the development and maintenance of our virtues.

It remains to specify what kinds of treatment of non-human organisms erode one's virtues or develop vices. The following seems plausible:

> (3): If a moral agent knowingly causes unnecessary harm to a non-human organism, then this moral agent erodes her virtue or develops a vice (or both).

This principle only identifies one sufficient condition for an action affecting organisms to erode some virtue or to develop a vice. There may be additional kinds of action that reduce one's moral perfection as well, such as actions whereby one *unknowingly* causes unnecessary harm to an animal. However, (3) is plausibly taken to identify one such way. To begin with, it provides a parsimonious explanation for why animal cruelty and wanton destruction of flora are morally problematic, given that such actions involve needlessly harming organisms. We also need an account what constitutes "unnecessary" harm. As examples of animal cruelty, Kant cites killing animals painfully and performing "agonizing physical experiments for the sake of mere speculation, when the end could also be achieved without these…" (Kant 1999). Intuitively, both of these examples seem to involve the infliction of unnecessary harm. To be more exact, however, consider the following principle of what kinds of harm count as unnecessary:

> (4): If the end of some harmful action is trivial, or if that end could be achieved by some reasonable means that would be less harmful, then the harm caused by that action is unnecessary.

In killing an animal in a painful fashion when some painless option is available, one fails to adopt a less harmful, reasonable means to her end. In wantonly destroying flora for the sake of (say) mere amusement, one performs harmful actions in service to a trivial end. Prima facie, such actions seem unnecessarily harmful, and (4) can explain why.[5]

Unnecessarily harmful actions, if knowingly performed, are plausibly taken to erode one's virtues and may develop vices. A person who inflicts excessive pain on animals, for example, may weaken a disposition of benevolence. In time, repeated acts of cruelty vis-à-vis

[5] For more detailed discussion of the principles in (3) and (4), see Svoboda (2012).

animals might lead one to develop a disposition of malevolence. Likewise, wanton destruction of flora may weaken a disposition of humility, and repeated destruction of plant-life for trivial ends may lead to the development of an arrogant disposition. But if it is true that knowingly causing unnecessary harm to non-human organisms erodes one's virtues or develops vices, then one is morally prohibited from performing such actions. This is because the duty to moral perfection proscribes performing actions that are inconsistent with the maxim of developing one's own virtuous dispositions. Actions that erode one's virtues or develop vices are inconsistent with this maxim because, by reducing our moral perfection, they achieve the opposite of what this maxim prescribes. Since unnecessarily harmful actions vis-à-vis non-humans erode one's virtues and may develop vices, it follows that they are proscribed by the duty to moral perfection. This proscription is an indirect duty because it is owed not in virtue of some direct duty to non-human organisms but rather in virtue of a direct duty to oneself.

There are substantial differences between my understanding of indirect duties regarding non-human organisms and the view attributed to Kant on the orthodox interpretation. On the latter, such duties are reducible to non-moral counsels against actions that make one less likely to comply with one's direct duties. An implication of this view is that there is nothing morally problematic about animal cruelty or wanton destruction of plant-life in its own right, although it is advisable to abstain from such actions. Alternatively, on my view, knowingly causing unnecessary harm to non-human organisms is morally impermissible, because doing so is incompatible with one's direct duty to increase one's own moral perfection.

Now that I have sketched the distinction between direct and indirect duty, as well as both the orthodox interpretation of Kant on indirect duties regarding nature and an alternative interpretation thereof, we are in a position to discuss some of the common objections leveled

against indirect duty views. I will examine two classes of objection, considering how both the indirect duty view of the orthodox interpretation and my own view fare in response.

Objections Regarding the Reasons Tied to Indirect Duties

The first class of objections to indirect duty views pertains to the nature of our reasons for treating non-human organisms in certain ways. Consider the following:

> The Wrong Reasons Objection: Indirect duty views misidentify the appropriate moral reasons for treating non-human organisms in certain ways.

Since indirect duties regarding non-humans depend upon direct duties owed to human beings, the moral reasons we have for treating non-humans in certain ways are ultimately rooted in reasons tied to our direct duties to humans. This is perhaps most clearly seen in the orthodox interpretation of Kant's view, according to which our sole moral reason for abstaining from animal cruelty and wanton destruction of flora is that such actions makes us more likely to violate our direct duties to human beings.[6] On this view, the mere fact that some action (say) causes excessive harm to an organism does not by itself generate a reason to avoid performing that action—rather, it is the fact (if it is one) that causing excessive harm to an organism makes one more likely to violate one's duty to humans that generates a reason to avoid performing that action. Critics of Kant contend that this misidentifies our reasons to abstain from animal cruelty and wanton destruction of plant-life. Taking the orthodox interpretation for granted, Peter Singer

[6] Actually, it is questionable whether, given Kant's view on the orthodox interpretation, this reason would be a genuinely moral one. If indirect "duties" regarding non-humans are merely non-moral counsels to abstain from actions that make us less likely to fulfill our duties to humans, then perhaps one's reason to abstain from such actions is non-moral as well.

writes, “Perhaps it is true that kindness to human beings and to other animals often go together; but whether or not this is true, to say, as… Kant did, that this is the real reason why we ought to be kind to animals is a thoroughly speciesist position” (Singer 1999). Singer contends that we have moral reasons to treat sentient entities in certain ways due to their capacity to feel pleasure and pain, which qualifies them as entities deserving of direct moral consideration (Singer 1999). On this view, the mere fact that some action would involve excessive pain to some animal provides one a moral reason not to perform that action, regardless of whether doing so would make one more likely to violate some duty to human beings.

A defender of the view contained in the orthodox interpretation might simply embrace the apparent implication to which Singer objects, holding that our sole moral reason to abstain from (say) causing excessive pain to animals is that causing excessive pain makes us more likely to be cruel to humans. Thus, someone pressing the wrong reasons objection needs to show that this reason is indeed the wrong one. One way of doing this is to consider cases of individuals whose actions cause excessive harm to non-human organisms without rendering those individuals more likely to violate any duty to humans. Consider the following sort of person (see Shafer-Landau 2007):

> The Principled Anthropocentrist: A person who has trained himself to distinguish sharply between humans and non-humans, who views harm to non-humans as morally irrelevant, and who has psychologically internalized this view.

Now imagine that this person routinely tortures kittens for amusement. Due to his principled anthropocentrism, it is difficult to see why this person’s torturing animals should make him more

likely to fail in some duty to humans—rather, we should expect that these torture sessions would have no impact on his interactions with human beings. After all, if one has internalized the views that animals are utterly different from humans in terms of their moral status and that harm to them is morally irrelevant, then there is no obvious ground for claiming that harming animals should make this person more likely to harm humans. If so, then on the view attributed to Kant by the orthodox interpretation, such a person has no moral reason to abstain from torturing kittens. Since on this view the only moral reason one *could* have for so abstaining is that engaging in the torture would make one more likely to violate duties to humans, and since this would not be the case for the principled anthropocentrist, such a person lacks any moral reason not to torture kittens.

Many will find this implication objectionable, since it seems that we *do* have a moral reason to abstain from such severe animal cruelty even if engaging in that cruelty does not make us more likely to violate duties to humans. Of course, one simply could accept the implication that the principled anthropocentrist lacks any reason not to torture kittens, but doing so would seem to involve biting a rather large bullet. Intuitively, it seems that even a principled anthropocentrist has at least a defeasible moral reason not to torture kittens for amusement. But as we have seen, the view attributed to Kant on the orthodox interpretation cannot account for such a reason, so a defender of this view seems forced to bite the aforementioned bullet. Accordingly, the wrong reasons objection seems to have some force when lodged against the position of Kant on the orthodox interpretation.

However, the objection loses this force when directed against the alternative interpretation of indirect duties I sketched above, namely that we have an indirect duty to treat animals and plant-life in ways that do not erode our virtuous dispositions or develop vices. On

this view, the fact that some action affecting a non-human organism would weaken a virtuous disposition of one's own gives one a moral reason not to perform that action. I have suggested in (3) that a moral agent weakens her virtuous dispositions if she knowingly causes unnecessary harm to a non-human organism. One's moral reason for abstaining from (say) animal cruelty is not merely that engaging in such an action would make one more likely to be cruel to humans (although it may do that as well), but rather that being cruel to animals would weaken certain virtuous dispositions, such as benevolence or humility. Accordingly, even a principled anthropocentrist has a reason not to torture kittens, since doing so would involve knowingly inflicting unnecessary harm on organisms, which would erode some moral virtue and thus violate one's direct duty to oneself to develop virtuous dispositions. Thus, the fact (if it is one) that torturing kittens renders one no more likely to violate duties to humans does not entail that one has no moral reason against torturing kittens—rather, doing so still indirectly violates a duty to oneself, and thus even a principled anthropocentrist has a moral reason not to torture kittens.

This is not sufficient to show that my account of indirect duties escapes the wrong reasons objection, since it still may be the case that facts about the status of one's own moral virtues do not generate the appropriate moral reasons for treating non-humans in certain ways. For example, one might deploy Singer's complaint, *mutatis mutandis*, against the view I have sketched: perhaps it is true that treating organisms in certain ways affects the status of one's own moral virtue, but to hold that this is the "real reason" we ought to treat organisms in certain ways is a mistake. This raises the question of whether the moral reason I have identified is indeed the wrong one. Consider the following objection to my view, a refinement of the wrong reasons objection:

> The Selfish Reasons Objection: If one treats non-human organisms in certain ways solely because of the affect such treatment has on the status of one's own moral virtues, then one's reasons for such treatment are objectionably selfish.

If I avoid causing unnecessary harm to flora and fauna solely because I am concerned to maintain a benevolent disposition, then perhaps I am missing the point. It might be that my reasons for not harming organisms should be tied to some kind of concern for those organisms themselves rather than an arguably selfish regard for my own virtue.

However, this objection misconstrues what it is to be concerned about one's own moral virtue. There is nothing objectionably selfish about wanting to cultivate a benevolent disposition, for example, because genuine benevolence seems to require sincere concern for the well-being of entities other than oneself. Further, there is nothing objectionably selfish about a reason for action that is tied to a desire to be benevolent. Again, genuine benevolence would seem to require sincere concern for the well-being of some entity. If I strive to be benevolent in my dealings with non-human organisms but harbor no concern for their well-being, then it is difficult to see how I could be successful in my endeavor. More generally, it seems that a purely self-regarding attempt to cultivate one's own benevolence is a self-defeating project. If, as seems plausible, genuine benevolence requires some concern for the well-being of other entities, then any attempt to cultivate one's benevolence while ignoring the well-being of other entities seems doomed to failure. We might draw an analogy with friendship. If I set out to become a good friend but ignore the needs, desires, values, etc. of my potential friend, then I have missed the point. Rather, being a good friend requires that I attend to some other entity, and likewise with

benevolence vis-à-vis organisms. Thus, the indirect duty view I have sketched does not entail merely selfish reasons for treating non-human organisms in certain ways.

One might raise yet a further objection. Up to this point, I have focused primarily on a "negative" indirect duty, namely a proscription against knowingly causing unnecessary harm to organisms. I have said little about any "positive" duty we might have regarding organisms, such as a prescription to promote their well-being. Perhaps it would be problematic if an indirect duty view recognized only negative indirect duties. Consider the following, a refinement of the selfish reasons objection:

> The Absence of Positive Duties Objection: A proscription against knowingly causing unnecessary harm to organisms does not require a moral agent to have sincere concern for the well-being of non-human organisms. As a purely negative indirect duty, this proscription merely requires a moral agent to avoid knowingly performing a certain kind of action. An indirect duty view comprised solely of such negative indirect duties is objectionably selfish because it does not allow for any positive indirect duty regarding organisms.

This objection challenges my reply to the selfish reasons objection. Perhaps it is the case that one could *maintain* one's (say) benevolence while paying no heed to the well-being of non-human organisms, provided that one does not knowingly cause them unnecessary harm. If so, then my indirect duty view will seem inadequate, at least to those who hold that we ought to care about the well-being of non-humans. Such individuals might claim that any adequate view must allow

for moral reasons on the part of moral agents to have sincere concern for the well-being of non-humans.

The indirect duty view I have sketched can accommodate this. On this view, we have moral reasons not only to maintain our virtue vis-à-vis non-humans but also to enhance our virtue vis-à-vis non-humans. Since we have a direct duty to ourselves to cultivate virtuous dispositions, we have moral reasons to act in ways that positively augment such dispositions. Promoting the well-being of non-human organisms is plausibly taken as a way to enhance certain virtues. For example, we can cultivate a disposition of benevolence by caring for injured animals, and perhaps we can cultivate a disposition of gratitude by caring for animals that have served us, which Kant claims that we are indirectly obligated to do (Kant 1999). Cultivating *genuine* benevolence or gratitude vis-à-vis organisms seems to require that we harbor a sincere concern for them and their well-being—how could my treatment of some organism render me more benevolent unless I actually attended to the well-being of that organism? Accordingly, we do have positive indirect duties regarding organisms, since benefiting them is a way to cultivate our virtue. Likewise, we have moral reasons to harbor sincere concern for their well-being, because this is required in order to cultivate certain virtues in the course of our interactions with them.

Acting to promote the well-being of animals and plant-life might be morally optional in certain cases. For example, someone who passes on an opportunity to help preserve wetlands, thereby benefiting various organisms who rely on wetlands for habitat, is not automatically blameworthy on my account. Passing on this opportunity need not involve a violation of the duty to moral perfection, given that one could cultivate virtuous dispositions by alternative means that do not involve interactions with organisms. Still, one has a moral reason to promote the well-

being of organisms in such cases—doing so would enhance one's virtuous dispositions—even when there is not a positive indirect duty requiring one to do so. In other cases, however, it seems that there are positive indirect duties regarding organisms. In Kant's example, someone who abandons a dog that has provided years of service is morally blameworthy. The indirect duty view I have sketched can account for this as follows. Since we have a direct duty to ourselves to cultivate virtues, we are morally prohibited from acting in ways that erode our extant virtues or develop vices. Thus, we are morally prohibited from treating non-human organisms in ways that erode our extant virtues or develop vices. In some cases, failure to perform certain positive actions pertaining to some organism (e.g., a dog that has been of service to oneself) would entail an erosion in one's virtue or the development of some vice. Thus, in such cases we are morally required to perform certain positive actions pertaining to some organism. Hence, in some cases, we have positive indirect duties regarding organisms—we are morally required to treat them in certain ways, since failure to do so would violate one's duty to cultivate virtuous dispositions.

Objections Regarding the Status and Security of Indirect Duties

A second set of objections to indirect duty views raises concerns about how demanding and secure such duties are. Consider the following:

> The Weakness Objection: Indirect duty views are implausibly weak, because they put only very limited restrictions on how non-humans may be treated.

Allegedly, indirect duties are not strong enough, perhaps because they do not strictly prohibit certain kinds of treatment. As with the wrong reasons objection, the weakness objection is best illustrated when applied to the Kant of the orthodox interpretation. Suppose that it is merely advisable (but not obligatory) to abstain from treating organisms in ways that decrease the likelihood of our complying with our duties to humans. Someone pressing the weakness objection might note that this view permits an extensive range of harmful actions to organisms, such as any brutality that a principled anthropocentrist should choose to commit. Provided that one does not render oneself more likely to violate duties to humans, there are no moral limits to how one may treat non-human organisms. Further, even in cases where some treatment of non-humans would decrease the likelihood of one's complying with duties to humans, the Kant of the orthodox interpretation does not prohibit such treatment but merely counsels against it. This will strike many as indeed too weak. Surely there is some moral *obligation* not to torture kittens or destroy forests for amusement, and surely this obligation holds even apart from whether such actions dispose us to violate duties to humans.

However, the weakness objection has less purchase against the account of indirect duties I have sketched, since this account holds that human beings are prohibited from knowingly causing unnecessary harm to non-human organisms. This is not a weak directive. First, it is a moral obligation rather than a non-moral counsel. Second, as we saw above, one cannot make oneself exempt from this prohibition on unnecessary harm by being a principled anthropocentrist. If it is impermissible knowingly to cause unnecessary harm to organisms, then one is obligated to abstain from knowingly causing unnecessary harm to organisms even if one's treatment of them has no affect on one's duty-compliance vis-à-vis humans. Third, this prohibition seems to have far-reaching reaching implications. Arguably, it would require many

of us to adopt vegetarian or vegan diets, since the practice of raising animals for food involves extensive harm to both animals and the flora used to support those animals (Singer 1999). Following the criteria in (4), since many of us could achieve the end of proper nourishment through less harmful means than a diet of animal products, the harm caused by such a diet seems unnecessary in many cases. If so, then such a diet would be prohibited by the indirect duty to abstain from causing unnecessary harm to organisms. This is a rather far-reaching obligation, and so the indirect duties that give rise to it do not seem objectionably weak.

One might accept that indirect duties need not be objectionably weak in terms of their content but still worry that they are objectionably weak in terms of an insecure status:

> The Too Easily Overridden Objection: Indirect duties are implausibly weak because they give rise to obligations regarding non-human organisms that are too easily and/or too often overridden.

Someone pressing this version of the objection might note that direct duty views—whether in the guise of animal rights (Regan 2004), biocentric egalitarianism (Taylor 1986), or some other form of direct moral consideration—offer more secure obligations vis-à-vis non-human organisms than do indirect duty views. Since indirect duties are dependent upon direct duties to humans, one might be concerned that our direct duties to human beings consistently would take precedence over our indirect duties regarding non-humans, such that the former routinely override the latter. For those sympathetic to positions affording moral consideration to non-humans, such implications may be problematic. In particular, such a person might worry that an

indirect duty to abstain from knowingly causing unnecessary harm will be overridden so frequently that it will be relatively weak in practice.

But this objection does not go through, at least on the indirect duty view I have suggested. It would be a mistake to think of indirect duties regarding organisms and direct duties to human beings as two separate sets of obligations that are opposed to each other. The indirect duty to abstain from causing unnecessary harm to organisms is rooted in a direct duty to oneself to cultivate virtuous disposition, and this direct duty has the same deontic status as other direct duties, i.e. it is no less important than other direct duties. Since knowingly causing unnecessary harm to organisms erodes one's virtuous dispositions, it constitutes a violation of a direct duty to oneself. Moreover, since this direct duty to oneself has the same deontic status as other direct duties, it is not prone to being over-ridden by other duties. Thus, the indirect duty to abstain from knowingly causing unnecessary harm to organisms does not take a backseat to other duties, because it is tied to a direct duty to ourselves that has just as much claim on us as any other duty. Accordingly, the indirect duty in question is not at any particular risk of being overridden by some other duty.

Closing Remarks

I have attempted to develop an indirect duty view that is not subject to certain objections that are often raised against indirect duty views. I lack space to argue that we should accept this view over various direct duty views that are available. Those sympathetic to one of the latter might grant that my view avoids some of the problems faced by the indirect duty view attributed to Kant on the orthodox interpretation. Still, they might be convinced that we have direct duties to non-human organisms, perhaps because such entities have intrinsic value (Rolston 1982) or

because they deserve our respect as entities with goods of their own (Taylor 1986). Yet my goal in this paper has been to show that indirect duties regarding non-humans need not be weak, easily overridden, based on objectionable reasons, or tied to questionable claims pertaining to how our treatment of non-humans affects our treatment of humans. Rather, there is some indirect duty view holding both that we have moral reasons to care about the well-being of non-human organisms and that there is a strong proscription on causing them unnecessary harm. Unlike the indirect duty view attributed to Kant by the orthodox interpretation, this alternative indirect duty view is plausible and avoids the objections discussed here. Accordingly, it deserves a hearing as a competitor to the various direct duty views available.

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