

RESPECT BEYOND PERSONS

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Abstract

The principle of respect is usually intended as respect for persons. Kant maintained that only persons could be the object of a duty of respect. Yet, a number of strategies have been proposed to make the principle more inclusive, mainly by expanding the circle of those covered by the principle. This article proposes a different strategy, based on a reformulation of the principle. Respect is the encounter of different powers, confronting each other at different levels and generating different kinds of duties. We should recognise that autonomy is a form of power, but it is not the only power that we have. We are also living beings, and natural entities, and these are also forms of power. So, at each level, there is respect for the kind of power facing us and this implies different levels of responsibility. This strategy is better than expanding the circle of “autonomous agents” and better than trying to ground rights for living beings and for natural entities.

Keywords: Respect, Kant, Animals, Persons, Power.

1. *Is respect only owed to persons?*

The principle of respect is usually intended as respect for persons.¹ The common understanding, on a largely Kantian basis, is that respect is appropriate, and even mandatory, when referring to autonomous beings, and only persons are considered autonomous beings.

1 R. Downie, E. Telfer, *Respect for Persons*, Allen & Unwin, London 1969; A. Donagan, *The Theory of Morality*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1977; C. Cranor, *Kant's Respect-for-Persons Principle*, in “International Studies in Philosophy”, 12, 1980, pp. 19-39; T.E. Hill, Jr., *Autonomy and Self-Respect*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991; S. Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2006.

Therefore, other living beings (and the environment) are excluded from its scope. Kant famously stated that we have no direct duties to nonhuman animals and that moral obligation is owed only to rational beings. Kant says, “As far as reason alone can judge, a human being has duties only to human beings (himself and others), since his duty to any subject is moral constraint by that subject’s will”.² This does not mean, though, that we have *no* duties *with regard to* nonhuman animals, only that we have no direct duties *to them*. In fact, according to Kant, we have *direct* duties only to persons, but, in the case of nonhuman animals, we ought to treat them with some respect as an expression of our respect for ourselves. In the *Lectures on Ethics*, Kant says that “Any action whereby we may torment animals, or let them suffer distress, or otherwise treat them without love, is demeaning to ourselves”.³ In Kant’s opinion, treating animals poorly is a sign that a person is likely to mistreat human beings as well, so we have to respect animals as a part of our character, in order to reinforce our disposition to respect persons:

violent and cruel treatment of animals is [...] intimately opposed to a human being’s duty to himself [...] for it dulls his shared feeling of their suffering and so weakens and gradually uproots a natural disposition that is very serviceable to morality in one’s relations with other human beings.⁴

There can only be *indirect* duties with regard to human animals, but they are quite relevant ones: e.g. not to treat them with violence or cruelty, not to perform “agonizing physical experiments for the sake of mere speculation, when the end could also be achieved without these”, and to show “gratitude for the long service of an old horse or dog (just as if they were members of the household)”.⁵ Nonetheless, this restrictive interpretation of the principle of respect sounds unsatisfying nowadays, since we incline to recognize that we owe at least *some* respect *directly to* nonhuman animals and the environment, and Kant’s perspective seems unduly anthropocentric in this matter.

Several strategies have been deployed to expand the scope of the principle, mainly concentrating on the object of the principle itself: to whom is respect owed? Does the limitation to rational beings really exclude non-hu-

2 I. Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), vol. 6, p. 442, in *Kants Gesammelte Schriften (KGS)*, de Gruyter, Berlin 1900-. I will only make reference to the volume and page in the *KGS*, as reported in the Cambridge Edition, where available; here, tr. by M. Gregor, ed. by L. Denis, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2017.

3 I. Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, 27, p. 710.

4 I. Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 6, p. 443.

5 *Ibid.*

man animals? These issues have raised extended discussion. James Rocha has argued that certain behaviours of animals show that they can be minimally rational in the same sense in which we consider children minimally rational at the earliest stages of development.⁶ On the other hand, Peter J. Markie maintains that, since respect is not something to which moral subjects have a right, but is a form of duty that depends on the moral potential of the subjects, the privilege accorded to human infants, severely disabled people and human embryos is warranted, since they have a greater moral potential than those of non-human animals.⁷

Nowadays, this privilege can be seen as a serious limitation of the principle, which makes it a hallmark of anthropocentrism and speciesism. As a remedy to this, some authors have suggested that Kantian premises – if not Kant’s texts⁸ – allow for more inclusive, non-speciesist accounts. Allen Wood has suggested that Kant’s position is conditioned by the adoption of a *personification principle*, by which the rational nature is respected only in actual, individual persons; but a *logocentric* (not anthropocentric) ethics, as Kant’s own, is not committed to the personification principle; rather, “It should hold that honouring rational nature as an end in itself sometimes requires us to behave with respect toward nonrational animals if they bear the right relations to rational nature”.⁹ Christine Korsgaard has argued at length that the principle of respect applies to creatures as ends in themselves, and animals constitute ends in themselves insofar as they are beings for whom things can be good or bad absolutely.¹⁰

In the context of bioethical debate, the principle of respect is understood mainly as respect for autonomy. As such, it is applied only to autonomous agents, but some authors have suggested that primates, and especially chimpanzees, can be considered autonomous, since they satisfy the two basic conditions of autonomy, i.e., *liberty*, the absence of controlling influences, and *agency*, self-initiated intentional action.¹¹ In this sense, the

6 J. Rocha, *Kantian Respect for Minimally Rational Animals*, in “Social Theory and Practice”, 41, 2, April 2015, pp. 309-327.

7 P. J. Markie, *Respect for People and Animals*, in “The Journal of Value Inquiry”, 38, 2004, pp. 33-47.

8 O. O’Neill, *Kant on Duties Regarding Nonrational Nature*, in “Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society”, Suppl. Vol. 72, 1998, pp. 211-228.

9 A. Wood, *Kant on Duties Regarding Nonrational Nature*, in “Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society”, cit., pp. 189-210, p. 197.

10 C. Korsgaard, *Fellow Creatures. Our Obligations to the Other Animals*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018.

11 T.L. Beauchamp, V. Wobber, *Autonomy in Chimpanzees*, in “Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics”, 35, 2014, pp. 117-132.

principle of (respect for) autonomy is an unfinished business, requiring further work in order to determine whether it applies to children as well as to chimpanzees.¹²

More radically, Tom Regan and Peter Singer have argued against what Bernard Williams called “The Human Prejudice”,¹³ refusing any anthropocentric view and any idea of human superiority. Peter Singer’s famous argument against speciesism is based on the idea that what deserves respect is the ability to feel pain and pleasure, an ability we share with animals, so that any criterion distinguishing humans from non-humans is equivalent to racism or genderism.¹⁴ Tom Regan argues in terms of rights, and his thesis is that we should recognize that animals have rights and should respect them since they are “subjects of a life”: this is all that is needed to have rights and to generate a duty of respect.¹⁵

The limitation of scope is made even more unsustainable by the fact that common language has recently adopted, as quite natural ones, expressions like “respect for animals”, “respect for living creatures” and “respect for the environment”: is this usage warranted by an adequate theory of respect? Is it just a fashionable way of using the principle, devoid of a serious theoretical and historical basis? Or should we offer a theoretical basis for the principle such that it can account for this use of language? Should we treat (some) animals as «marginal cases» in the application of the principle of respect?¹⁶

Or should we remove the limitation altogether? This creates a sort of paradox: if we have to respect animals and the environment, i.e., if we have to respect *everything*, is the principle still useful as a criterion for action? Can we make any distinction in the kind of respect that we, supposedly, owe to other living and non-living beings?

12 R.L. Walker, *The Unfinished Business of Respect for Autonomy: Persons, Relationships, and Nonhuman Animals*, “Journal of Medicine and Philosophy” 45 (2020), pp. 521-539.

13 B. Williams, *The Human Prejudice*, in Id., *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ) 2009.

14 P. Singer, *Animal Liberation*, Harper Collins, New York (NY) 2009 (1975); and Id. *In Defense of Animals*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1985.

15 T. Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights*, University of California Press, Berkeley (CA) 1983; second ed. 2004.

16 Cfr. C. Korsgaard, *Fellow Creatures*, cit., pp. 77-96 argues that the argument from marginal cases is seriously flawed: “A creature is not just a collection of properties, but a functional unity, whose parts and systems work together in keeping him alive and healthy in the particular way that is characteristic of his kind” (p. 83).

2. *Re-formulating the principle of respect*

I want to propose a different strategy, based on a reformulation of the principle in terms of *relations of power*. Instead of concentrating on the object of respect, I suggest focusing on the principle itself, clarifying its origin and its fundamental structure.

My thesis is that respect is the practical recognition of an (at least partially) independent power, which requires acting accordingly. More precisely, respect is the encounter between two or more powers, not necessarily of the same kind, in which every power takes action and creates a relation to the other powers according to its ability to interact. Autonomy is one such kind of power, and a very particular one; but it is not the only power that we, as agents, have and that we are confronted with, not even among rational agents. Our autonomy is embodied, and it is immersed in complex spatial, temporal, social and cultural relations affecting its expression. Respect takes different forms and contents according to the powers involved: it is essentially a relation, in which the powers confronting each other aim at attaining a normative status. As I will show, the perspective I am trying to articulate can be seen as an interpretation of the fundamental structure of respect in Kantian terms. But before showing that, it is necessary to further elaborate the definition of respect I have just offered.

Kant characterized respect as a feeling. It is the feeling aroused by the awareness of the moral law. This kind of emotive reaction is the effect of the authority of the moral law on inclinations. So, Kant says that respect is the only *practical* – as opposed to *pathological* – feeling, meaning that it is derived from the awareness of the rational source of morality.

There is no *antecedent* feeling in the subject that would be attuned to morality: that is impossible, since all feeling is sensible whereas the incentive of the moral disposition must be free from any sensible condition. Instead, sensible feeling, which underlies all our inclinations, is indeed the condition of that feeling we call respect, but the cause determining it lies in pure practical reason; and so this feeling, on account of its origin, cannot be called pathologically effected but must be called *practically effected*.¹⁷

17 I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), 5, p. 75; tr. by M. Gregor, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997.

Kant maintains that respect humiliates self-love, making it clear, in an emotional way, that our destination as rational agents is not to be slave of inclinations:

Respect for the law is not the incentive to morality; instead it is morality itself subjectively considered as an incentive inasmuch as pure practical reason, by rejecting all the claims of self-love in opposition with its own, supplies authority to the law, which now alone has influence.¹⁸

So, the moral law has authority over the emotions. Yet, what is the source of this authority? Kant says that the awareness of the moral law is a fact of reason (*Faktum der Vernunft*), which means that its validity is self-evident upon reflection:

Consciousness of this fundamental law may be called a fact of reason because one cannot reason it out from antecedent data of reason, for example, from consciousness of freedom (since this is not antecedently given to us).¹⁹

This does not mean that the moral law “grounds itself”, so to say. Kant only says that the *awareness* of the moral law is a fact, and the use of the uncommon word *Faktum* points to the idea that the moral law is a product of practical reason, a law of its functioning which is posed by practical reason itself.

Now, at this point we should remember that Kant says that the moral law is the *ratio cognoscendi* of freedom, and that freedom is the *ratio essendi* of the moral law.²⁰ This means that the ultimate source of the moral law is freedom. The awareness of the moral law implies that we admit that such a law can only be the product of autonomy, i.e., of freedom giving a law onto itself. In that sense, respect is the effect of freedom on emotions by way of the awareness of the moral law. Freedom is the only source of authority, for Kant. This explains why he refuses to recognize rights to animals and why the duties concerning them are indirect, being required only as an expression of a respectful attitude

18 I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5, p. 76.

19 I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5, p. 31.

20 I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5, p. 4n: “I only want to remark that whereas freedom is indeed the *ratio essendi* of the moral law, the moral law is the *ratio cognoscendi* of freedom. For, had not the moral law *already* been distinctly thought in our reason, we should never consider ourselves justified in *assuming* such a thing as freedom (even though it is not self-contradictory). But were there no freedom, the moral law would *not be encountered* at all in ourselves.”

toward persons: those who treat animals badly are more likely to treat humans in the same way. An assumption, by the way, that is far from being empirically demonstrated.²¹

It is at this point that we should bring the structure of Kant's argument a bit further. Essentially, respect is the recognition of the authority of freedom as the source of the moral law. This authority derives from the power of freedom. This power is twofold.

A first dimension of this power is negative: Kant says that freedom is independent from the inclinations and from any further condition. Freedom is an ultimate power, subtracted from the laws of phenomena, since it is not determined by any natural law. This is not an empirical claim. It is a conclusion drawn from the premise that the law that we (as a fact of reason) are aware of as the law of rational action, i.e., the moral law ("So act that the maxim of your will could always hold at the same time as a principle in a giving of universal law"),²² cannot be a law of phenomena. It is a *practical* law. This means that it is a law for a will that is independent of the natural laws:

If no determining ground of the will other than that universal lawgiving form can serve as a law for it, such a will must be thought as altogether independent of the natural law of appearances in their relations to one another, namely the law of causality. But such independence is called *freedom* in the strictest, that is, in the transcendental, sense.²³

This argument is based on the idea that the "*Will* is a kind of causality of living beings insofar as they are rational, and *freedom* would be that property of such causality that it can be efficient independently of alien causes *determining* it".²⁴ It is important to note that Kant says that the will is one kind of causality *among others*. It is the kind of causality owned by rational agents *as such*. But human rational agents are persons, and persons also have other kinds of causality: they are living beings, with a body and a presence, they move and nurture themselves and they cause events in the world just like all other living beings. Their difference is that they can act

21 J. Skidmore, *Duties to Animals: The Failure of Kant's Moral Theory*, in "The Journal of Value Inquiry", 35, 2001, pp. 541-559.

22 I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5, p. 30.

23 I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5, p. 29.

24 I. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. by M. Gregor, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998; corresponding to *KGS*, 4, p. 446.

under a law posed by their own autonomy, i.e., their ability to create laws for action. This is their supersensible dimension, meaning no more than a dimension that is not subsumed under the laws of phenomena. In general, for Kant, “supersensible nature, so far as we can make for ourselves a concept of it, is nothing other than *a nature under the autonomy of pure practical reason*”.²⁵ This is the negative meaning of freedom.

A second dimension of freedom as power is positive: freedom is not just an arbitrary power; it creates its own law. Freedom as autonomy is the ability of forming a law from a subjective maxim, which becomes the law of a moral order that is a level of reality made by actions. Freedom is unconditioned (*Unbedingte*) and self-regulating:

What, then, can freedom of the will be other than autonomy, that is, the will’s property of being a law to itself? But the proposition, the will is in all its actions a law to itself, indicates only the principle, to act on no other maxim than that which can also have as object itself as a universal law.²⁶

This positive dimension of freedom as a power is recognized as the ground of the moral law and as a characteristic of the kind of will that determines itself on its basis. This kind of will is autonomous, i.e., it is a power following its own law and is not under any other condition.

Now, if we characterize respect as the recognition of the (unconditioned) power of freedom, we find this fundamental structure: respect is an emotional response generated by the relation between freedom and sensibility, where freedom as an autonomous power causes, through the awareness of the moral law it creates, the feeling of deference and wonder that we call respect. So, we can say that, in general, respect is the emotional recognition of power; in particular, Kant holds that respect is the emotional effect of the awareness of the moral law generated by the power of freedom as autonomy. When we meet another person, we feel the power of her freedom confronting us: she can contrast our will in ways that we cannot control, because her freedom is an *independent* power that will always escape our dominion. As Kant says,

before a humble common man in whom I perceive uprightness of character in a higher degree than I am aware of in myself *my spirit bows*, whether I want it or whether I do not and hold my head ever so high, that he may not overlook my superior position.²⁷

25 I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5, p. 43.

26 I. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4, p. 447.

27 I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5, p. 77.

In this passage, the feeling of respect is caused by the perception of the law operating as a ground of determination of the will (*Bestimmungsgrund des Willens*) in a person, and this is the power to which my spirit bows. *That person* is the power that faces me: I perceive a living being endowed with autonomy, therefore not only her autonomy, but her energy as a living being, the power of her life together with the power of her freedom.

We can go beyond Kant, here, in at least two ways. The first is by understanding respect not only as a feeling but as a principle as well. This is something many authors have already done.²⁸ It is not an awkward move, since the second formula of the categorical imperative can easily be interpreted as commanding respect for every person by not using anyone as a mere means. Present-day language has absorbed this meaning as part of the concept, and there is no need to restrict it exclusively to the feeling.

The second way of moving beyond Kant is understanding respect as the relation between powers mediated by emotions. Confronting another's power is an experience we very often have. We may experience fear, rage, challenge, but in general what we feel is respect, understood in a wide sense: we feel that we are facing a force that can resist us, and that therefore has potential authority over us. Freedom is at least this power of resistance against dominion. We cannot do what we want with that force. Furthermore, when we meet persons, we understand ourselves as having the same kind of authoritative force, therefore our claim to dominate has no basis: as autonomous agents, we are two identical powers confronting each other. In this perspective, respect is the feeling that the other has an independent power that can even be a threat to me. "Respecting an enemy" is not so much recognizing her humanity, but first of all recognizing that she has the power to win over me. I respect her because I recognize her power. And I oppose my power to hers so that I cannot be used or dominated. We can fight or we can reach an agreement, it depends on the circumstances.

3. *Different kinds of power*

Of course, we do not meet each other only as autonomous agents. We are embodied, we live in a certain context, and we exercise our freedom differently. While freedom as autonomy can be understood, in Kantian terms, as an all-or-nothing capacity, belonging to all human beings as such, the other powers that we have as living and social beings (strength, influence,

28 See note 1.

position, finance) are unequal, and the relation of powers is uneven. This is why, in strictly Kantian terms, respect concerns only our *moral* identity, i.e., our identity as rational autonomous agents.

Yet, confronting each other involves all the different powers we have. We stand in front of each other as autonomous agents, but also as living beings. And, as such, we have some distinct powers: the powers of our body, the powers of life. These powers stand on a different level from the power of freedom. But they are powers nonetheless, and they have to be recognized as at least partially independent from us. Respecting these powers means recognizing their independence and the effect they may have on us no less than the effect that we may have on them.

Respecting means feeling and recognizing the power facing us. This is a feeling specifically different from fear or wonder, it is the emotional awareness of a presence that might have some authority over us, in the sense that this power has effects on our behaviour and can change our attitude while confronting it. We *take it into account*. And we know that there are things that we cannot do with it. When we confront ourselves with the power of other living beings or of nature, we know that they are an independent power and that if we do not recognize this, we risk being overcome, defeated, and destroyed.

The majority of other authors have not pursued this strategy. Christine Korsgaard admits that she is “somewhat tempted by such thoughts”. She says:

We do have normative responses to plants, for instance; a drooping plant in need of a drink seems to present us with a reason to water it; a sapling growing from what seems to be almost sheer rock makes us want to cheer it on. Is this because we cannot help animistically imagining that the plant experiences its good? Or is it perhaps because the shared condition of *life itself* elicits these responses? Could it even be that we have duties, not only to our fellow creatures, but to our fellow organisms, and to even our fellow entities?²⁹

But she refrains from these thoughts, since she is “convinced that there is something special about the kind of good to which something is subject when it is a conscious being with a self”.³⁰ Granted, but does this imply that respect can only be connected to the recognition of a self? What seems to be missing in Korsgaard’s analysis is the idea that respect is a practical relation between powers. The powers involved can be different both in nature and in strength, but the essential structure of respect does not change.

29 C. Korsgaard, *Fellow Creatures*, cit., p. 94.

30 *Ibid.*

Confronting each other, the powers define their relation in terms of possible conflict and/or recognition, so that every relation has a measure in the reciprocal action of each power on the other one.

Is there a normative rule in this relation between powers? My answer is yes, and that normative rule is respect. In this perspective, respect is both a feeling and a principle, and can be defined, in general, as the relation between practical powers, no matter what kind of entities these powers are embodied in (persons, animals, volcanoes, etc.). In sentient beings, respect as a feeling is the emotive perception of the strengths of the other: we perceive the force of the bear, the bear perceives we can be a danger to her; the enemy is strong, the allied is a resource, the friend is part of our strength. As living beings, we feel that the other's powers need to be recognized as such, and that we have to adjust our action to the relation with those powers. So, respect is the feeling of the independent power of the other.

Respect as a principle is of course meaningful only to rational agents. But it is clear that it is not only a principle *regarding* rational agents. Starting from the definition of respect as the relation between powers, the principle of respect – in general – can be formulated as follows: *so act that you recognize power, in yourself or in any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means*. We have different powers: our autonomy is an end in itself for autonomous agents; but our life is also an end in itself for us as living beings and for all living beings. So, respecting another (non-autonomous) living being means taking into account that his/her/its life and its basic conditions are ends in themselves for that living being (and for us as living beings).

This implies two slightly different forms of respect. First, the recognition of the other as an independent source of power: this generates a kind of prudence somehow connected to a sort of admiration for the exhibition of that force in the other. We admire the tiger's strength at the same time that we are scared of it, and we act so that we take into account that, for her, her life and self-defense are ends in themselves. Second, respect here is also the recognition that her animal power is something that we share, although in a different form and measure. She wants to be alive and will use her muscles, her agility and her cunning at the extreme to stay alive. This is the same that we do while confronting her.

Now, of course we also have different forms of power, that animals do not have (freedom) or that they seem to have in a less expanded version (rationality, language, emotions). This puts us in an *asymmetrical* relation to them. When we confront our powers to theirs, we can choose to use our other abilities to defend ourselves and/or to dominate them.

Taking into account our autonomy and our other abilities (technology included), we are generally stronger than other animals, in the sense that we can almost always find a way to impose ourselves on them. Freedom and our kind of rationality give us an advantage over other animals, but this does not imply that we are always justified in dominating them. One thing is power, another is legitimacy. But, in general, autonomy can be considered as a kind of superior power: it gives us an advantage and it is also an unconditioned power: it creates its own law. So, there is indeed an asymmetry between our powers and those of other animals.

Now, is there a normative rule in this asymmetrical relation? Yes, and we might try to express it as follows: *always use your freedom in a way that recognizes the other powers at play in the situation*. These powers can be an end in itself for other animals, just like autonomy is an end in itself for us humans. The privilege accorded to our kind is granted only inasmuch as what we do protects our autonomy without needlessly reducing the other animals' powers to mere means. In some cases, we need to do that, in other cases we do not: it is our responsibility to offer good reasons for using our autonomy as a dominating power. Also, we have a responsibility for leaving open the possibility that other animals can pursue their ends without being unduly oppressed by humans and their behaviour. Causing the extinction of a species is something we can avoid, and it is up to us to protect it insofar as its existence is not a direct threat to our autonomy (which is hardly the case).

4. *Different kinds of respect*

This is where the structure of respect can be extended beyond persons: if respect for persons is the recognition of freedom as an autonomous power that people have, respect for animals is the recognition of an independent power that living beings have; and respect for the natural environment is the recognition of the independent power that inanimate nature has. These are different levels of respect, since the first is respect between freedoms, the second is respect between living beings (that we also are), the third is respect between natural entities (that we also are).

There are two dimensions of respect here, as said before: 1) the recognition of the power confronting us and 2) the recognition that we *share* that same power with the other pole of the relationship. We are prudent when we recognize the strength in the other; we are empathic when we recognize that our power and hers are of the same kind in at least some respect, though we may have also further and different powers.

This implies that we can have duties concerning persons that are different from the duties we have, out of respect, concerning animals or the environment. We have a kind of power that other animals do not have, i.e., freedom; we and the other animals have a power that inanimate life does not have, i.e., life. So, when we are confronting another autonomous will, we have some kinds of duties; when we are confronting the powers of animal life, we have a different kind of duties; and we have yet another kind of duties when we are confronting the environment. Let us try to characterize them.

1) Respect for persons (as autonomous agents): they can never be used as mere means and must always be treated as ends in themselves. Duties deriving from this principle ground social and political ethics (what we owe to each other)³¹ no less than individual ethics (what we owe to ourselves). The least we can do is to offer good reasons that can be understood and shared by all the autonomous agents involved in the situation. This means recognizing everyone's autonomy as an unconditioned, independent power having effective relevance for our normativity. Since this power is ultimate, unconditioned and capable of creating its own law, the appropriate form of respect is offering reasons to share as a common determining ground for decision. Naturally, this implies the absolute protection of each person's autonomy, and of the conditions of its practice, life included.

2) Respect for non-human animals (as living beings): they are ends in themselves as living beings; autonomy as a superior kind of power (the power to create its own law) has privilege only insofar as this is needed to protect itself and to make its effective exercise possible. Protecting the life and well-being of non-human animals is a responsibility of autonomous agents, who can take advantage of their autonomy only provided that they do not unduly sacrifice the other powers to which they themselves belong (life, existence). The powers of living beings are independent: they need to be recognized as sources of some authority, e.g., we have no right to slaughter them for mere fun. Along these lines, the duties deriving from this kind of respect include responsibility for the species, the duty of reducing the use of non-human animals to what is actually needed for exercising autonomy, the duty to care for animals depending on us for their survival and flourishing.

3) Respect for the environment (as nature): nature is a source of power, even in its inanimate form. This power is expressed in the laws of nature, and

31 T. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, Belknap Press, Cambridge 1998; rev. ed. 2000.

it cannot create a law of its own. Therefore, its normative authority is inferior to that of autonomy. Yet, autonomy only exists in living beings that are part of nature. And even autonomous agents have to recognize that the power of nature is at least partially independent and uncontrollable by humans. It is a power of its own. So, the recognition of the value of nature as a source of power implies that we must have good reasons if we want to dominate or mould it for our purposes. These reasons are connected to life and autonomy as superior powers than mere existence, but this does not mean that nature can simply be used without a good reason. And a good reason is one that shows that certain uses are really necessary to protect life and autonomy.

These different kinds of respect are combined together. The priority among them, i.e., autonomy, life, existence, is based on the actual relations between these powers. But this priority is not such that the superior level of respect grants any behaviour toward the other levels. Each sphere of powers requires an appropriate form of respect and a consequent behaviour. So, we can protect autonomy, but the recognition of the authoritative power of life and existence requires that we do it inflicting the less possible damage to them, and that we recognize that those independent powers impose caution on us. So, prudence in dealing with animate and inanimate nature is also an expression of respect, while recognition that we have the powers of life and existence in common with those entities implies a kind of equality that is not the level of the equality of autonomy but nonetheless requires some respect.

If the strategy I proposed here works, we have enlarged the scope of the principle of respect without losing contact with the emotional side of it, i.e., its being a perception of an independent power that limits our excessive self-confidence and dominion. If we understand respect not only as the recognition of dignity and autonomy, but more generally as the recognition of an independent power, we obtain at least three results.

First, we have shed light on the formal structure that backs up both the emotional experience of respect and its normative value. Respect is a relation between powers, in which the recognition of the other's power elicits an emotive reaction and the adaptation of behaviour to a principle of not reducing it to a mere means.

Second, we have established a formula of respect that naturally includes humans, the other living beings and inanimate nature, but not at the same level as autonomous agents. The principle of morality remains, but differences are taken into account as differences in the kind of powers that we are facing. Authority comes from those powers, but in rather different ways and measures.

Third, we have given an account of how to accommodate common language, especially concerning the use of respect in expressions like respect for animals, for the environment, for the planet. We have a different sensibility to these issues from that of Kant and his contemporaries, and our moral theories must take into account the awareness we now have of the importance of living and inanimate beings.

There can be a lot to be specified in the application of this principle. But this strategy seems more promising than, on one side, depriving of direct respect all non-autonomous agents (as Kant does) and, on the other side, trying to include the other living beings among the number of autonomous agents. Korsgaard is right in claiming that our fellow creatures can be considered ends in themselves because there is something that is absolutely good for them. This Aristotelian correction of Kant's principle is indeed helpful. But respect is not about absolute good: it is a relation between powers and, in the Kantian framework, good comes after right. The right relation to another power is recognition and the definition of a rule of this relation. The absolute good of a living being is relevant to another being as far as it represents a practical – not a theoretical – pole of interaction. So, autonomous agents and other living beings can be ends in themselves *because* they have the power to pursue their ends and to face opposing powers. The rule, for autonomous agents, is to recognize that power, be prudent, reduce damage to the least and, when possible, promoting the development of those powers in an appropriate way.

Furthermore, and as a conclusion, respect as a normative relation between powers can handle these situations better than establishing rights. In fact, rights require stronger claims and are based on the recognition of a *status*. But actually, status reflects power, and it is established on the basis of the actual relations between powers. In this sense, respect is at the same time more realistic and more normative than rights. We do not need to recognize a status on some ontological or metaphysical basis. The real relations between entities (autonomous agents, living beings, natural objects) are the real *practical* foundation of any rights claim. Real powers create a status, which is to be understood as the condition generated by the balance of powers that constitute the normative capacity of an entity. Respect is therefore based on actual relations, and not on any *a priori* definition of the nature of things. Respect is practical, not metaphysical.