

Animal Selves and the Good¹

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Abstract: If we would save a human in preference to some other kind of animal, does that show that we must think humans are more important or valuable than the other animals? If everything that is important must be important to someone, and everything that is good must be good for someone, it makes almost no sense to say that humans are more important than the other animals. This paper constructs and defends a theory of the good that reflects the idea that everything that is good must be good for someone, in particular that everything that is good must be good from the point of view of a self. But the extent to which an animal has a unified self or identity is a matter of degree, and that makes the extent to which things may be good or bad for animals a matter of degree: some things may be both better and worse for animals with more unified and substantial selves. This may explain our intuitions about cases in which we would give the preference to people or the higher animals without invoking the absurd idea that some animals are more important than others.

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¹ Some of the material in this essay is also appearing in Chapter Two of Korsgaard, Christine M., *Fellow Creatures: Our Obligations to the Other Animals*, forthcoming from Oxford.

1. Introduction

1.1 In recent years, philosophers and others have raised questions about the moral justifiability of the ways we human beings treat the other animals — about whether we should eat meat, use animal products, experiment on animals, and so on. What justifies us in engaging in practices that are harmful to the animals themselves? One response you often meet with is the claim that human beings are just more important, or more valuable, than the other animals.² After all, given the choice between saving a human being and saving another animal in some sort of emergency, we would ordinarily save the human being. Doesn't that show that we think human beings matter more? Because of our intelligence, our linguistic abilities, our cultural capacities, or our moral nature, many people claim, human beings, or human lives, are more valuable than the lives of the other animals. What happens to us therefore matters more.

² Another possible response would be that animals are of no importance — that what happens to them does not matter for its own sake at all. This was essentially Kant's position, but few people are willing to endorse it. That is why many prefer to say that human beings are more important. If the argument of this paper is correct, it shows that there is a certain consistency to Kant's position: it makes better sense, from a strictly logical point of view, to deny that the welfare of animals is any part of the good than to assert that some animals are more important than others, even though the position is untenable.

Some people also extend this kind of thinking to other species, endorsing an order of importance among them. Many people share the intuition that there is something worse about the brutal treatment of animals who are in certain ways more like us — intelligent animals like primates and cetaceans, or animals who appear to have sophisticated emotional capacities, for example. One explanation of that intuition would be that because of the capacities they share with us, primates and cetaceans are more valuable and important than the so-called lower animals are.³

1.2 I think that the trouble with this view is not exactly that it is false — that the other animals are just as important as people — but that it makes almost no sense whatever. So in this paper I am going to do four things: First, I am going to explain why I think the view that human beings are more important or valuable than the other animals makes almost no sense. Second, I am going to back up that explanation with a theory about why anything is important or valuable at all. That is, I am going to sketch a theory of the good, an explanation of why there is such a thing as the good. We are then going to look at some objections to that theory, which will lead us to consider the relationship between having a self and having a good. Thinking about that relation is going to put us in a position to see why it can seem to us as if some animals were more important and valuable than others, even though they are not. What is at stake — besides practical issues about the way we treat the

³ For an alternative explanation, see *Fellow Creatures*, 4.3.

other animals — is an important point about the metaphysical structure of value itself.

2. Importance

2.1 The point about the metaphysical structure of value is controversial, but easily stated. I believe that nothing can be important without being important to someone or something — usually, to some creature, that is, to some person or animal, for whom it is good or bad.⁴ (“Creature” is the word I use for both people and the other animals.) Relatedly, nothing can be good or bad, without being good or bad for some creature.⁵ If that is right, we need to be more specific about what exactly the claim of superior human importance is supposed to be. To whom are human beings supposed to be more important? To the universe? To God? To ourselves? Obviously, as individuals we may be more important to ourselves than other people are, and our friends and families may be more important to us than strangers. There is

⁴ Something can be important to or good for a group agent like the state or an organization. I believe, but will not attempt to argue here, that all such value must be tied to value for individual creatures.

⁵ This view has some consequences that some find it hard to accept. It blocks aggregation, since what is good-for-me plus what is good-for-you is not necessarily good for anyone. It permits only Pareto-optimal changes to be made in the name of the good. It also prevents us from saying which of two states of affairs is better if the goods involved fall to different creatures. I have explored some of these consequences and defended the view in general in “The Relational Nature of the Good” and in “On Having a Good.”

philosophical disagreement about exactly how we are to understand this kind of partiality — what justifies it, if anything, and what it in turn justifies. But I think that most philosophers agree that the fact that someone is more important to *me* justifies only a limited form of partiality in certain well-defined circumstances, and does not commit me to the view that the person who is more important to me is actually more valuable absolutely than anybody else.

But the more general point is that if everything that matters must matter to someone, to some creature, then there is no place we can stand from which we can coherently ask which creatures, or which kinds of creatures, matter more absolutely.⁶ Or rather, there is almost no place, as I am about to explain.

2.2 There are two different inferences you might draw from the point I just made, and I want to distinguish between them. When we do distinguish them, it reveals a problem with what I have just been saying. You might think what I have said implies the view that all value is, in a certain popular sense of the term, relative. Then you will think what I am saying is that there are things that are important to me and things

⁶Of course there could be some third party to whom one kind of creature mattered more than another. When I first advanced these ideas in the form of the David Ross Boyd lectures at the University of Oklahoma in 2007, Linda Zagzebski asked me if I thought it would make any difference if human beings were more important to God. Absent some piece of further theorizing about the connection between God and absoluteness, that would not show that we were more important absolutely.

that are important to you but there is nothing that is quite simply and absolutely important or valuable. But actually that does not have to follow. So what I have in mind is a somewhat different view, which I will call the view that all importance and value are *tethered*. In particular, they are tethered to the creature to whom the thing in question is important, or for whom it is good, and cannot be cut loose from that creature without ceasing to be important or valuable at all. Although someone who holds the view that all value is tethered denies that there is such a thing as free-floating value, she is not committed to the view that nothing is valuable absolutely. There might be still ends that everyone (that is, everyone who can think about these things) must agree are worth bringing about; it is just that they will be worth bringing about in virtue of the fact that they are good for someone. This, after all, is what we want from the notion of absolute value — the notion of something that is good from every point of view, something whose value must be acknowledged by everyone who can think about value. There is no difference between being absolute and being relative to everyone.

Of course, there is a complication that arises from the view that all value is tethered. We cannot move from the claim that something is good for you to the claim that it is good absolutely, by invoking the premise that it is good absolutely, in an untethered way, that people, or people and animals, should get what is good for them. Instead we have to arrive at the conclusion that what is good for you is good absolutely by showing that it is, in a certain way, good for everyone, or from

everyone's point of view, that you, or perhaps that people and animals generally, should get what is good for them.⁷

Explaining exactly how this could be true, or rather to what extent it could be true, is a tall order, and I will not be attempting that in this paper.⁸ But — this is the problem I mentioned — it does leave a *logical* opening for the view that human welfare is more important absolutely than that of the other animals. It is just that *what* we would have to show is that even from the point of view of *the other animals themselves*, the good of human beings matters more than the good of those other animals themselves. We would have to show that our good is what is best for them, or from their point of view. It is hard to imagine anything that could make that even remotely plausible except some sort of teleological view, according to which human good is the purpose of the world towards which all things in some way strive. Of course that is no accident. The view that human beings are more important than the other animals wears its religious heritage on its sleeve.

Of course, those who hold that human beings are more important absolutely can deny that they hold the implausible view that human beings are more important than the other animals even from the point of view of the other animals themselves.

⁷ Although it may not be obvious, this is just a way of saying that the good is object of practical rather than theoretical reason. It is a version of Kant's paradox of method. See Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:63.

⁸ See *Fellow Creatures*, 8.8.3.

They can do this by denying that value is tethered. Then they can suppose that human beings can matter more than the other animals, without mattering more to anyone in particular. So this is a case of the metaethics of human domination. The belief in untethered value puts human beings in a position to imagine we can make claims about our own superior value that do not in fact make any sense outside of an antiquated teleological conception of the world.

3. The Good

3.1 In order to explain why I believe these things, I am going to sketch a theory of the good, according to which value is tethered.⁹ So let's ask: Why is there value? Why does anything matter? In arguing that the importance or value of something is always tethered to some creature, I have already given you a clue to what I think the answer is. I think that there are things that matter because there are entities to whom things matter: entities for whom things can be good or bad, in the sense that might matter morally. What are these entities? The answer, I am about to argue, is basically *animals, creatures*, including ourselves. This remark, as we will see, is almost true by definition. For there is a very tight connection between the concept of an animal, at least on one philosophical conception of what an animal is, and the concept of a

⁹ This section draws heavily on my earlier unpublished paper, "The Origin of the Good and Our Animal Nature."

being for whom things can be good or bad — a being who, as I like to put it, has a good.

3.2 I said a moment ago that animals, almost by definition, have a good *in the sense that might matter morally*. This qualification is necessary because we use the word “good” in two different ways, each associated with its own sense of “good-for.” First, “good” is our most general term of positive evaluation, a term we apply to nearly every kind of thing, or at least every kind of thing for which we have any use, or with which we interact. Think of the wide variety of things we evaluate as good or bad: cars, houses, machines and instruments, dogs and cats, food, weather, days, prose, pictures, movies; people considered as occupying roles or having jobs such as mother, teacher, son, president, friend, carpenter; and people considered just as people, among many other things. All of these things may be evaluated as good or bad. I am going to call that the *evaluative*, or, for reasons I will explain later, the *functional* sense of good. I call “good” in the second sense in which we use the term the *final* sense of good, borrowing one familiar translation of the Greek word *telos*, meaning a goal or an end. We call something “good” in the final sense when we consider it worth having, realizing, or bringing about for its own sake. We suppose that something we call “the good” or in our own case “the human good” is the end or aim of all our strivings, or at any rate the crown of their success, the *summum bonum*, a state of affairs that is desirable or valuable or worth achieving for its own

sake. Final goods are the ends of action, and the conditions that results from the successful pursuit of those ends.

3.3 Ask yourself, why do we use the same word, “good,” both as our most general term of positive evaluation, and to designate the ends of action and the condition that results from their successful pursuit? What do the two uses have in common? I think most people think that the answer to this question is obvious, that in both cases we are using the term evaluatively. That is, they think that when we use the word “good” to refer to a final good, that is just a special case of the evaluative good — one in which what we are evaluating is a person’s ends or how his life is going.

That seems reasonable, but there is a puzzle about how exactly we are supposed to evaluate lives and ends. As Plato and Aristotle pointed out long ago, evaluation is usually related to the purpose, role, or function of the entity that is judged good or bad. An entity is good in the evaluative sense when it has the properties that enable it to serve its function — either its usual or natural function or one we have assigned to it for some specific purpose.¹⁰ A good knife is sharp, because the function of knives is cutting; a good teacher is clear, because the function of a teacher is to help her students to understand the material; a good car handles easily, gets good gas mileage, and goes fast, because the function of a car is to get people quickly and safely to destinations they cannot easily reach on foot.

¹⁰ See Plato’s *Republic*, 352d-354b; Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1.7 1097b21-1098a20.

These things are evaluated as good because they have the properties that enable them to perform their functions well. But what is the function of an end or a life? Ends and lives do not have functions. In fact, to say something is an end and not a means is precisely to say that we do *not* value it merely because of some other purpose that it serves. But then how are we evaluating it when we say that it is good — to what evaluative standard are we appealing?

3.4 One thing that seems clear is that when we say that a life is good, in the sense we want now — the sense that allows us to say that it is good *for* the creature, or important to the creature, whose life it is — we are looking for a standard that makes it good from the point of view of that creature. A life could be good from some other point of view, like that of the farmer who values the life of his cow, but that does not give us the sense that supports the idea that the life is good for the cow. This point turns out to be the key to solving our problem, although it will take me a little while to explain why. First, notice that the evaluative or functional sense of good also supports the notion of “good-for” in a particular way. If a thing is good when it has the properties that enable it to perform its function well, then the conditions and actions that tend to give rise to those properties or enable it to maintain them count as good-for the thing. In this sense, which I am going to call “the functional sense of good-for,” it might be good for your knife to get sharpened regularly, and bad for your knife to be used on material that tends to dull its blade. A whetstone is good for

your knife, too. A certain kind of gas might be good for your car, and it might be bad for the car to leave it sitting idle too long. When we use the concept of good-for in this way, we refer to activities or conditions that maintain or promote the ability of the knife or the car to function well. But of course we do not mean that they are good from the point of view of the knife or the car, for knives and cars have no points of view.

Now think about what an animal is. Aristotle taught us that it is possible to regard living organisms as having a function, which he identified as that of self-maintenance or maintaining their own “forms.”¹¹ Aristotle argued that everything, every substance whatever, can be seen as having a “form” and a “matter.” The matter is the material or parts of which it is composed, and the form is the way the parts are put together, which is what makes it the kind of thing that it is. In particular, the form is what enables it to serve its function. So for instance we might say that the matter of a house is a roof, walls, windows, and doors. Then we impose some form on these parts, by establishing certain relations between them: we line the walls up corner to corner, put the roof over the top, insert the door into one of the walls, so that we can go in and out — and behold! — we have an object that can function as a shelter, something in which people can keep themselves and their things safe from other people and animals and the weather.

¹¹ See Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, especially Books 7-9, and *On the Soul*, especially Book 2.

Aristotle was also impressed by the fact that living organisms are made of fragile materials that are constantly being used up as energy or worn out or damaged in other ways. But organisms constantly take in new materials from the environment, through the nutritive process, and turn those materials into fresh parts of themselves, thus keeping themselves, for a while at least, in existence. Furthermore, living organisms also make new kinds of things like themselves — things with the same “form” as themselves — through reproduction. So Aristotle observed that we can explain a great deal about living organisms if we view them as objects that have the function of maintaining their own forms, in these two senses: first, they maintain themselves in existence, as individual members of their kind, and second, they maintain their species by producing new members of their kind.

When we view an organism as a functional object in this way, then it is like any other functional object: we can see the things and conditions that enable it to perform its function — to stay alive and reproduce — as things that are *good-for* it, in the functional sense of *good-for*. Just as the whetstone is good for the knife, and being driven now and then is good for the car, rain and sunshine are good for the plants, and fresh air and exercise are good for both you and your dog.

3.5 There are two important differences between animals and functional artifacts like knives and cars, however. The first difference applies to living organisms generally, including both animals and plants. Although we are getting better at producing

machines that are in various ways self-maintaining, generally speaking a knife does not sharpen itself, and a car does not seek out the best quality of gasoline. But a living organism does do things like that. So there is something special about the way that organisms function, which is by tending to their own well-functioning, by looking after it. In fact, unlike a car or a knife, *that is an organism's function* — to maintain its own well-functioning — or perhaps its own and that of its species.¹² After all, that is really all that organisms do: they take care of themselves and their offspring, and so keep themselves and their kind in existence. There is a kind of self-referential character to an organism's functioning, for its function is more or less to preserve a certain way of functioning, the way that is characteristic of its kind, and nothing more.

Or at least we can view organisms in this way, a point I will come back to. And when we do see them this way, we see them as beings for whom things can be good or bad, in the functional sense of “good-for” and “bad-for.” That is what we are doing, when we say that the rain and the sunshine are “good for” the plants. We mean that the rain and the sunshine are helping the plants to maintain those properties that enable the plant to perform its function — which is simply to stay alive and reproduce. So the first difference is that living organisms, unlike artifacts,

¹² But for some reasons to doubt that a species has a function or even a good, see *Fellow Creatures*, chapter 11.

take care of themselves. They are, in fact, simply various ways of taking care of the ways in which an entity may take care of itself.

3.6 The second difference brings us to what is distinctive about animals as opposed to plants. An animal — at least as I will use the term here — is a particular kind of living organism.¹³ An animal is an organism that functions, at least in part, by representing the world to herself, through her senses, and then by acting in light of those representations. She is guided by her representations to get the things that are good for her and avoid the things that are bad for her, in the functional senses of good-for and bad-for. In order for an animal's representational system to work in this way, however, the animal's representational system has to have what I will call a "valanced" character. That means that the things she encounters in the world have to strike her as attractive or aversive, welcome or unwelcome, pleasant or painful, in particular ways, depending on whether and how they are good or bad for her. She has to be drawn by the way the world appears to her to seek out the things that are good for her and to avoid the things that are bad. So she has to perceive the world

¹³ The scientific definition of an "animal" refers to structural features such as being multicellular and eukaryotic, and of course science now recognizes kingdoms of organisms other than "animal" and "plant." Scientists also count things as animals that do not fit my Aristotelian definition very well, such as sponges.

evaluatively, as a place full of things which present themselves as attractive and to-be-sought and things which present themselves as aversive and to-be-avoided.¹⁴

In other words, an animal experiences her own condition, and the things that affect it, as good and bad for her. But now they are not merely good or bad in the functional sense, but in the final sense too, since for an animal getting things that are good for her and avoiding things that are bad for her have become the ends of action.¹⁵ That is how an animal works, that is how she functions, *how she goes about*

¹⁴ A complicated issue arises here, which I cannot deal with in a satisfactory way in this paper. I do not believe that pleasure is the good; I believe, with Aristotle, that it is a perception of good. That remark, however, may leave you with an oversimplified picture of the view. Since what gives content to the final good in my view is functional good, and an animal only functions well if she takes pleasure in the right things, pleasure, especially pleasure taken in one's own good condition, is also part of the content of the good. (So, in a more conditional way, is pain, which is why there are pains we should not wish to forego, like grief for the death of a loved one.) This is one of the ways in which the good is necessarily connected to self-consciousness, as I will explain later. But pleasure taken in the wrong things is not part of the good. I deal with these matters in *Fellow Creatures*, Chapter 9.

¹⁵ You will want to know whether I mean that they are the intentional ends of her action or whether I simply mean that the biological function of her representational system is to lead her to them. I think this is a matter of location on a continuum. As we come to more cognitively sophisticated animals, the animal does things more deliberately, and we are under more pressure to distinguish between the biological function of a behavior and its intentional end. This is in part because more cognitively sophisticated animals are more likely to adjust their actions to their intentional ends as they perform them. If the dumb fish keeps doggedly biting at a piece of tinsel floating on the water, it does not

taking care of her own well-functioning. She is “designed” to monitor her own condition (that is, her own ability to function) by representing the world in ways that will motivate her to keep her condition good. A well-functioning animal likes to eat when she’s hungry, is eager to mate, feeds and cares for her offspring, works assiduously to keep herself clean and healthy, fears her enemies and avoids the sources of injury. Don’t say, “Well, of course she does!” Allow yourself to be struck with the fact that there are entities, substances, *things*, that stand in this relation to themselves and their own condition. Because what I am saying is that an animal functions, in part, by making her own well-functioning, the things that are good for her in the functional sense, the ends of action, the things to go for, final goods. The final good came into the world with animals, for an animal is, pretty much by definition, the kind of thing that has a final good — a good, in the sense that might matter morally. These final goods are tethered to the animals for whom they are good.

matter much whether we say he is trying to get something to eat, or he is just snapping at something bright. From his murky point of view, there probably is little difference. But if the smart fish gives it up as soon as he perceives it to be inedible, he was trying to get something to eat, not just snapping at something bright. For further discussion, see my commentary on Frans De Waal, “Morality and the Distinctiveness of Human Action,” in *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved* (Princeton, 2006), pp. 107-110.

3.7 So, now, let me come back to the question I raised earlier: by what standard are we evaluating a creature's life or her ends when we say that they are good, in the *final* sense of good? When we say that something is a final good, what we are saying is that it constitutes or contributes to the well-functioning of an entity who experiences her own functional condition in a valanced way, and pursues her own functional goods through action.¹⁶ The standard is one deployed from the standpoint of *empathy*, because when we invoke it, we are looking at the creature's functional goods as if through her own eyes, in the way that she necessarily looks at them herself — as things worth pursuing or realizing for their own sakes. Final goods exist because there are such creatures, creatures *for whom* things can be good or bad.

4. An Objection

4.1 Obviously, much more needs to be said in defense of this account of the good, and I do some of that elsewhere.¹⁷ What I am going to do in this paper is develop it a little further in response to an objection that probably occurred to you while I was laying out the view.

¹⁶ Some readers may have doubts about whether this standard applies to the human good. I think that it does, but we must remember that what counts as “well-functioning” for a creature whose self-maintenance includes the maintenance of what I elsewhere call a “practical identity” is a complex matter. See ¹⁶ For the notion of practical identity see *The Sources of Normativity*, especially Lecture 3, and *Self-Constitution*, 1.4, pp. 18-26.

¹⁷ In “The Relational Nature of the Good,” and “On Having a Good.”

4.3 I have followed Aristotle, and a long tradition, in talking about organisms and their parts as having functions, in particular about organisms having the function of self-maintenance. People often say that we no longer believe in “natural purposes” or natural functions. Instead we believe that organisms evolved through natural selection. At the beginning of this paper, I castigated my opponents for secretly adhering to the implications of an antiquated teleological conception of the world. But, you will object, this is exactly what I am doing myself.

I might respond that the theory of evolution does not show us that there are no functionally self-maintaining objects. Instead it shows us how there can be such objects even if no one designed them.¹⁸ We might then also be tempted to say that it also explains something else about organisms. If we regard living organisms as self-maintaining systems, we must regard them as extremely defective ones, for all individuals eventually die. If individuals are essentially self-maintaining, why should that be? What is biologically necessary for the species, or for the genes if you like, is only that there are individuals who live long enough to reproduce, and so maintain themselves long enough to reproduce. So animals are defective self-maintaining systems because natural selection only selects for self-maintenance up to the time of reproduction. But this response of course only brings out a deeper problem. Why call the organisms self-maintaining at all? Why isn't it only — or at most — the species

¹⁸ Or it shows us that once we also have a theory about the origin of life.

that may be regarded self-maintaining? (I say at most, because species also all go extinct.)

In fact for individuals there is a further problem, which is even trickier to deal with. Consider: Even if an organism were successfully self-maintaining, it could still die of an accident. It could get eaten, or burnt up in a fire, or squashed by a meteorite, or trapped in a deep pit where its needs could not be met.¹⁹ These are just the hazards of material existence. There are a few species of organisms — the examples are controversial, but hydras, flatworms, a certain species of jellyfish (*Turritopsis dohrnii*) have been suggested — that apparently do always die of accidents and so are potentially, though never actually, immortal.²⁰ But most animals are doomed to die of senescence — the natural weakening of the body with age —

¹⁹ It is worth noting that the distinction between dying from a failure of self-maintenance and dying from an accident is a little bit wobbly. Aristotle thought of self-maintenance primarily as manifested of nutrition and reproduction. But we might also think of it as manifested in the body's ability to cure itself of small injuries and build up resistance to minor illnesses. Then, however, we are faced with a puzzle: why should the body's ability to heal a scrape on the knee be a manifestation of self-maintenance, but its inability to heal itself from being squashed by a meteorite not be a failure of self-maintenance? In a sense, these two kinds of injuries are continuous with each other. I am not sure what to say about this.

²⁰ We might say this about the extinction of species, too: that though it always happens, it is always because of external forces like climate change, the evolution of rival species, invasive species, contagious illnesses, and so on.

even if they do not die of accident or disease. Perhaps this is better for the species, since an ever-fresh supply of slightly different individuals enables it to adapt better to changing conditions, so that its members do not all die of accidents. But if that is true, how can the individuals of the species be characterized as self-maintaining? For these animals, death is not just a hazard of material existence. It is, in Aristotelian terms, built into their forms.

This raises large issues about the use of the notion of function in biology, for if nothing is really biologically self-maintaining, then it is not clear what entitles us to use the concept of function when we talk about living things. But if we cannot talk about function when we talk about organisms, then we cannot talk about their functional good either. If they have no function, they have no functional good, then nothing is functionally *good-for* them. In that case, we are saying something without foundation, when we say that sunshine and rain are good for the plants, in the functional sense of *good-for*. (Or at most, if we grant that the species is self-maintaining, it is a shorthand way of saying that it is good for the species.) But if we cannot talk about an individual's functional good, then I cannot say that final good, and the final sense of *good-for*, appeared in the world when animals evolved and began to take their functional goods as the ends of action, and to see them as things to go for.

4.4 I think we can still say these things, though. I think what all of this shows is that when we talk about functional good, we are saying something contextual, and that what forms the context is a point of view.

When I say that the function of a knife is cutting, that a good knife has a sharp blade, and that things that keep the knife sharp are good for the knife, I am not saying anything that has to be rejected in the name of scientific naturalism. I am speaking from the point of view of a human being, who sometimes has to do some cutting. When I say that water is good for me, since I need it to live, I say it from the point of view of a human being who wants to go on living. When I *feel* that water is good for me, because I was dry and thirsty, and the relief from that is welcome to me, I feel it from the point of view of a creature who experiences her own condition in a valenced way, and who is genetically predisposed to seek out and to enjoy such things as water, in order to keep herself in existence for a time. I may also be genetically predisposed to senescence, but I am not predisposed to seek it out as an end of action, or to enjoy it for its own sake when it comes. Except under special circumstances, therefore, I do not regard senescence and death as part of my final good. It follows from that — or so I am about to claim — that it is not part of my functional good.²¹

²¹ Or anyway, it need not be. A caveat here: The jury is out on whether immortality would be a good thing for people if we could have it, but that question is settled by thinking about how it relates to things that we do experience as parts of our final good: whether it would make our lives more

Now you might object that I cannot legitimately say this. After all, I have claimed that final good came into the world when we animals who pursue our functional goods as the ends of action came into the world. Now I am claiming that whether something is properly part of your functional good depends on whether it contributes in the right way to your final good. Apparently, I have reversed the order of dependence between these two forms of goodness, functional and final. I cannot claim that final good is functional good actively pursued, and then turn around and limit functional good to what contributes to final good, because I would have to have an independent notion of final good before I could do that.

Furthermore, I do not want to identify final good with what actually appears good to us, because I want to say we, and all animals, can get it wrong. It happens all the time. Animals evolve in one set of conditions, and when those conditions change, animals may want things that are not good for them, or fail to want things that are. Notoriously, for example, human beings evolved to want to stock up on salt and fatty foods when the supplies are good, in anticipation of the lean times when they won't be. When the lean times never come, those desires do not serve our functional good, and I want to say that their satisfaction does not serve our final good either. We are wrong not to crave a leaner, blander diet, although we have a hard time seeing it as

meaningful and interesting, our projects more worthy of pursuit, our relationships stronger and better, or whether instead it would reduce us to aimless creatures, with no ends worth struggling for, bored with existence and each other.

good. If we reject the idea that the leaner blander diet is genuinely good for us as individuals, then the only available explanation for the claim that it is better is that it serves the interests of the species. But if that is so, why aren't we wrong not to crave death, which probably serves the interest of the species as well?

4.5 The reason is that when animals evolved to pursue their functional goods through action, something else evolved, namely consciousness, subjectivity, which then became essential to the individual identity of the creatures who have it. When I say that something is good-for-me, even in the functional sense, the “me” that I am referring to is the embodiment of my *self*, a conscious subject and agent who is more or less (for this is a matter of degree) functionally unified over time. Speaking a little roughly, your *self* is functionally unified insofar as you have an integrated point of view, at a time, and over time, that enables you to carry out your projects and stick to your commitments in a world in which you can find your way around. For a human being, this has two distinct aspects. The unity of what we may call your acting self — a unity that we call “integrity” — enables you to pursue your ends effectively and maintain your projects, commitments, relationships, and values over time. The unity of what we may call your knowing self involves the formation of an integrated conception of your environment, one that enables you to identify relations between the different parts of your environment well enough to find your way around in it. Those relations are temporal, spacial, causal, and for many animals social. By forming

a unified conception of your environment, you also unify yourself as the subject of that conception. The fact that I identify with my *self* — with the agent of my projects and commitments and the subject of my conception of the world — means that there may be things about my body, such as its tendency to senescence, that are not good for *me*, even if perhaps they are good for my species or my genes. They are not good, that is, for the thing that I experience, and identify, as “me.” My functional good is what maintains the aspects of me that support my having a self.

So I have not exactly reversed the order between final good and functional good. Instead what I have done is point out something that happens to the identity of an object when that object acquires consciousness and a point of view. The object acquires a new form of identity, a self. And since it is the self that experiences its condition and things in the world as good or bad, and the self that decides what to do and acts, it is the self that has a final good.

5. Self-Consciousness and the Self

5.1 Some people think that you have to be self-conscious in order to have a self. The self is not like most other things, which exist independently of your awareness of them. Your self only exists, the claim is, if you have some awareness that it is there, and that of course would have to be a kind of self-awareness. Initially, it may seem paradoxical that you could be aware of something that would not exist at all unless you were aware of it. But if you think about it, you will see why it is plausible that the

self should have this “reflexive” character. After all, as I have already suggested, you acquire a self when you acquire a point of view, a form of awareness. Having a point of view introduces a distinction between yourself and the rest of the world. It identifies you, and makes you identify yourself, with a specific spot in the world, from which the rest of the world appears to you. It identifies some of the things that happen in the world as things that happen to you. It does this not just externally, but from your own point of view. So to have a self is to have a point of view, and to have a point of view is to be aware of the difference between you and everything else, and in that sense to be aware of yourself. What I have just been saying about the connection between having a self and having a final good seems to require that thought, since I claimed that having a self determines what you identify as yourself, causing you to identify with the features of your embodiment that support the existence of a unified point of view, and to regard only those features as part of your functional good.

5.2 But if the self is dependent on self-consciousness in this way, can the other animals have selves? It is sometimes said that human beings are the only animals who are self-conscious. Immanuel Kant wrote:

The fact that man can have the idea ‘I’ raises him infinitely above all the other beings living on earth. By this he is a *person*; and by virtue of the unity of his consciousness, through all the changes he may undergo, he

is one and the same person — that is, a being altogether different in rank and dignity from *things*, such as irrational animals, which we can dispose of as we please.²²

Kant thinks that only we human beings think about ourselves. We do not know much about the thoughts of animals, or about what goes on when they are thinking. The serious study of animal minds is a young science, less than a century old. Presumably it is different for different animals, depending on what sort of cognitive powers they have. It may be true that only we human beings think about ourselves, if that means having thoughts in which we identify ourselves as “I.” But even if it were, the issue is more complicated than that, for self-consciousness is something that comes in degrees and takes many different forms.

One form of self-consciousness is revealed by the famous mirror test used in animal studies. In the mirror test, a scientist paints, say, a red spot on an animal’s body and then puts her in front of a mirror. If the animal eventually reaches for the spot and tries to rub it off, or looks away from the mirror towards that location on her body, we can take that as evidence that the animal recognizes herself in the mirror, and is curious about what has happened to her body. Apes, dolphins, elephants, and possibly some birds have passed the mirror test. An animal that passes the mirror test seems to know that a certain body is her own, or herself. She

²² Kant, *Anthropology*, 8:127.

recognizes the animal in the mirror as “me” and therefore, some people think, must have a concept of “me.”

But failure to pass the mirror test does not imply that an animal is not self-conscious. I think it can be argued that even animals who do not pass the mirror test have forms of self-consciousness. In fact, I think it can be argued that pleasure and pain are *forms* of self-consciousness, since what the animal who experiences these things is experiencing is the effects of the world on himself, on his own condition. In that sense, all animals are self-conscious because they can *feel* their existence. Again, you have self-consciousness if you have some sort of awareness that one of the things in your world is you. This awareness can be relational. In fact, at some level, it has to be relational, since what it is to be self-conscious is to stand in a certain relation to the rest of the world, to distinguish yourself from the rest of the world. Such relational knowledge is essential to action, because in order to act you have to orient yourself within the world: you have to some sense of what your own position is in it. A tiger who stands downwind of her intended prey is not merely aware of her prey — she is also locating *herself* with respect to her prey in physical space, and that suggests a form of self-consciousness. A social animal who makes gestures of submission when a more dominant animal enters the scene is locating himself in social space, and that too suggests a kind of self-consciousness. Knowing how you are related to others in space or in a social order involves something more than

simply knowing about them. It involves knowing how you stand with them, and that requires some kind of conception of yourself.

5.3 Of course there is something right about what Kant says, when he emphasizes that having a self involves having a kind of consciousness that is unified over time. But the view that only human beings have that is too extreme.²³

Instead, I believe that having a self is a matter of degree: a matter of how much functional unity your point of view has at a time, and over time. Here is what I have in mind. When philosophers work on questions of what we call “personal” identity, we identify certain factors as giving a person a certain kind of continuity over time, and so making the person one person, a person with a single self enduring. These factors are those that tend to unify the person’s point of view over time. Learning, episodic memory, ongoing relationships, even long-term projects are among these factors. But these factors may also be found, to varying degrees, in the lives of animals. Many animals can learn, and that means that what happens to them at one moment changes the way that they respond to the world at another. Animals also do other things that systematically influence and so unify their points of view over time. They can acquire tastes, and make friends, and even take on projects and

²³ What is true is rather that human beings participate much more actively in achieving that unity — in their self-constitution - than the other animals do. For a defense of this claim, see *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity*.

roles. If one animal bonds with another, he can feel comfortable when he encounters that other, and in some cases even feel uncomfortable when he does not. If he decides to build his nest or his dam or his burrow in some particular spot, then that becomes the spot to return to when the day's foraging is done. If he makes a mental map of a certain region to which he has been newly transported then he can find his way around there with ease. If what happens or what you do at one time changes your point of view on the world at another time, then your *self* acquires an ongoing character that makes it a more unified self over time.

Philosophers who think about what gives a human being a unified self over time like to emphasize memory, but what I am talking about does not require "episodic memory," the memory of particular events. An animal that is frequently beaten becomes fearful and cringing, or hostile and aggressive. An animal that is regularly treated well becomes more relaxed and confident. These are not just changes in the animal's outward behavior: they reflect changes in the animal's way of experiencing of the world, ways in which what the animal is experiencing now is informed by what he experienced in the past. An animal does not need to remember specific occasions in order for this to happen. Experience is something that accumulates, constantly modifying experience itself. The animal's point of view becomes more unified, in the sense that the animal responds to the same things in

the same ways at different times.²⁴ But at the same time it can also become more flexible, as the animal's repertoire of responses that are appropriate to his environment accumulate. He learns to avoid more of the things that will hurt him and seek out more of the things he enjoys.

Why does this matter to our topic? Because it changes the ways in which things can be good or bad for the animal. People like to say that animals live in the moment, and in one sense that is probably right: unlike human beings, they do not seem to spend a lot of time planning for the future or fretting about problems that may or may not arise. But in another sense, I do not think it is true. Or perhaps I what I should say that at least for many animals, the moment itself does not live merely in the moment, but reverberates with the character of the other moments in the animal's life. The more this is true, the more animal's experiences build on themselves in forming his point of view, the more it becomes true that it makes sense to identify what is good for him in larger temporal units. Any sentient animal has good experiences and bad ones. But the more that experience accumulates, the more it makes sense to think that the animal, like a human being, can have a good or a bad life, where a life is not just a string of good or bad experiences, but a kind of

²⁴ Someone may wish to protest that without conscious memory this could only be qualitative similarity, not an actual unified ongoing point of view. Actually, there is a puzzle about how even with conscious memory, one moment can be linked to another by anything more than a qualitative similarity.

whole with an overall character of its own. This is because it becomes true that there is something it is like to live that life.

5.4 I mention all of this for two related reasons. First, many people believe that animal experience is disconnected, and that this somehow makes not only the death of a non-human animal, but even her pains, less bad for her than they would be for a human being. Killing her is supposed to be less bad because she has no plans and projects whose completion will be aborted by death, no ongoing relations which will be disrupted, no hopes for the future that will be disappointed. Hurting her is supposed to be less bad because an isolated pain, neither resented nor remembered, ceases to trouble you the moment it is over.

No doubt there are ways in which the nature of your mind and the resulting character of your experience can make pain either worse or less bad. Many people suppose that the fact that human beings have reflective capacities makes a difference of that kind. But the lack of reflection does not always make suffering less bad. In some cases, animals may suffer less because they do not reflect on the fact that they are suffering, and suffer in turn from that reflection. But in other cases, they may suffer more because they do not know that it will be over in a moment. Animals cannot laugh at their pains; we do it all the time. But even if it did mostly follow from the disconnected and transitory nature of a creature's experience that his death and suffering were less bad, it is simply not true that all animals have such

disconnected experience. It depends what sort of animal we are talking about, and how much of an ongoing self it has.

5.5 But to the extent to which it is true, it points to one explanation of the moral intuition from which I started, which is that the fate of more “cognitively sophisticated” animals matters more than that of less cognitively sophisticated ones. “Cognitively sophisticated” here is a weasel word you will often encounter in the literature, since no one is sure exactly which cognitive powers matter and why. It cannot plausibly be thought that the difference that matters is simply one of intelligence. We certainly do not think that the fate of more intelligent people matters more than that of less intelligent ones. What I am suggesting is that the cognitive differences that are relevant to the intuition in question are the ones that also inform the extent to which it makes sense of think of the animal as having a unified and ongoing self and the kinds of experiences that characterize a unified and ongoing self.²⁵ Things that can only matter to animals with more ongoing selves could not matter, or matter as much, to animals whose experience is more disconnected. Something can only be good for you, can matter to you, only to the

²⁵ I believe that this idea is what Tom Regan is trying to get at when he claims that the ground of moral standing is being the “subject of a life” in *The Case for Animal Rights*.

extent that there is a you, which is to say, to the extent that there is a *unified* you. And that is a matter of degree.²⁶

6. Conclusion

6.1 Earlier I argued that people are not more important than animals, that more generally, it makes no sense to say that some creatures are more important than others. Am I taking it back? Not at all. What I am suggesting is just that what exactly can be important to or good *for the animal herself* varies with the extent to which she has a self. If an animal does not have much of an ongoing self, then perhaps death cannot matter as much *to the animal*. To the extent that what you lose through death is yourself, such an animal has less to lose. A similar point may hold about pleasure and pain, although I am even less sure of this. If some animals really do have disconnected experiences, so that the badness or goodness of one experience had no ramifications for the badness or goodness of others, then perhaps the experiences themselves would be less good or bad *for those animals themselves*. That would be essentially the same fact as the fact that such animals have less of a self *for whom* the experiences can be good or bad. If we can translate tethered values into absolute values, in the way I mentioned earlier, this might have practical

²⁶ Actually, I am ambivalent about this conclusion. For some counter-considerations, see *Fellow Creatures*, 4.3.

ramifications: in a case where we had to choose between saving a human being and saving an animal with a less connected identity, we would save the human being.

But there is nothing whatever in the arguments I have just been canvassing that suggests that human beings are more important than the other animals, or justifies any general preference for the satisfaction of human interests over those of the other animals. Certainly there is nothing in these arguments to justify the imposition of what obviously is terrible suffering on animals for the sake of human interests. These arguments grant only that certain kinds of evils may have a different character for different animals, depending on what kind and how much of a self they have. In other words, the goods and evils I am talking about remain tethered to the animals for whom they are good or bad.

6.2 Now I will conclude. In this paper I have argued that value is tethered: things are only good or bad insofar as they are good or bad for the world's creatures, for the people and animals for whom things can be good or bad. Value came into the world when creatures of this kind evolved. If value is tethered, the claim that some creatures are more important than others cannot be made in any plausible form. It is a holdover from a teleological-religious conception of the world according to which human good is the final purpose of everything. Nevertheless, within a tethered conception of value, sense can be made of the claim that the deaths and perhaps the pains of some kinds of creatures should matter less to us than the deaths or pains of

some others. Such deaths and pains should matter less, if they should, because — and only because — they matter less to the creatures themselves, not because the creatures matter less. What exactly follows practically is a matter for detailed argument. But a general preference for the human good over the good of the other animals does not.

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