Abstract: Much recent work defends the idea that nonhuman animals are reasons-bearers. This literature proceeds through negative arguments, criticizing accounts of reasons which bar animals from acting on reasons, as well as positive arguments, supporting accounts which entail that animals act on reasons. I offer a skeptical take on these arguments. First, I argue that recent negative arguments misconstrue Kantian theories of reasons and their motivations, and so fail. Second, I raise three objections to externalist, tracking accounts of reasons employed in positive arguments. Third, I show that there are nonetheless some viable internalist and externalist theories of reasons which are compatible with reasons possession in many animals, including internalist Humean accounts and externalist factoring accounts. The upshot is that there can be no straightforward case from empirical research to reasons in animals. Whether one should accept that animals can possess reasons centrally depends on one's theory of normative reasons.
A large body of recent work on animal cognition and metaethics makes the case that nonhuman animals are the subjects of moral obligations, and so, *a fortiori*, of normative reasons. Papers in this literature proceed by shoring up a large body of empirical evidence that suggest some interesting cognitive capacity of certain species of nonhuman animals (e.g., that they act on the basis of empathic concern or that they can acquire group norms) and then defending a theory of moral reasons such that this cognitive capacity entails the capacity to have and to act on moral reasons. In some cases, philosophers perform other philosophically interesting interventions, articulating new and expansive theories of emotions, concepts, and more in order to render this theory of normativity compatible with the cognitive capacities of some nonhuman animals. In each case, the upshot is that some subset of nonhuman animals can act *morally*.

This paper is an intervention in the metaethical domain of said research program. I here set aside debates about recent empirical research on animal cognition. I also set aside the important question of what it is for a reason to count as a *moral* reason. Instead, I narrow in on the question of *what it is for a subject to have a normative reason*. The goal will be to show that there are more viable theories of reasons possession that rule out morality in nonhuman animals than recent literature has assumed and fewer that rule it in than has been assumed.

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The upshot is that whether we should accept that nonhuman animals can act morally will substantively depend upon our theory of reasons, which in turn depends on abduction from broader considerations in metanormative philosophy.

I take as foil the influential work of Mark Rowlands and Susana Monsó.² In *Can Animals Be Moral?*, Rowlands argues that Kantian theories of normative reasons are incoherent, depending on miraculous claims about the relationship between agency and metacognition. In turn, Rowlands and Monsó both defend an externalist, tracking account of reasons possession. Herein, I argue that Rowlands has misconstrued the Kantian picture of normativity, and so his argument fails. Kantian theories of reasons are therefore viable and appear to rule out the possibility of normativity in nonhuman animals. I subsequently raise three objections to the tracking account of reasons offered by Rowlands and Monsó, which significantly reduce the view’s appeal. This means that their negative and their positive cases for morality in nonhuman animals both fail. In the final section, I give a lay of the normative land and show that there are nonetheless viable internalist and externalist theories of reasons on offer which are compatible with moral action in many nonhuman animals, including internalist Humean accounts and externalist factoring accounts.

There is therefore no straightforward case from empirical research to morality in nonhuman animals. Whether one should accept that nonhuman animals can be moral depends centrally on which theory of reasons one is most drawn to. Questions about the aptness of morality ascriptions to nonhuman animals must therefore be had out in the domain of metanormative theorizing.

I. Kantianism without Miracles

² Rowlands, *Can Animals Be Moral?*; Monsó, “Morality without Mindreading.”
Mark Rowlands considers the *reflection condition* on having normative reasons: the idea that one precondition on having a normative reason is the capacity for reflection on propositions. He finds this precondition in the Aristotelian and Kantian metanormative traditions, noting that it rules out the possibility that nonhuman animals act on normative reasons, but argues that neither the Aristotelian tradition nor the Kantian tradition adequately motivates the reflection condition. I focus on Rowlands’ argument against the Kantian basis for the reflection condition, arguing that it is unsound.

Rowlands argues that the Kantian motivation for the reflection condition fails due to a tacit commitment to miraculous thinking. Citing passages from Christine Korsgaard, Rowlands takes there to be a tight connection between normativity and *control*. Distinguishing between a *propositional agent* named “Marlow” and a *nonhuman animal* named “Myshkin,” Rowlands reconstructs the Kantian as follows:\(^3\)

Myshkin is “at the mercy” of his motivations. He has them, and he acts on them—and that is all he can do. He is tossed this way and that—a bobbing cork on a sea of motivations. Marlow’s metacognitive abilities, on the other hand, allow him to float above this sea. He is able to observe his motivations and, by following certain evaluative procedures, adjudicate between them. Because of this, Marlow has control over his motivations in a way that Myshkin does not. In virtue of his metacognitive abilities, Marlow can decide which motivation he is to act on and which he is to reject. And, in virtue of this, Marlow’s motivations have a normative dimension that Myshkin’s lack. Marlow’s motivations belong in the *space of moral reasons*, not in the space of causes.

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\(^3\) Rowlands, 170.
For Rowlands, then, the Kantian picture is all about control—in particular, about the freedom to transcend one’s motivational states and freely decide which an agent will endorse and which they will reject, without being at the mercy of their own contingent creaturely motivational states.

If this allegedly Kantian picture sounds implausible, it is. Rowlands rightly points out that if morality requires a genuine stepping back from all of one’s contingent creaturely motivations then it is incoherent, relying on what he describes as a “miracle of the meta.” Rowlands’ argument against such a picture of reasons follows similar arguments against higher-order thought theories of consciousness. Because this argument is fairly intuitive, I do not repeat it here. In summary, Rowlands claims:

The appeal to metacognition… overlooks the fact that the very issue of control that arises at the level of motivations is also going to be replicated at the (second, third, fourth, and so on) level of our evaluation of those emotions… Metacognition… was supposed to allow Marlow to sit above the motivational fray, and calmly pass judgment on his motivations, thus providing him with control over those motivations… If Myshkin is indeed at the “mercy” of his first-order motivations, as the traditional picture would have us believe, then, logically, Marlow is similarly at the “mercy” of his second-order evaluations of these emotions.

So, if the Kantian picture of reasons requires those acting for reasons to genuinely transcend their creaturely motivations it is not satisfiable. It requires a spectral unmoved mover who masters the motivational toggles in our creaturely machine, a picture woefully incompatible with the picture of humans offered by the natural sciences if not with bare metaphysical possibility.

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5 Rowlands, Can Animals Be Moral?, 186.
So, the Kantian picture apparently cannot motivate the reflection condition, and we should improve our credence in the possession of normative reasons by nonhuman animals.

Unfortunately, Rowlands seriously misconstrues the Neo-Kantian picture of normativity. Setting aside Kant's own views (as Kant appears to have affirmed Rowlands' antecedent and taken "miracle of the meta" type reasoning as a transcendental argument for the existence of counter-causal noumenal selves),\(^6\) we can now turn to the Kantian theories of reasons in Korsgaard to see why they are not guilty of the "miraculous thinking" Rowlands attributes to them.

As I understand the Neo-Kantian paradigm, there are at least two separate reasons to think that having and acting on normative reasons requires sophisticated metacognitive abilities, having to do with the unity of reflection and personal integrity.\(^7\) These reasons hang together neatly as part of the same picture of normative self-governance, but provide two distinctive lines of argument that support the reflection condition.

First, there is the claim found in both Korsgaard's theory of reasons and in Bernard Williams' Aristotelian theory of reasons that "our ethical dispositions are judged good from every point of view which makes practical claims on us, including their own point of view."\(^8\) For Neo-Kantians, having a reason involves considering every motive and every normative disposition one finds in themself and bringing them into harmony. What it is to have a reason, then, is to have a sort of unified normative point of view from which one evaluates all of one's motivates, judges them with higher-order motivations, and brings all of one's dispositions into reflective coherence to form an all-things-considered judgment about what one should do. This

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\(^7\) Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). There may be a third separate motivation: that, in line with the categorical imperative, acting morally requires acting on a maxim that one wills to be a universal law. See Korsgaard, 98-99.

\(^8\) Korsgaard, 78.
is significant because it accounts for the *authority* of internal normative reasons. As Williams makes the point, “when the agent reflects, even from the outside, on all his needs and capacities, he will find no conflict with his ethical dispositions.” So, for internal normative reasons to have *authority* over the agent’s will, the Kantian thinks, an agent must be able to bring them together comprehensively such that there is no ultimate conflict between the agent’s motives and no conflict between these motives and anything external to that agent.

For this to be possible, an agent must have some metacognitive abilities that render them capable of making evaluative judgments about conflicting attitudes. If the subject merely has attitudes that orient them in one direction or another, such that they act on their strongest motive at a given time, then the Neo-Kantian will deny them the capacity to have and act on reasons for they cannot bring their motives together comprehensively to make a judgment. What is required for a subject to have a reason, then, is the capacity for metacognition - to form judgments about one’s other judgments such that for no *n*-order pair of judgments is it the case both that these judgments conflict and that there is no *n* + 1-order judgment that can adjudicate between these conflicting judgments. This is what allows one to form a judgment comprehensively with a unified will rather than being divided *qua* agent, such that the agent is genuinely of multiple minds and simply acts on the stronger of conflicting passions. If this is a requirement of self-governance and so of having a normative reason, then the Neo-Kantian need not posit an unmoved mover to get reasons off the ground, and Rowlands’ argument fails.

The second motivation for an appeal to metacognition is the importance of integrity for one’s practical identity. “To make a law for yourself,” Korsgaard says, “is at the same time to give expression to a practical conception of your identity… And to the extent that we cannot act against them without losing our sense that our lives are worth living and our actions are worth

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undertaking, they obligate us.” For Korsgaard, to be a unified self at all, and to be a person at all, one must have integrity within oneself, and this means bringing one’s ends into a reflective equilibrium that allow one to form stable laws that one is committed to. These laws are at the center of our practical identities, “For to violate them is to lose your integrity and so your identity, and to no longer be who you are.” It is therefore the need to think of oneself as a person who has a sense of identity that gives rise to the need for personal integrity, or unification across one’s motives, which then gives rise to the need for laws, finally giving rise to unconditional practical reasons.

Whatever we make of this account, we can see why such a desire for personal integrity only arises in subjects with a high degree of metacognitive ability, and we can also see why Neo-Kantians are not in any way committed to miraculous thinking. Rowlands’ objection to the Kantian view of reasons fails, leaving a prominent theory of normative reasons on the table which rules out moral action in nonhuman animals.

II. Tracking Animals

The externalist account of what it is to have a normative reason that Rowlands and Monsó each propose involves the following kind of empathy they argue may be found in nonhuman animals:

Minimal Moral Empathy (MME): Creature C possesses MME if (1) C has an ability to detect distress behaviors in others, and (2) due to the action of a reliable mechanism, the detection of distress behaviour in others results in a process of emotional contagion that (3) generates a form of distress that has the other’s distress behavior as its

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10 Korsgaard, 129.
11 Korsgaard, 102.
intentional object, and built into which is (4) an urge to engage in other-directed affiliative behavior.

For Rowlands and Monsó, if a subject is sensitive to some of the objectively good- and bad-making features of situations such that these emotions track the good- and bad-making features of situations, in a way that can be successful or unsuccessful, then that subject’s motivations count as moral motivations, and acting on those motivations counts as responding to the objective moral reasons.\textsuperscript{13} So, such subjects are “moral subjects” and their actions and motivations can be assessed as morally good or bad. We can call this a “tracking” account of reasons, because it takes the reliable tracking of moral reasons to be central to what it is to have a reason. It is also an externalist account of reasons, taking reasons to be attitude-independent.

Tracking accounts of reasons face three significant objections. The first is due to Marilie Coetsee. As Coetsee argues, causal tracking accounts of reasons possession fail because there can be deviant ways of tracking:\textsuperscript{14}

\begin{quote}
[S]o long as there is a supervenience of moral reasons on natural properties (or any base properties for that matter) that can at least in principle be tracked independent of one’s by necessity having to take any notice of the relevance of those subvening properties for the right kinds of questions of action guidance, it’s going to be possible to track moral reasons in a deviant way unrelated to appreciation of those reasons.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{13} Rowlands, \textit{Can Animals Be Moral?}, 228.
The point is that if moral naturalism is true, then there are all kinds of ways for agents to track moral properties that do not involve *appreciating* moral reasons. For example, I could feel uncomfortable when others are in pain without being concerned *for them*, and try to get pain to stop because I want my discomfort to stop. The mere fact that nonhuman animals take others' distress behavior as the intentional object of their emotion does not rule out this possibility.

The second problem is that because what it *is* to have a reason is spelled out in terms of reliable tracking, there must be a threshold of reliability above which a subject counts as having moral reasons in their normative grips—otherwise a subject's accidentally responding in a way that aligns with objective moral reasons even once puts them permanently in the normative grips of reasons. But any such threshold appears arbitrary. Why should it be that if a subject is 70% reliable in causally tracking objective moral reasons they count as a moral subject, but if they are merely 69% reliable they fail to count as a moral subject?

A third problem is related: such a causal tracking account of moral reasons rules out the possibility of seriously vicious moral subjects—subjects who have moral reasons in their normative grips but regularly fail to act on them. On Rowlands and Monsó’s account of moral reasons, such subjects would automatically fail to count as subjects of moral reasons in virtue of their failing to reliably track moral reasons. But this is implausible. Morally vicious agents are possible.

So, we should reject the externalist, tracking account of moral reasons on offer.

III. How Animals Might Have Reasons

The negative case and the positive case for nonhuman animals having reasons fails. I want to close by briefly sketching some remaining accounts of moral reasons that *would* vindicate the view that nonhuman animals have and act on reasons. These are the views we
should employ in theories of animal normativity, and whether we think that nonhuman animals have and can act on reasons therefore depends on an abductive argument for one of these views over the Kantian view of reasons possession.

First, there are Humean forms of internalism about reasons. For Humeans, normative reasons just are motivating reasons: beliefs, desires, preferences, aims, plans, takings-to-be-a-reason, and more. Many such accounts of reasons are compatible with the conclusion that nonhuman animals have and act on reasons—all they need is the requisite hardware to form said propositional attitudes.

Second, there are various Factoring accounts of reasons possession, where having a reason is an epistemic relation that one bears to reasons for one to do something. Possible epistemic relations to reasons include that one has a reason if one believes that, knows that, is justified in believing that, or ought to believe that one has a reason, and more. If what it is to have a reason is to stand in a certain epistemic relation to that reason, then it’s plausible that nonhuman animals can have reasons. After all, it’s common to think that nonhuman animals have beliefs, knowledge, and epistemic oughts (for example, they ought to believe in what they perceive directly). And so on such an account nonhuman animals might well have reasons.

Finally, there is a phenomenal appreciation account of reasons, whereby subjects have reasons when they present the relevant consideration via the light of a felt authoritative force “pointing” towards φ-ing—lending weight to it, or soliciting it—in a particular way. On such an externalist account it is presenting a reason under the right phenomenology that puts it in one’s normative grips. The evidence Rowlands and others have proffered, combined with the psychological continuity between human and nonhuman animals and the role that felt, soliciting

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16 Coetsee, 27.
forces play in human motivational psychology suggest that nonhuman animals may feel this soliciting force when they respond to others’ pain, and if so, they may indeed have reasons.

IV. Conclusion

Recent positive and negative arguments for reasons possession by nonhuman animals fail. Kantian theories of normativity remain a live option and externalist causal tracking accounts of reasons are implausible. This substantially weakens the appeal of recent arguments for morality in nonhuman animals. Nonetheless, there are still many theories of reasons possession on offer that are potentially vindicatory for the defender of animal morality. To decide whether nonhuman animals have and act on normative reasons, we must therefore reason abductively to the best theory of normative reasons and see whether it places reasons in the grips of paws and claws.