Moral Animals
Christine M. Korsgaard

Why is there such a thing as value? Those who believe that intrinsic values simply exist – that some things just have the property of being valuable - don’t feel a need to answer that question. But I believe that all value is dependent on the existence of valuing beings. In these lectures, I explore the roots of the good in animal nature and the roots of the right in human nature. I then consider the implications of these accounts for a practical question: if it is human and animal nature that bring value into the world, what if anything does that imply about the way human beings should treat the other animals?

Lecture One: Animal Nature and the Good

We use the term “good” in two contexts: as a form of evaluation, and to denominate the final end of life and action – the summun bonum, or, in our case, the human good. I start from the question what evaluative and final goodness have to do with each other. Do we use the same term because when we talk about “the human good” or “the good life” we are evaluating a life and its circumstances in general? If so, how do we go about doing that? Most things are evaluated with respect to their fitness to perform their function, but life and its circumstances do not have a function.

I contrast three theories of the final good: an objective realist theory that identifies the final good with participation in intrinsically valuable activities; a hedonist theory; and Aristotle’s account, which identifies an entity’s final good with its well-functioning as the kind of thing that it is. Aristotle’s theory suggests another relationship between evaluative and final goodness: an entity is capable of a final good when it functions by being aware of its own evaluative goodness – that is, by being aware of whether it is functioning well. This is because such an entity functions by developing evaluative attitudes – desire and aversion, pleasure and pain - towards things that affect its own functioning. Animals (including human animals) are entities that function by being aware of their own functioning. It is therefore the nature of an animal to have a final good.

This account of the final good may be combined with Kantian value theory to yield a naturalistic account of the good. According to Kantian value theory, things that are good for their own sake are not characterized by a metaphysical property of intrinsic value – rather, they are valuable because someone values them for their own sake. In the combined theory, final goods exist because there are animals. Good things are good because they contribute to or are partly constitutive of an animal’s final good. This theory avoids the metaphysical appeal to intrinsic values and preserves the intuition that everything that is good is good for some valuing being.

Lecture Two: That short but imperious word ought: Human Nature and the Right

Are the differences between human beings and the other animals all matters of degree, or is there a difference of kind? Human beings, I argue, are the only moral and rational animals – that is, we are the only animals that live under the government of an “ought.” But this difference can be explained in terms of other attributes that we share with the other animals although they come in degrees. Specifically, an action can be “intentional” in different ways that can be arranged on a scale, from movement that can be described purposively at one extreme to action that involves the choice of
an end at the other. These degrees of intentionality are in turn correlated with degrees of self-consciousness, ranging from awareness of your position with respect to others in the physical or social world to awareness of yourself as the author of actions influenced by your own attitudes. When we become aware of ourselves in this latter sense we become capable of evaluating and directing our own conduct (and beliefs) in accordance with norms. This power is reason in the strict sense. Other intelligent animals “reason” in the sense that thinking about means and consequences can change their attitudes, but this by itself does not make them answerable for bringing about these changes and is not the same as being under the government of norms. Morality and reason are (probably) unique human attributes but are the natural result of the evolution of self-consciousness.

**Lecture Three: Human Beings and the Other Animals**

Most people agree that it is wrong to torment or kill a non-human animal for a trivial reason, but they count almost any human interest served by the suffering or death of an animal as the source of a sufficient reason. Animals have moral claims, we seem to think, but unlike the claims of our fellow humans, they are easily overridden. I call this the moral asymmetry and ask whether anything in the nature of the good or the right could justify it.

Some people suppose that the human good is more important than the good of the other animals, because our lives are in some way more important to us than the lives of the other animals are to them. Appealing to the theory of the good described in the first lecture, and to the account of human nature sketched in the second lecture, I offer a theory of what is distinctive about the human good. Human beings live under the government of individual normative self-conceptions, and living up to these self-conceptions gives life the character of a project that can succeed or fail. This makes our lives important to us in ways that the lives of animals are not, and this might make some moral differences. But there is no clear sense in which our lives are “more” important than the lives of animals. This is in part because “important” is like good: everything that is important must be important to some valuing being, and so there is no point of view from which this comparison can be made. And it is in part because the difference between the human good and animal good is not a quantitative one, but a difference of kind.

Some people suppose that human beings cannot have duties to the other animals in the same sense that we can have duties to other human beings because morality is a system of reciprocal relations. We can therefore have duties only to those who can have duties to us. I argue that we must distinguish two senses of the idea of a duty to someone. In the first sense, someone may make a claim on you in the name of a law you both acknowledge yourselves to be under; in the second, someone may have a claim on you in the name of a law you acknowledge yourself to be under. We make claims on one another on the basis of goods and ills that spring from our animal nature – for instance our capacity for suffering – and therefore acknowledge that animals have such claims. And in a more general way, our claims spring from our animal nature, for they are ultimately based on the fact that we have a final good.

I conclude that although both of these arguments do reflect important moral truths, neither justifies the moral asymmetry.