
DISCUSSION

The Use of Animals in Experiments – Not Because of Lack of Empathy?

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The choice of an individual to use animals in experiments is influenced by a wide range of social, religious and sometimes career-driven factors, rather than a lack of empathy

Representatives of various religions and philosophical ideologies frequently make reference to the well-known belief that one's attitude toward the disabled, the sick, old people and children, is a measure of the humanity or moral value of the person. Yet, disputes arise when animals are included into the group of living beings entitled to the same type of consideration. The fact that they are used in scientific experiments is a highly controversial matter, and conflicting views are held by people both within and without the scientific community. This article presents a number of factors which might influence the decision of an individual to stand for or against animal use in experiments, including arguments voiced by representatives of the various sciences, both in support of or against the continuation of animal experimentation.

Some historical and religious background

The approach adopted by ancient ethicists, in assuming the dichotomy of human body and soul, resulted in man's alienation from nature. Aristotle proclaimed a hierarchical structure of the world and the existence of essential differences between humans and animals, the latter being considered as inferior to the former. The intellect, according to that philosopher, was the main determinant of moral values.¹ Adopted by the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions, the dogma of the immortal soul inherent in humans but not in animals, served to create a vast chasm between mankind and the animal world. Accordingly, Man rules over the world in which animals play an ancillary function.²⁻⁴ The cultures of Hinduism and Buddhism are based on the principles of respect for life and the protection of every living creature from suffering. Considered as being similar in their essence to humans, it is dictated

in these religions that animals deserve to be protected and treated with reverence.^{3,5,6}

Shaped throughout the ages, our stereotypical opinion of animals has been encoded into our collective consciousness, and cannot be easily overcome by newly emerging social concepts and ideas. For centuries, our attitude toward animals has been based on domination and power.⁴ In contemporary Christian culture, the majority of ethologists, psychologists and lawyers sympathise with an anthropocentric model of the biosphere, and take a negative stand with regard to animal rights. According to Białocerkiewicz,⁵ animal rights reflect our attitude toward life and suffering and our appreciation of the universal principle of humanitarianism. Humans are not entitled to treat nature barbarically – i.e. to kill or mutilate, inflict pain or suffering. Białocerkiewicz does not find any reason to recognise a unique role of mankind in the grand scheme of things, and emphasises a lack of religious, ethical or economic justification for awarding humans the right to take arbitrary decisions concerning the lives of other species.

The Catholic Church also acknowledges problems related to animal suffering. It speaks for an absolute ban on the mass breeding of animals and for the abandonment of procedures of animal testing used for cosmetics and various types of stimulants.⁷ According to Kożuchowski,⁸ a priest, it is our respect for ourselves and our claim to be perceived as more evolved beings that forbid us to treat animals as ordinary objects. A negative attitude toward animals is inevitably linked with a negative attitude toward other human beings.

The concept of 'animal rights' and morality

Cohen believes that rights result from contracts which are binding between members of a given com-

munity, and that rights, unavoidably, have inherently associated duties. Animals cannot undertake such obligations, and therefore they are not entitled to any rights in this sense (as cited in Mukerjee⁶). Guzek⁹ also points to the relativity of the concept of ‘animal rights’. He emphasises that rights can only be awarded to members of communities which are able to comply with commonly recognised ethical norms, so animals are not eligible to have such rights. Guzek believes that extremist activists of ‘animal right movements’ expect that animal rights should be similar to, or identical to, human rights. Yet, evidence derived from observations shows that, whenever there is a conflict between animal rights and human interests, the latter always win. In Guzek’s opinion, human and animal rights are not, and cannot be, equal.⁹ Mukerjee, however, points out that children and mentally ill individuals cannot assume any obligations, nor do they comply with any norms, and yet they are not deprived of rights.⁶

According to Kotowska,⁴ the protection awarded to animals by the legal system of a given community depends on the attitude generally adopted by its members toward animals. If animals are treated as objects by the majority, then they will also be treated as objects by the adopted customary law, because there would, of course, be no one in such community to protest in their defence.

Many contemporary philosophers are reluctant to admit that it is pointless to extend our system of morality to include animals, opposing the claim that animal research does not constitute a moral problem. They emphasise the fact that speciesism is the cause of cruelty committed by man toward laboratory animals. Other philosophers take a less radical approach, accepting only some methods of animal use, and expressing favourable opinions about the banning of the most abusive research methods.⁶ Frey, a philosopher, emphasised that he was not an anti-vivisectionist, but that he accepted only those experiments with animals which yielded significant benefits and could also be conducted with human subjects.¹⁰ Singer, author of *Animal Liberation*,¹¹ recognised by publicists as “the bible of the animal liberation movement”, believes that animal experimentation is acceptable only in the case of trial tests for life-saving drugs.

A contradiction in definition

The contradiction in the fact that people use animals as experimental models to acquire information pertaining to humans, and yet they refuse to acknowledge that animals have qualities recognised as human, is noted by Pisula.¹² According to Griffin,¹³ the belief that no animal is capable of suffering or worthy of sympathy cannot be supported by any contemporary scientific evidence, and Spaemann¹⁴ emphasises that animals are not able to give meaning to, or con-

trol, their suffering. They are, indeed, doomed to suffer, in that it is particularly hard to endure, if they cannot respond to it with aggression or by escape.

As a result of scientific progress, it is more and more difficult to justify the claim about the uniqueness of our species. Birmelin and Arzt, in their book, entitled *Haben Tiere ein Bewusstsein [Do Animals Have Consciousness?]*,¹⁵ wrote: “...in terms of their mentality and emotions animals are more similar to us than we used to believe...”. What differs between us and animals, however, is not these qualities *per se*, but their intensity. Animals use senses which have become blunted in human beings. After long-term observations of social behaviour in elephants, zoologists assume that certain forms of morality and self-awareness may occur in more-highly evolved animals.¹⁶ Today, we also know that primates are able to experience emotions such as anger, fear, boredom, longing and loneliness.⁶

Opinions at the laboratory bench

It was emphasised by Mukerjee that scientists often decide to use animals, only if they are convinced that this is the only way to help people, and that sympathy for animals frequently affects this deliberation. Researchers try to reconcile the dictates of science with a humane approach – in fact, many of them love animals and volunteer to work for their benefit.⁶ Szyszko believes, however, that the choice of research method does not depend on sympathy for animals, or the need to acquire knowledge necessary for saving human health and life. Instead, it is proposed that senior academic staff members might sometimes encourage younger researchers to conduct animal experimentation, in order to contribute to the scientific accomplishments of the given institution. As a result, animal experimentation is conducted all-too-often, and its purpose is not always justified by the needs of science. According to Szyszko, many higher-order animals suffer and die needlessly, frequently only to fulfil the excessive ambitions of young academics.¹⁷ In addition, Białocerkiewicz highlights the fact that, in order to advance their careers and scientific outputs, some researchers are ready to carry out even the cruellest experiments, and gives an example of Baltimore, a physiologist awarded the Nobel Prize, who does not believe that “animal testing poses any moral problems”.⁵ As a result of such explicit approval by high-profile individuals, animals used in research can become perceived to be merely instruments – i.e. objects which can be exposed to any manner of tests.¹⁸ We see this in the fact that animals are often referred to as “experimental models”, “bioreactors”, or “source of replacement parts”, and this inevitably reinforces that idea that they have no rights and that they can be readily exposed to suffering and extermination.¹⁹ Feinberg insists that animals should not be treated as objects,

although undoubtedly, they cannot be perceived in the same category as humans.²⁰

Conclusion

Mukerjee points out that we are all morally responsible for the appropriately humane treatment of animals.⁶ The choice of an individual to use animals in experiments is influenced by a wide range of social, religious and sometimes career-driven factors, rather than a lack of empathy on the part of the researcher. Indeed, it is commendable that sensitivity to human pain and suffering defines the course of action for people professionally involved in medicine. What must be emphasised is that this sensitivity should be manifested as empathy for beings which are weaker and subordinate to humans, and the right choices should be made accordingly.

We should not make people suffer for the sake of animal welfare, but we also should not sentence animals to terrible suffering which leads to questionable benefits for people, not least in terms of the scientific validity of the results obtained. Due to progress in science, it is more and more difficult to justify the claim about uniqueness of our species, and being human is not only a privilege, but also an obligation to the creatures with which we share the Earth.

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