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Duties Regarding Nature: A Kantian Approach to Environmental Ethics

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Abstract

Many philosophers have objected to Kant's account of duties regarding non-human nature, arguing that it does not ground adequate moral concern for non-human natural entities. However, the traditional interpretation of Kant on this issue is mistaken, because it takes him to be arguing merely that humans should abstain from animal cruelty and wanton destruction of flora solely because such actions could make one more likely to violate one's duties to human beings. Instead, I argue, Kant's account of duties regarding nature grounds much stronger limitations on how humans may treat non-human animals and flora, since such duties are rooted in the imperfect duty to increase one's own moral perfection. This duty proscribes actions affecting non-human nature that decrease one's moral perfection, such as those that cause organisms unnecessary harm. Moreover, the duty to moral perfection prescribes (but does not strictly require) actions affecting non-human nature that increase one's moral perfection, such as those that benefit organisms. Given this interpretation, I show that, contrary to a widely held view, Kant's moral philosophy can ground a coherent and robust approach to environmental ethics.

1. Introduction

It is widely held that Kant's moral philosophy cannot accommodate adequate moral concern for non-human natural entities, such as non-human animals.¹ Although Kant recognizes certain duties "regarding" nature, he denies that moral agents can have direct duties to non-humans (*MM*, AA 6:442–443).² According to the traditional interpreta-

1 Regan (2004, 179); Nussbaum (2004, 300); Hursthouse (2007, 159); Skidmore (2001, 541); Singer (2009, 244); cf. Wilson (2004). Henceforth, the term "animals" should be understood to refer always to non-human animals.

2 All parenthetical citations are to the volume and page numbers of the Akademie-Ausgabe of Kant's works (Kant 1900-), as reproduced in the cited English translations. The following abbreviations for particular works are employed: G

tion of Kant's account of duties regarding nature, one should abstain from treating non-humans in certain ways (e.g., cruelly) solely because doing so makes one more likely to violate one's duties to human beings. Given this interpretation, philosophers who argue for moral consideration of non-humans have found Kant's account deficient.³ In this paper, I argue that Kant's position sanctions much stronger limitations on how non-human entities may be treated than the traditional interpretation recognizes. In particular, I defend an interpretation of Kant's account of duties regarding non-human nature that prohibits animal cruelty and wanton destruction of flora because such actions are violations of one's duty to increase her own moral perfection. Moreover, I argue that this Kantian account also prescribes kindness to animals and aesthetic appreciation of flora as optional but effective ways to help fulfill one's duty to moral perfection. This interpretation of Kant's account renders a Kantian approach to environmental ethics much more promising than the traditional interpretation allows.

2. Kant on Duties Regarding Non-human Nature

At first glance, a Kantian approach to environmental ethics might seem to be a non-starter. After all, in §16 of the *Doctrine of Virtue*, Kant himself denies that moral agents have direct duties to non-humans, both because "duty to any subject is moral constraint by that subject's will" and because human persons are the only known entities capable of constraining others in this way (*MM*, AA 6:442). Kant here suggests that a moral agent can have a direct duty only to another subject with a will, because only such an entity has the capacity to obligate moral agents. This requirement rules out direct duties to entities that are not subjects with wills. Hence, Kant concludes that human beings can have direct duties only to one another, because other entities (e.g., animals) lack the capacity to place human beings under moral obligation. Also in §16, Kant writes that "the constraining (binding) subject must, *first*, be a person; and this person must, *secondly*, be given as an object of

= *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (Kant 1996a), *LE* = *Lectures on Ethics* (Kant 1997), *MM* = *Metaphysics of Morals* (Kant 1996b).

3 Indeed, James Skidmore argues that the inability of Kant's moral theory to countenance duties to animals shows that theory as a whole to be a "failure." See Skidmore (2001).

experience, since the human being is to strive for the end of this person's will and this can happen only in a relation to each other of two beings that exist..." (*MM*, AA 6:442). The second condition here suggests that human beings have direct duties only to subjects with wills because having a duty to someone consists of striving "for the end" of his or her will. Kant's argument seems to be that since non-humans lack the capacity to set ends for themselves, and since having a direct duty to some entity consists of striving to achieve the ends of that entity, it is impossible for moral agents to have direct duties to non-humans. Further, the first condition, namely that "the constraining (binding) subject must, *first*, be a person," suggests that human beings lack direct duties to non-humans because the latter are not persons. Additionally, in his 1784–1785 lectures on moral philosophy, Kant argued that all animals lack self-consciousness, which means that they "exist only as means, and not for their own sakes" (*LE*, AA 27:458–459).⁴ Given these various claims, Kant clearly denies that humans have direct duties to non-human natural entities because such entities neither possess wills nor are they persons.

According to Kant, if one believes that one does have direct duties to non-humans,⁵ it is due to what he calls "an *amphiboly* in his *concepts of reflection*," whereby one confuses duties *regarding* non-humans with duties *to* non-humans (*MM*, AA 6:442). A moral agent has a direct duty to another entity if and only if that entity morally constrains that agent via its will. Alternatively, a moral agent has a duty *regarding* another entity if and only if some direct duty requires that moral agent to perform actions that happen to affect that entity. Kant holds that a human can have duties regarding non-human natural entities insofar as certain actions affecting non-humans fulfill direct duties a human has to human beings. On his view, neither animals nor flora deserve direct moral consideration, yet humans are not thereby permitted to treat such organisms however they wish. The implication is that one could have a duty regarding non-humans that determines how they may be treated, but only if one's treatment of non-humans happens to be involved somehow in fulfilling a direct duty to oneself or other humans.

This seems to have been a consistent view of Kant's. In his 1784–1785 lectures on moral philosophy, Kant held that all duties regarding

4 Kant (1997).

5 See Rolston (1988, 45–125); Taylor (1986, 169–92).

animals are indirect duties to human beings (*LE*, AA 27:458–459). In §17 of his 1797 *Doctrine of Virtue*, Kant writes the following:

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 [*Stimmung*] 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. (*MM*, AA 6:443).

In at least one respect, this passage is quite clear: humans have direct duties only to themselves and other human beings. Although Kant recognizes duties regarding nature, his rejection of direct moral consideration to non-human nature might seem inimical to an ethic that grants moral consideration to non-humans. This is the view of many who accept the traditional interpretation of Kant on duties regarding non-humans. According to this interpretation, human beings have duties regarding non-human nature only in the sense that certain actions regarding non-humans develop and strengthen dispositions that are useful for transacting one's direct duties to human beings. I turn now to an examination of this interpretation.

3. The Traditional Interpretation of Duties Regarding Non-human Nature

Most scholarship on Kant's account of duties regarding non-humans focuses on duties regarding animals. Initially, Kant's argument in both the *Doctrine of Virtue* and his lectures seems to be that one should not be cruel to animals because this makes one more likely to be cruel to humans. On this interpretation, Kant is appealing to an alleged psychological tendency in human beings, according to which cruel treatment of animals desensitizes a human being to suffering in general.⁶ This psychological tendency makes one who is cruel to animals more likely to dis-

6 See Singer (2003, 407–10).

regard the suffering of humans and thus more likely to fail to fulfill his direct duties to humans, such as the duty to promote the happiness of others (*MM*, AA 6:452–454).

This is the dominant interpretation of Kant's account of duties regarding non-human nature. For example, James Skidmore holds that Kant's account of duties regarding animals reduces to the claim that "if we develop a habit of treating animals cruelly this will damage our character and ultimately lead to inappropriate treatment of other human beings."⁷ Skidmore concludes that, given this inability to afford direct moral consideration to animals, Kant's moral philosophy is a "failure."⁸ To take another example, Peter Singer 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."⁹ In a recent anthology, Russ Shafer-Landau introduces an excerpt from Kant's 1784–1785 lectures by writing, "But what of animals that roam the wild – is it permissible to treat them in just any way we please? Kant says no, since such behavior will make us more likely to treat our fellow human beings, who do possess rights, in the same way."¹⁰ Even Tom Regan, who provides a careful consideration of Kant's moral views on animals, accepts the traditional interpretation.¹¹ According to Regan, for Kant "it is the effects that our treating animals in certain ways has upon our character, and [...] the effect our character has on how we treat human beings, that provide the grounds for morally approving or disapproving our treating animals in certain ways."¹² According to all four of these commentators, Kant's position is that human beings ought to abstain from violent and cruel treatment of animals *only* because such treatment will make humans more likely to fail in their direct duties to one another.

This prevalent interpretation of duties regarding non-human nature establishes only a tenuous link between morality and the way one treats non-humans. There is no necessary connection between cruelty to animals and a reduction in one's sensitivity to human suffering. As Shafer-

7 Skidmore (2001, 541).

8 Ibid., 541.

9 Singer (2009, 244); see also Singer (2003, 56).

10 Shafer-Landau (2007, 391).

11 Regan (2004, 174–85).

12 Ibid., 179.

Landau notes, one can imagine individuals who cause severe harm to animals but who nonetheless maintain a strong sensitivity to human suffering.¹³ Moreover, even if there are particular cases in which cruelty to animals does diminish sensitivity to human suffering, such diminished sensitivity is compatible with completely fulfilling one's direct duties to other humans. That is, one can be cruel to animals and thereby become emotionally indifferent to human suffering while nonetheless fulfilling all one's direct duties to other human beings, such as by respecting others (*MM*, AA 6:462–465) and promoting their happiness (*MM*, AA 6:452–454). Kant approves of just such a person in his example of the “cold-hearted benefactor” in the *Groundwork*.¹⁴ Imagining a person who is “by temperament cold and indifferent to the suffering of others” yet who is nonetheless beneficent to other human beings, Kant declares that his “worth of character come out, which is moral and incomparably the highest, namely that he is beneficent not from inclination but from duty” (*G*, AA 4:398–399). According to Kant then, although a sensitivity to suffering might support morally right actions, it is not necessary for the performance of such actions. Hence, the traditional interpretation of duties regarding nature offers only a relatively weak reason for moral agents to abstain from cruelty to animals, namely that it can help maintain a disposition that is useful but not necessary for being moral vis-à-vis human beings.

If the traditional interpretation of duties regarding nature is correct, then the prospects for a Kantian approach to environmental ethics are dim. Indeed, the widespread acceptance of this interpretation might explain why no major environmental ethicist adopts a Kantian approach.¹⁵ Since a moral agent could be cruel to animals while fulfilling all her direct duties to humans, there is nothing morally problematic with animal cruelty itself. Moreover, although commentators tend to pass over what Kant writes about non-animal entities (e.g., flora), they would presumably offer the same interpretation of duties regarding them, e.g. that wanton destruction of plant life tends to weaken some disposition that

13 Shafer-Landau (2007, 391–92).

14 For a discussion of the “cold-hearted benefactor,” see Stohr (2002).

15 Paul Taylor's theory in *Respect for Nature* is sometimes thought to be Kantian, but this is true only in a very general sense. Although Taylor defends a deontological approach and views non-human organisms as ends-in-themselves, he does not attempt to reconcile his position with Kant's. Indeed, his rejection of Kant's position is implied by the fact that Taylor argues for direct duties to non-human organisms. See Taylor (1986).

is useful but not necessary for fulfilling one's direct duties to humans. It is not surprising that those who both accept this interpretation and believe that non-humans deserve some kind of moral consideration are unimpressed by Kant's account of duties regarding nature.¹⁶

This apparent inability of Kant's moral philosophy to ground moral consideration for non-humans has led some Kantians to argue that Kant's moral theory, if modified or developed in significant ways, can accommodate moral concern for non-humans. For example, Allen Wood argues that if one rejects Kant's so-called “personification principle,” or the view that “rational nature has a moral claim on us only *in the person of* a being who actually possesses it,”¹⁷ then the way is open to argue that moral agents ought to respect non-rational entities (e.g., animals) that display fragments, traces, or preconditions of rationality.¹⁸

Christine Korsgaard, in a quite different departure from Kant, suggests that, “despite what he himself thought, Kant's arguments reveal the ground of our obligations to the other animals.”¹⁹ She argues that a human being has direct duties to animals in virtue of each animal's “natural good,” which is constituted by the ends that the animal desires to achieve.²⁰ In a complex argument that I cannot reconstruct in full here, Korsgaard holds that human beings, via their legislative wills, confer normative value on their own natural good as animal beings, which entails conferring normative value on the natural good of non-human animals as well.²¹ She writes, “In taking ourselves to be ends-in-ourselves we *legislate* that the natural good of a creature who matters to itself 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.”²² However, as Korsgaard recognizes, this involves rejecting Kant's claim that humans cannot have direct duties to animals.²³

Both Wood's and Korsgaard's arguments are interesting in their own right, but they are motivated by the belief that Kant's own position in

16 See Nussbaum (2004, 300); Hursthouse (2007, 159); Skidmore (2001, 541); Singer (2009, 244).

17 Wood (1998, 193).

18 *Ibid.*, 197.

19 Korsgaard (2004, 82).

20 *Ibid.*, 102–103.

21 For the full argument, see *ibid.*, 101–105.

22 *Ibid.*, 106.

23 *Ibid.*, 87, 92.

the *Doctrine of Virtue* is incapable of grounding adequate moral concern for non-humans. They seem to concur with the traditional interpretation that Kant's account of duties regarding nature is deficient. However, there are reasons to think that the traditional interpretation itself is not adequate. I will attempt to show this by first examining more closely what Kant writes about duties regarding animals and then turning to what he writes about duties regarding non-animal nature.

4. Cruelty and the Treatment of Animals

Kant offers three examples of cruel treatment of animals. The first two are given by implication: "The human being is authorized to kill animals quickly (without pain) and to put them to work that does not strain them beyond their capacities (such as work as he himself must submit to)" (*MM*, AA 6:443). This implies that killing animals painfully and slowly is cruel, as is working animals beyond their capacities. As for the third example, Kant claims that "agonizing physical experiments for the sake of mere speculation, when the end could also be achieved without these, are to be abhorred" (*MM*, AA 6:443). The feature that all three of these examples have in common is that they cause unnecessary harm to animals. Typically, one could choose to kill animals quickly and painlessly, not overwork them, and avoid frivolous and painful experiments on them.

One problem with the traditional interpretation of duties regarding nature is that it does not fit well with Kant's implication in these three examples that animal cruelty is impermissible. His claim that some kinds of treatment of animals are "authorized" implies that other kinds of treatment are not authorized but instead forbidden, as does his claim that frivolous and painful experiments "are to be abhorred" (*MM*, AA 6:443). The traditional interpretation cannot account for this because it views animal cruelty as problematic only insofar as it could lead one to fail in fulfilling her direct duties to humans. Since animal cruelty need not entail such a failure, the traditional interpretation cannot explain why cruel treatment of animals is forbidden. For example, a proponent of the traditional interpretation cannot hold that beating a dog to death with a shovel is impermissible but only that such an action *could* weaken one's moral dispositions, which in turn *could* lead one to fail to fulfill some direct duty to human beings. Yet Kant seems to

hold that there is something morally wrong with such actions themselves, suggesting that causing unnecessary harm to animals is proscribed.

Further, Kant claims that a human's duties regarding animals are not limited to abstaining from cruel treatment of them. In addition, these duties require certain positive actions with respect to animals. In a very interesting remark, Kant writes, "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*" (*MM*, AA 6:443). According to this comment, given some direct duty a human being has to herself, she also has an indirect duty to show gratitude to certain animals. As with the proscription against causing animals unnecessary harm, this prescription of gratitude towards certain animals is entailed by a direct duty to oneself. Again, this does not fit well with the traditional interpretation. If gratitude to animals was merely a way to maintain or strengthen morally useful dispositions, then why does Kant hold that such gratitude is *owed* in virtue of a direct duty to oneself?

In his 1784–1785 lectures, Kant argued that someone who shoots an old dog because it is no longer useful violates an indirect duty to humanity: "Since animals are an analogue of humanity, we observe duties to mankind when we observe them as analogues to this, and thus cultivate our duties to humanity" (*LE*, AA 27:459). Kant adds that someone who shoots an old dog "thereby damages the kindly and humane qualities in himself, which he ought to exercise in virtue of his duties to mankind" (*LE*, AA 27:459). Kant goes on to praise Leibniz for replacing insects on trees after he had finished observing them, not wanting to cause them any harm. Finally, although Kant allows experiments on animals, he claims that harming animals for sport is never acceptable (see *LE*, AA 27:459–60).

These passages from Kant's lectures might seem susceptible to the traditional interpretation. However, even in the 1784–1785 lectures, Kant's position seems stronger than the traditional interpretation allows. Although he does contend that cruelty to animals makes one more likely to fail in one's duties to other humans, Kant also suggests that cruelty to animals betrays the absence of a moral quality one ought to have. For example, "If a master turns out his ass or dog because it can no longer earn its keep, this always shows a very small mind in the master" (*LE*, AA 27:460). This claim that such an action "always" exhibits a small mind suggests that turning out one's dog is morally problematic even

if doing so does not cause one to violate any direct duty to other human beings. In later lectures, Kant claims, “Any action whereby we may torment animals, or let them suffer distress, or otherwise treat them without love, is demeaning to ourselves” (*LE* 27:710). Kant’s description of such actions as “demeaning to ourselves” is instructive. Although humans have only indirect duties regarding animals, this passage suggests that humans have some direct duty to themselves that proscribes animal cruelty. The problem with cruelty to animals is not simply that it has a tendency to make us cruel to humans – rather, there is something morally problematic with such cruelty itself. Otherwise, it would not be the case that “any” action of tormenting an animal would be “demeaning” to oneself.

5. Duties Regarding Non-animal Nature

Kant also recognizes duties regarding flora and even non-living entities, arguing in §17 of the *Doctrine of Virtue* that appreciation of the beauty in non-human nature is serviceable for morality because it promotes a disposition “that greatly promotes morality or at least prepares the way for it: the disposition, namely, to love something [...] even apart from any intention to use it.” Moreover, “A propensity for wanton destruction of what is *beautiful* in inanimate nature (*spiritus destructionis*) is opposed to a human being’s duty to himself” because it weakens that disposition (*MM*, AA 6:443).

According to this argument, the aesthetic appreciation of an entity independently of its usefulness promotes a morally good disposition. Kant does not say exactly why this is the case in the *Doctrine of Virtue*. According to the notes of Vigilantius, however, Kant claimed similarly in his lectures that, regarding non-animal nature, moral agents have “a duty only to have no *animus destructionum*, i. e. no inclination to destroy without need the useable objects of nature” (*LE*, AA 27:709).²⁴ This is because “the need to love other things outside us must not be self-serving” and because one “cannot be more disinterestedly satisfied, from a

24 Whereas in the *Doctrine of Virtue* Kant associates a *spiritus destructionis* with the destruction of beautiful inanimate nature, here he associates an *animus destructionum* with the destruction of “useable” inanimate nature. It is an interesting question whether there is an important moral distinction between one’s treatment of beautiful versus usable natural objects. Due to limitations of space, I set this issue aside.

moral point of view, than when this inclination is directed upon lifeless objects [...]” (*LE*, AA 27:710). According to this account, being moral includes regarding oneself and other humans in a manner that is not merely self-serving. This, of course, fits well with Kant’s central claim that moral agents ought to view one another as ends-in-themselves deserving of respect rather than as mere means (see *G*, AA 4:428–429). Appreciation of beautiful flora and non-living entities cultivates a similar disposition, since one thereby admires beautiful entities apart from their propensity to serve one’s own interests.

Initially, this account of duties regarding non-animal nature might appear to be prone to the same interpretation, *mutatis mutandis*, traditionally offered for duties regarding animals. According to such an interpretation, aesthetic appreciation of plant life and non-living natural entities can help foster dispositions that make one more likely to fulfill her duties to human beings. However, this interpretation does not account for Kant’s claim that humans have a duty not to possess a *spiritus destructionis*, or propensity for wanton destruction. Since Kant holds both that wanton destruction of beautiful natural entities “is opposed to a human being’s duty to himself” (*MM*, AA 6:443) and that humans have “a duty only to have no *animus destructionum*” (*LE*, AA 27:709), the traditional interpretation is too weak. Evidently, Kant thinks that wanton destruction of flora is morally problematic in some way, since otherwise he would have no reason to claim that such destruction is opposed to duty nor that humans have a duty not to harbor a *spiritus destructionis*. If Kant held only that wanton destruction of plant life tended to weaken dispositions that are useful for respecting humans as ends-in-themselves, then he would lack grounds both for finding such destruction to be *opposed* to one’s duty and for holding that one has a duty not to possess a *spiritus destructionis*.

6. The Imperfect Duty to Increase One’s Own Moral Perfection

For these reasons, the traditional interpretation of duties regarding non-humans is inadequate. This interpretation relies heavily on a psychological tendency of human beings to transfer the way they treat non-humans to the way they treat humans. However, as Heike Baranzke contends, Kant’s account does not rest on this psychological tendency of

humans.²⁵ Instead, Kant seems to be arguing that there is something inherently wrong with cruelty to animals and wanton destruction of flora. A different interpretation is called for, one that can account for Kant's contention that some actions affecting non-humans are proscribed by some duty one has to oneself. I will now attempt to defend such an interpretation.

In §17 of the *Doctrine of Virtue*, Kant does not identify explicitly the duty to oneself upon which duties regarding non-humans depend. Later in that work (§§21–22), however, Kant identifies a direct duty to oneself to increase one's own "moral perfection" (*MM*, AA 6:446). This is an imperfect duty, or a duty that specifies a maxim that one ought to adopt but does not specify specific actions that must be performed (*MM*, AA 6:388–90).²⁶ Kant identifies two kinds of moral perfection. The first "consists subjectively in the *purity* (*puritas moralis*) of one's disposition to duty, namely, in the law being by itself alone the incentive [...] and in actions being done not only in conformity with duty but also *from duty*" (*MM*, AA 6:446). Moral purity is the disposition whereby one makes the moral law the incentive of one's moral actions – it is the disposition of acting from duty rather than merely in accordance with duty. Kant glosses this duty as the command, "be holy" (*MM*, AA 6:446). The second kind of moral perfection "consists objectively in fulfilling all one's duties and in attaining completely one's moral end with regard to oneself." Kant glosses this duty as the command to "be perfect" (*MM*, AA 6:446). A moral agent who attains this moral perfection is one who completely fulfills all one's duties to oneself and other humans. According to Kant, one has an imperfect but direct duty to oneself to develop and increase both these kinds of moral perfection.

The imperfect duty to increase one's own moral perfection is distinct from the other (perfect and imperfect) duties to oneself Kant identifies in the *Doctrine of Virtue*. These include perfect duties to oneself as an animal and a moral being, as well as an imperfect duty to increase one's own natural perfection. The perfect duties to oneself as an animal

25 Baranzke (2005). See also Ott (2008, 47); Baranzke (2004).

26 See Kant (1999, G, AA 4:421–3). 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" (Guyer (1993, 321)).

being (§§5–8) require one "to *preserve himself* in his animal nature" (*MM*, AA 6:421). Such duties include prohibitions on committing suicide, "defiling oneself by lust" (*MM*, AA 6:424), and "stupefying oneself by the excessive use of food or drink" (*MM*, AA 6:427). The perfect duties to oneself as a moral being (§§9–12) include prohibitions on lying, avarice, and servility (*MM*, AA 6:429–437). Finally, one has an imperfect duty to increase one's own "natural perfection" (§§19–20), or to develop one's physical and mental talents (*MM*, AA 6:444). Such talents could include musical propensity, athleticism, and various intellectual capacities.²⁷

Kant's account of a direct duty to increase one's own moral perfection sheds light on his claim that a human violates a duty to herself by being cruel to animals or by wantonly destroying flora and other natural entities. As both Allen Wood and Paul Guyer independently hold,²⁸ the duty in question must be the duty to increase one's own moral perfection, because it is by far the most plausible candidate available among the duties to oneself Kant identifies in the *Doctrine of Virtue*. Neither cruelty to animals nor wanton destruction of flora seems to violate one's perfect duties to oneself as an animal being, because such actions need not (and typically do not) involve suicide, lust, nor intemperance (see *MM*, AA 6:421–428). Further, neither cruelty to animals nor wanton destruction of flora seems to violate one's perfect duties to oneself as a moral being, because such actions need not (and typically do not) involve lying, avarice, nor servility (see *MM*, AA 6:429–437). Nor do the actions in question seem to violate one's imperfect duty to increase one's own natural perfection, because animal cruelty and wanton destruction of flora could be practiced by someone who carefully cultivates his physical and intellectual talents. In short, one could imagine a human being who fulfills all his perfect duties to himself and his duty to increase his natural perfection but who still violates his duties regarding non-human nature. Kant's claims in §17 of the *Doctrine of Virtue* is that such a person nonetheless violates a duty to himself. The only remaining candidate is the imperfect duty to oneself to increase one's own moral perfection, and

27 Kant also mentions a duty to oneself "as his own innate judge" (§13), which requires one to maintain a conscience whereby one can judge the morality of one's actions (*MM*, AA 6:437–440).

28 Guyer (1993, 324–329); Wood (1998, 195).

on closer inspection this duty does indeed seem to proscribe animal cruelty and wanton destruction of non-human natural entities.²⁹

Early in the *Doctrine of Virtue*, Kant claims that one “has a duty to carry the cultivation of his *will* up to the purest virtuous disposition, in which the *law* becomes also the incentive to his actions that conform with duty and he obeys the law from duty. This disposition is inner morally practical perfection” (*MM*, AA 6:387). He adds that the “ultimate wisdom” for a human being is “to develop the original predisposition to a good will within him [...]” (*MM*, AA 6:441). These allusions to a good will are important. A good will is a will that acts from duty, or a will for which the moral law is itself the incentive for action. At the beginning of the *Groundwork*, Kant contends that a good will is the only conceivable object that is unconditionally good, because all other candidates (e.g., happiness, talents, health) cease to be good if the person who possesses them lacks a good will (*G*, AA 4:393). Hence, only a good will is good in itself – its value does not depend on certain conditions being met nor on its being instrumentally valuable in achieving certain ends. Since moral purity is the disposition by which one acts from duty rather than merely in conformity with duty, having this disposition is constitutive of having a good will, or a will that acts solely from duty.

While allowing that a good will is indeed “a will which steadily acts from the motive of respect for the moral law,” Robert Louden writes, “Kant’s virtuous agent is a human approximation of a good will who through strength of mind continually acts out of respect for the moral law while still feeling the presence of natural inclinations which could tempt him to act from other motives.”³⁰ This virtuous agent has not fulfilled the command, “be holy” (*MM*, AA 6:446), because she still is susceptible to inclinations that tempt her to act otherwise than from duty. A holy will, by contrast, is one whose “volition is of itself necessarily in accord with the [moral] law” (*MM*, AA 4:414), i.e. a holy will by its nature always has the moral law as the incentive of its actions. Since, unlike a being with a holy will, a human being is always subject to incli-

29 It is important to note that this duty to oneself to increase one’s own moral perfection is a direct duty. In particular, the disposition of moral purity is not merely a useful disposition for a moral agent to possess, but rather a disposition that moral agents have a direct duty to strive for.

30 Louden (1986, 477–8).

nations, he must instead cultivate virtuous dispositions that approximate a good will.

Since a human has a direct duty to strive for moral purity, and since this consists of cultivating a virtuous disposition that approximates a good will, a human has a direct duty to cultivate such a virtuous disposition. This suggests that, for Kant, a virtuous disposition is not merely instrumentally valuable insofar as it helps one perform one’s various duties. More importantly, human beings have a direct duty to cultivate their own virtue. The more virtuous one’s disposition, the closer one approximates to having the moral law as the sole incentive of her actions, although the ideal of the good will cannot be realized by humans in this life (*MM*, AA 6:446–447). This is why Kant writes that “human morality in its highest stage can still be nothing more than virtue, even if it be entirely pure [...] In its highest stage it is an ideal (to which one must continually approximate), which is commonly personified poetically by the *sage*” (*MM*, AA 6:383).

7. Moral Perfection and Duties Regarding Non-human Nature

Kant’s account of the duty to increase one’s own moral perfection allows us to offer an interpretation of duties regarding non-humans that avoids the problems of the traditional interpretation. As Wood argues, a person who practices cruelty to animals or wanton destruction of flora weakens in himself the virtuous dispositions that approximate a good will.³¹ Performing such actions erodes one’s moral purity and hence decreases his moral perfection, thus violating one’s duty to increase her own moral perfection. In what follows, I argue that animal cruelty and wanton destruction of flora are both proscribed in virtue of one’s duty to increase her own moral perfection. Moreover, this duty gives human beings good moral reason to practice kindness toward animals and to engage in aesthetic appreciation of flora because such actions are ways to increase one’s moral perfection.

Since the duty to increase one’s own moral perfection is an imperfect duty, it does not give a law for actions themselves but only for a maxim of actions. In other words, this duty specifies that one ought

31 Wood (1998, 195).

to make her own moral perfection her end, but it does not specify exactly what actions must be performed in order to achieve this end, thus affording some latitude to a moral agent in deciding how to increase her moral perfection (*MM*, AA 6:390). Accordingly, Kant holds that every action that fulfills a duty of virtue is meritorious, but he denies that a moral agent is always culpable for failing to perform such actions (*MM*, AA 6:390). A missed opportunity for fulfilling an imperfect duty of virtue indicates “mere *deficiency in moral worth* [...]” (*MM*, AA 6:390), but it is still compatible with the acceptance of those maxims prescribed by imperfect duties of virtue. One fails in fulfilling an imperfect duty only if “the subject should make it his principle not to comply with such duties” (*MM*, AA 6:390), i. e. only if one fails to adopt the maxim prescribed by an imperfect duty. Hence, one who does nothing to increase her moral perfection not only fails to act meritoriously but also violates her duty, because she lacks the maxim prescribed by that duty.

In Kant’s sense, passing on an opportunity to be kind to animals, or to go out of one’s way to benefit animals, is a missed chance to fulfill one’s duty. By ignoring the plights of animals whose suffering one could alleviate, for example, one misses a chance to cultivate virtuous dispositions that would be constitutive of one’s moral purity and hence increase one’s moral perfection. Kind actions toward animals can cultivate virtuous dispositions, such as benevolence. Such an action plays a causal role in strengthening one’s virtuous dispositions, thus augmenting one’s moral purity and increasing her moral perfection. Kind actions vis-à-vis animals are ways to cultivate virtuous dispositions that one ought to have. Accordingly, one who opts not to practice kindness to animals passes on an opportunity to perform a meritorious action that cultivate such virtuous dispositions. The imperfect duty to increase one’s own moral perfection prescribes kindness to animals as a way to strive for the end of moral purity. Similarly, passing on an opportunity to appreciate the beauty of plant life is also a missed opportunity to increase one’s moral perfection, insofar as such appreciation could cultivate virtuous dispositions, such as the disposition to love something apart from its utility (see *MM*, AA 6:443). Accordingly, aesthetic appreciation of flora is also prescribed by one’s imperfect duty to moral perfection because such appreciation is one way to cultivate one’s virtuous dispositions and hence increase her own moral perfection.

However, a person who passes on an opportunity to be kind to animals or to appreciate beautiful flora does not *necessarily* violate her duty

in a culpable manner. This is because passing on an opportunity for meritorious action is compatible with possessing the maxim that is commanded by the imperfect duty to increase one’s own moral perfection. Consider the opportunity to volunteer at an animal shelter caring for abandoned pets. A person who acts on this opportunity performs actions whereby his virtuous dispositions and thereby his moral purity are strengthened, thus contributing to the fulfillment of his imperfect duty to increase his own moral perfection. Alternatively, a person who declines this opportunity is not thereby blameworthy, because he might strive toward increasing his own moral perfection by performing other actions. The latter person misses a particular opportunity to cultivate his virtuous dispositions, but this is compatible with his adopting the maxim whereby he seeks to increase his own moral perfection. Likewise, a person who chooses to rush past a scene of beautiful plant life rather than appreciate it passes on an opportunity to increase his own moral perfection, but he is not culpable for doing so, provided that he performs other actions to increase his own moral perfection.

Yet there is a significant, moral distinction between choosing not to perform actions that benefit non-human natural entities and choosing to perform actions that unnecessarily harm non-human natural entities. The latter is not merely a missed opportunity for strengthening one’s virtuous dispositions – it is also the kind of action that weakens one’s virtuous dispositions and thus *decreases* one’s moral perfection. A person who tortures animals for fun does not merely miss an opportunity to increase his moral perfection. This is because cruel treatment of animals, or the infliction of unnecessary harm on them, weakens virtuous dispositions, such as benevolence and sensitivity to suffering. Such actions are incompatible with the direct duty to oneself to increase one’s own moral perfection because they do exactly the opposite. By practicing cruelty to animals, one acts in a way that is incompatible with the maxim that the duty to moral perfection commands her to adopt, namely that one ought to strive for moral purity by strengthening the virtuous dispositions that approximate a good will. Hence, animal cruelty violates one’s duty to increase her own moral perfection.

This account fits well with Kant’s example of the master who dismisses a dog that has served him for many years (*LE*, AA 27:459). No longer of any use to him, this person chooses to abandon the dog, letting it suffer and die on its own. He is thus the cause of the unnecessary harm the animal experiences afterward. Accordingly, this person’s moral perfection is damaged, his virtuous dispositions eroded. By

practicing cruelty against an animal that has served him throughout its life, the master mitigates his dispositions of benevolence, sensitivity to suffering, and gratitude (see *MM*, AA 6:443). This is why, as Kant says, causing unnecessary harm to animals in general is “demeaning to ourselves” (*LE*, AA 27:710). One does not demean oneself merely by passing on an opportunity for increasing one’s moral perfection, but one does demean oneself by engaging in actions that decrease his moral perfection. Although he does not fail in a direct duty to the dog, the master does violate a direct duty to himself. Hence, he is morally culpable for unnecessarily harming the dog.

The same is true in cases of wanton destruction of flora. Kant claims that humans have a duty not to possess a *spiritus destructionis*, or the “inclination to destroy without need the useable objects of nature” (*LE*, AA 27:709). This destructive inclination is inimical to the disposition “to love something [...] even apart from any intention to use it” (*MM*, AA 6:443). This disposition to love something (e.g., a rational person) apart from its utility is plausibly viewed as a virtuous disposition that contributes to one’s moral perfection. All else being equal, a person who is disposed to love others in this way has a greater degree of moral purity than a person who lacks this disposition. This is because moral purity is the disposition whereby the moral law is the incentive of one’s moral actions, and moral actions often require one to love others regardless of their usefulness to oneself. Such love seems required by what Kant calls duties of love, namely beneficence, gratitude, and sympathy (*MM*, AA 6:448–458). In performing beneficent actions, for example, one must love others for their own sakes, i.e. apart from their usefulness to oneself. Accordingly, the disposition to love in this way is a virtuous disposition that is constitutive of one’s moral perfection, and one therefore has a duty to strive for this disposition.

Now, according to Kant, wanton destruction of flora weakens this virtuous disposition to love something apart from its usefulness. Hence, such destructive actions decrease one’s moral perfection. This means that wanton destruction of flora is incompatible with the maxim commanded by the duty to moral perfection. Since one ought to adopt the maxim whereby one increases her moral perfection, a person who acts contrary to this maxim performs a blameworthy action. Wanton destruction of flora is therefore proscribed by the duty to moral perfection. Such an action weakens one’s virtuous disposition to love something, and thus it is an action that is contrary to a maxim that one has a direct duty to oneself to adopt.

8. Closing Remarks

Both cruelty to animals and wanton destruction of flora are morally problematic, but not only because such actions make one more likely to fail in one’s duties to oneself and other humans. More importantly, such actions decrease one’s moral perfection and thus are directly opposed to one’s duty to increase that moral perfection. Actions that weaken one’s virtuous dispositions are morally proscribed because they are incompatible with the maxim commanded by this direct duty to moral perfection. On this interpretation of duties regarding non-humans, Kant’s position entails that animal cruelty or wanton destruction of flora violates a direct duty one has to oneself.

The interpretation I have defended, if correct, means that duties regarding non-human nature are much stronger than the traditional interpretation recognizes. Rather than merely discouraging animal cruelty or wanton destruction of flora on the basis that it could lead to the development of dispositions that make one less likely to fulfill one’s duties to human beings, Kant’s position actually proscribes such actions as morally wrong. Moreover, Kant’s position also prescribes kindness toward animals and aesthetic appreciation of flora as optional but nonetheless effective ways to strengthen one’s virtuous dispositions and hence fulfill one’s duty to increase her own moral perfection.

Given this interpretation, a Kantian approach to environmental ethics seems more promising than is usually recognized. While I lack space to begin developing a Kantian environmental ethic here, I hope to have shown that Kant’s position is by no means inimical to granting non-humans a kind of moral consideration. While he does not allow that humans have direct duties to non-humans, Kant’s account of duties regarding non-human natural entities gives human beings good moral reason both to benefit animals and flora and to abstain from causing them unnecessary harm.³²

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