

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

Korsgaard and Non-Sentient Life

ABSTRACT

Christine Korsgaard argues for the moral status of animals and our obligations to them. She grounds this obligation on the notion that we share a common identity, our animal nature, with them and that animal pain represents a public reason that binds us; nevertheless, her distinctive attempt to enlist Kantian arguments to account for our obligations to animals has a startling implication that she fails to adequately consider: that we have direct duties to plants as well.

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In *The Sources of Normativity*, Christine Korsgaard argues for the moral status of animals and our obligations to them. She grounds this obligation on the notion that we share a common identity, our animal nature, with them and that animal pain represents a public reason that binds us; nevertheless, her distinctive attempt to enlist Kantian arguments to account for our obligations to animals has a startling implication that she fails to adequately consider: that we have direct duties to plants as well. In the first part of this paper, I will revisit Korsgaard's attempt to justify our obligations to animals; then in part two, I will examine her account of our *indirect* duties to plants. Next, I will show that her argument for our having direct duties to animals actually justifies similar obligations *to* plants as well, not just *in regards to* them, and finally I will consider and rebut her objection to my argument.

Obligations to Animals

According to Korsgaard, animals value themselves; this is just what it means to be a living thing. She says, "A living thing is an entity whose nature it is to preserve and maintain its physical identity. It is a law to itself. When something it is doing is a threat to that identity and perception reveals that fact, the animal finds that it must reject what it is doing and do something else instead. In that case, it is in pain" (1996, 150). She argues that pain is the "unreflective rejection of a threat to your identity. So pain is the perception of a reason, and that is why it seems normative" (1996, 150). When we see an animal in pain, we are also perceiving a reason that the animal has to change its condition, and this reason is public, something that has normative import for us as reflective rational beings. She argues that the animal's cry of pain obligates you just as someone calling out to you in your language can obligate you to listen: "You can no more hear the cries of an animal as mere noise than you

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can the words of a person” (1996, 153). Pain, in this sense, is a public language that we share with animals, a sign that points to reasons that we both are able to perceive.

Korsgaard argues that we must respond compassionately to the cries of an animal because we must act consistently (in a Kantian sense), valuing sentient nature wherever we find it. In *The Sources of Normativity*, she puts it this way:

I first point out to you that your animal nature is a fundamental form of identity on which the normativity of your human identity, your moral identity, depends. It is not just as human but considered as sensible, considered as an animal, that you value yourself and are your own end. And this further stretch of reflection requires a further stretch of endorsement. If you don't value your animal nature, you can value nothing. So you must endorse its value. And the reasons and obligations to which your animal identity gives rise are not private reasons. However you bind yourself by those reasons, you can bind and be bound by others as well. So the reasons of other animals are also reasons for you (1996, 152-153).

Thus the reasons we have to value our sentient identities are public in nature; that which is a reason for you is also a reason for me—hence my obligation to you. Like Kant's Formula of Humanity, just as you can recognize your own humanity in other rational beings, wherever you also find animal nature, you will find a common identity, something *someone* shares with you and something that can obligate you.

In her article, “Fellow Creatures: Kantian Ethics and our Duties to Animals,” she describes our common animal nature as an end in itself: “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 this is why we have duties to the other animals” (2004, 103).

Indirect Duties to Plants

On the face of it, Korsgaard’s account of obligations to animals seems plausible, but what does she have to say about other forms of life, specifically plants? According to Korsgaard, plants do not share the same status as rational and nonrational animals: “Since a plant is not conscious, being a plant is not a way of being someone, so it is not a way of being someone that we share with them” (1996, 156). She thinks that a plant’s lack of awareness, its lack of mattering to itself, disqualifies it from obligating us.

On the other hand, Korsgaard *does* recognize that we have duties *in regards to* plants; she asks, “Is it crazy to say that there is something amiss with someone who destroys plant life wantonly, or who can see a plant drooping but still alive without wanting to give it a drink? Such a person shows a lack of reverence of life which is the basis of all value” (1996, 156). However, she claims that this is not an obligation *to* plants directly. This is Kant’s view, as Allen Wood describes it, of our duties to *both* animals and plants:

Kant argues that our duty to cherish and promote what is beautiful in nonrational nature irrespective of its usefulness, and to behave with kindness and gratitude toward animals, are really duties to promote our own

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moral perfection by behaving in ways that encourage a morally good disposition in ourselves. Kant claims that appreciation for the beauty of nature, by awakening in us the disposition to value something apart from its usefulness for our ends, prepares the way for a genuinely moral disposition in our behavior toward rational beings (1998, 194).

This means, regarding plants, that Kant's duty not to harm plants is an indirect duty, not a direct duty to value plant life for its own sake, but to value it for our sake because it makes us better people. Kant's view does not permit unbridled exploitation of nonrational life for our own pleasures, but it also does not consider plant life as intrinsically valuable. Korsgaard agrees with Kant that our duties to plants are indirect, but she disagrees with him regarding our duties to animals. However, she may be overlooking an aspect of her argument that would support the view that our duties to plants and animals are the same, that we have direct duties to both.

Direct Duties to Plants

Korsgaard's argument for our direct duties to animals depends on two things: our shared identity and the reasons it gives rise to, but this justification would also work for plants as well. First, we share a common identity with plants—our biological nature; second, our biological nature gives rise to reasons too.

Regarding our common identity, we are not only a part of the animal kingdom, but we also share biological characteristics in common with plant life. This could be called (following Aquinas) a vegetative, (or following Aristotle) nutritive, or reproductive nature. Without this principle of life—the aspect that is concerned with nutrition, growth, and reproduction—

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there would be no animals or rational human beings who could concern themselves with higher principles such as appetite, action, or reason. In fact, there would be no Kantian basis for duty at all since obligation is self-legislating through rational autonomy, and this is dependent (at least empirically) on there being human biological organisms. Therefore, if animal nature is necessary for rational human nature, then so is biological nature in general.

A living thing, under Korsgaard's conception, "is an entity whose nature it is to preserve and maintain its physical identity" (1996, 150). While describing animals, she invokes Aristotle: "Aristotle thought that a *living* thing is a thing with a special kind of form. A living thing is so designed as to maintain and reproduce itself. It has what we might call a self-maintaining form. So it is its own end; its job is just to keep on being what it is. Its business in life is to preserve its own identity. And its organs and activities are arranged to that end" (1996, 149). When an animal experiences pain, it perceives a reason to act to preserve its identity. For example, when an animal feels hungry, it perceives a reason to eat, being that if it does not eat, it will die. The animal does not *know* this reason, but it does perceive it, nonetheless. Korsgaard applies a similar description to plant life: "Plants, although not sensible, are in a way organized to be their own end. Like animals they have a self-maintaining form. And it is also true that we find it natural to use the language of reason and action about plants. We say that a plant *needs* water, that it *turns* towards the light, even that it is not *happy* in that window and must be moved to another" (1996, 156). Here and elsewhere, Korsgaard describes living things in the language of final causes, as having ends. Although some of this language clearly crosses over into metaphor (plant emotions for example) Korsgaard evidently thinks that a common prin-

principle of life can be ascribed to both animals and plants, since both “are organized to their own ends” and “have natures that aim at preserving their own identity.”

Plants are not conscious, so any sense that can be made of the claim that plants have reasons must not include the notion of awareness. Nevertheless, it seems as though Korsgaard is consistently applying the Aristotelian conception of living things here. Although plants do not share perceptual capacities with animals, it is not inconceivable to think that they are organized on the basis of final causes; for example, Thomas Aquinas, commenting on Aristotle, agrees that a rational mind is not necessary to act for an end. Everything in nature, by its action or movement, tends to an end (*Summa Theologica*, I-II, 1,2). As Korsgaard writes, “We do not think of plants as perceiving and pursuing their good, and yet like animals they are essentially self-maintaining beings and in that sense are oriented toward their own good. And they exhibit a certain responsiveness to the environment, to light and moisture” (2004, 106). Plants spread their roots and photosynthesize on the basis of this end, and if they do not do this, they will die. “Since the function of a plant...is to maintain itself, it is the plant’s own needs, not our needs, that are affected by things that enable or interfere with its functioning. A plant therefore ‘has a good’ in a slightly deeper sense than a [human artifact] does, since what is ‘good for it’ is more authentically good for *itself*” (2004, 102). Thus, plants have identities, just not in a conscious sense, which does not seem to be a difficulty for Korsgaard’s model. If conscious self-awareness were necessary for having an identity, then it is not clear that even animals would have the status that Korsgaard needs for her argument to go through. Granted animals are more conscious than plants, they are not self-aware in the same way as human beings are. Nevertheless, Korsgaard can

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extend direct duties to animals because, I claim, it is not awareness that is fundamental to her model, it is having reasons based on a *metaphysical* identity, or the having of an *esse*.

Attributing reasons to plants in this way depends on a strongly teleological conception of life. Nevertheless, this appears to be Korsgaard's actual view toward living things in general and why her model, in my view, entails direct duties to plants. J. Skidmore interprets her model in a similar fashion: "Korsgaard's discussion seems to lay great emphasis on a teleological conception of life, suggesting that living things are, by their very nature, oriented toward certain goals or ends, such as self-preservation" (2001, 548). If we grant her this controversial conception of life, then we seem to be faced with the fact that being one's own end is not limited to human or animal life, but would even extend to plant life.

But does *having ends* mean *having reasons* in the needed sense? Skidmore, at least, is skeptical: "Does it follow that plants have reasons to pursue such ends? It is hard to imagine what this could mean. Plants simply are not the kinds of things that can have reasons to do anything at all" (2001, 548). Under our modern conception of having a reason, it seems implausible to ascribe reason to anything incapable of acting for reasons in a deliberative sense. Nevertheless, in the rich teleological conception of life present in Korsgaard's writing, it makes sense to conflate *having ends* with *having reasons*. This is apparent in Korsgaard's discussion of animal reason: "Suppose for instance that [this] animal needs nourishment. It perceives that by getting hungry. It finds this unpleasant and is moved to get something to eat. Don't be confused here: it is not that the pain is an unpleasant sensation which gives the animal a reason to eat. The animal has a reason to eat, which is that it will die if it

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does not” (1996, 150). Thus, for Korsgaard, having a reason is quite independent from being capable of rational deliberation and from even being basically aware of it. In this example, the animal has a reason to eat apart from the pain, which is the perception of that reason. It will die if it does not eat, and this is what is relevant to obligation. Plants, equally, have reasons entailed in their principle of life.

Assuming the case has been made that plants have reasons and identities, then our direct duty to plants works like this: your biological nature is a fundamental form of *your* identity. You do not simply value your human nature, but also you value that nature on which your distinctly rational faculties depend: animal nature and more basically biological nature. Since you value the basic principle of life that you find within, then you are obligated to value the same principle in others as well, whether you find it in other humans, animals, or plants. To disvalue the principle of life in others would be to deny your own nature, to lose your self-identity. This shows that plants do not have value simply as being instrumental to our good, but they are valuable as having their own ends, and this is how Korsgaard’s model entails obligations to plants.

Korsgaard’s Response

Korsgaard would immediately reject this alleged implication of her argument because she says plants are not conscious and thus not capable of perceiving threats to their identities. She says, “Being a plant is not a way of being someone, so it is not a way of being someone that we share with them” (1996, 156). And this would mean that our perceiving a threat to a plant would not obligate us to the plant, to change its condition in any way, because the plant itself does not *perceive* a reason; it does not “matter to itself” in a self-conscious way.

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That a plant does not “matter to itself” in a self-conscious way is an incontestable fact, but as Korsgaard says, plants matter to themselves in an unconscious teleological sense, and this *having a reason*, not *the perception of a reason*, seems to be the basis of obligation. For something to obligate us, it need only have a reason that we can also attribute to ourselves, which is to identify with it, and this is clearly what she has in mind when she speaks of plants having ends, which I have shown above. Being a *conscious someone* might be necessary for holding obligations yourself, but not a necessary condition for being able to obligate others.

Under Korsgaard’s model, plants obligate us because we are capable of reflecting on reasons that they have to maintain themselves, as having their own needs. We do not need to be called upon by an expression of pain to recognize these needs, we simply infer these needs as reasons by seeing the same principle of life active in ourselves, and this is how we are obligated to plants, not just *in regards to* them.

Conclusion

I have attempted to show that Korsgaard’s theory of direct duties to animals entails direct duties to plants as well. The only way for Korsgaard to avoid this entailment is to abandon the teleological conception of life, but it is not clear that she can do this without ultimately undermining her case for obligations to animals. Another solution might be to give a more careful defense of why mattering to yourself or being conscious of reasons is necessary to obligate others in your case, or she could simply embrace our having direct duties to plants, but then face the daunting task of answering other questions such as what we are to eat. I think all of these solutions are potentially viable. Some might take my argument as a *reductio ad absurdum*.

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dum against Korsgaard (some think it is absurd to say that we have direct obligations to non-sentient life), but this is not my aim. I am partial to teleological conceptions of life and hopeful that her project can help explain the moral intuition that non-sentient life is intrinsically valuable; however, making the full case for direct obligations to plants will require more work, and I hope that Korsgaard or someone else continues this project.

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