*How far is the practice of animal experimentation compatible with the kinds of consideration that, in your view, we owe to non-human animals?*

Introduction

Who, today, isn’t impressed and positively enthralled by the ground-breaking developments in human healthcare? Who isn’t glad to hear the news that some surgeons have successfully managed a previously impossible transplant operation, or that a team of scientists has created improved medication in fighting illnesses such as HIV, cancer and Parkinson’s? Few will disagree that progress in these areas of research is fundamental. However, most people also fail to understand at what cost these breakthroughs often come, since, most of the times, while the results make the headlines, the research that led to them is conducted by discrete teams in removed facilities, far from the public eye and under only limited control.

The use of animal experimentation in particular, over the past decades, has come under sever scrutiny and criticism. As ecological movements gained popularity in calling for the protection of wildlife, some activists argued more precisely for animal rights and therefore the cessation of animal experimentation. These claims were maybe primarily practical ones, aimed first and foremost at changing government policies, but their intellectual impact wasn’t any less profound, as they challenged the traditional conception of man’s position in Nature and forced society to reconsider its instrumental use of animals.

In consequence, the conflict of interest between animals and humans became just as evident as it is difficult to address, as there is much at stake in its resolution: how far is the practice of animal experimentation compatible with the kinds of considerations that humans owe to non-human animals? Given the unprecedented nature of the contention (the parties at hand are, after all, animals and humans at large) and the gravity of its implications, this is a problem that cannot be ignored as it will determine governments and societies’ subsequent, and logically irreversible, behavior.

In providing a possible solution to the dilemma, we must first and foremost decide precisely what place animals occupy in relation to humans, as it is the answer to this philosophical interrogation that determines the resulting course of action. Obviously, people who disagree on the moral standing of animals necessarily diverge on the way humans can treat them. We will first draw from the existing literature in order to explore a spectrum of possible standpoints and attempt to provide a clear proposal on how animals should be viewed. Upon making such a judgment, we will see that the solution to the controversy of animal experimentation does not naturally flow into evidence. This is why we will finally attempt to provide a sustainable answer to the question, by arguing that animal experimentation *is* morally permissible only when it is *necessary* for the pursuit of an *essential* human interest.

I – The moral consideration of animals

Defining how we regard animals is the essential starting point of this whole discussion, because it will allow us to recognize what type of obligations, if any, we have towards them. The question is raised primarily because of the immemorial observation that animals look, behave and live differently than humans. The question then becomes whether these differences justify unequal moral standing, and if so, on what basis?

There seem to be three general positions one could hold in answering this question. The first is the traditional one, dubbed the “clear-line view”, that holds that humans are special and therefore superior to all living things. This theory draws not only from religious scriptures (like Genesis) but also finds root in more serious writings such as those of 17th century philosopher Descartes, who defended animal inferiority by claiming that only humans were capable of consciousness. If one holds this view then, humans are masters of animals and therefore experimentation should know no bounds. This line of thought dominated human perception until the mid 19th century when Darwin’s theory of evolution argued not for a separation but a continuity of animal and human existences. His explanatory idea of “natural selection” paved the way for the moderate “sliding-scale view”, according to which there is a form of hierarchy between species according to their respective capacities. Humans would be at the top of the pyramid, followed by primates, other mammals, invertebrates and so on; moral value would then depend on how high a species finds itself in the table. If one holds this view, then, the extent of animal experimentation should depend on what type of species is concerned and on the importance of the scientific research. However, as the intricacies of Darwin’s theory were challenged by modern science and new studies in animal behavior, a more recent conception, famously put into words by Peter Singer in his 1975 publication “Animal Liberation”, argues for the “equality view”, whereby there is no morally relevant difference between humans and animals. In application of such a conviction, then, no animal experimentation can be morally tolerated. Although today the battle mainly opposes the two latter views, such was the impact of Descartes’ theory on our intellectual reflexes that we still somehow struggle to shed the perception of our own prevalence.

Facing these three positions, we must confront the core question that keeps them apart: what characteristics qualify a being as having moral worth? After all, we have no quarrels killing trees for paper, nor do we have any scruple causing mass vegetal genocide when mowing our lawn. Why should we feel any different when dealing with animals? The reason for such a question boils down to the simple fact that animals cannot communicate intelligibly with us in order to express any kind of consent. Therefore whoever arbitrarily claims that animals are inferior to humans and then justifies animal testing on such a judgment call is no better than the “Nazi doctors” who monstrously experimented on Jews in extermination camps. This is the claim of those who view animal experimentation as the result of “speciesism”, a term coined to designate the differential treatment other beings solely because of their belonging to different species. Its critics argue that such a view of animals suffers from the same prejudice as racists towards skin color or sexists towards gender.

However, discussion on speciesism can be avoided seen as critical anthropomorphism has allowed us to progressively bridge the gap between species, therefore bringing animals “closer” to the human condition in order to grant them the same moral consideration. First of all, in response to Descartes’ judgment that only humans have a “conscience”, animal behaviorists argue that some animals, in particular primates, show signs of higher cognitive capacities. However, this is a weak argument seen as justifying experiments only on grounds of insufficient cognitive capacities is of little reassurance for humans with similar limitations, such as babies and the mentally impaired. This is why, secondly, we can generally recognize what is “good for” an animal, in the sense that they have the ability to flourish, so that whatever is “not good for” an animal can be seen as morally wrong. Finally, and more importantly, it seems that the main rationale for attributing moral status to animals is their capacity to feel pain. As Jeremy Bentham argued, “the question is not ‘can they reason?’ nor ‘can they talk?’ but: can they suffer?” Evidence shows that not only can animals experience physical pain, but they are also fully capable of being afraid and psychologically miserable.

In consequence, it would seem legitimate that we include animals in the human sphere of moral consideration. However, this still does not justify granting them the *same* moral consideration, simply because, if they undoubtedly possess some of these features, it hardly follows that they possess them to the same extent as humans do. Just because a monkey is able to recognize itself in a mirror does not signify that it can rationally think of itself through time, nor make long-term plans, nor have hope for a better life. Actually, even if animals secretly were more mentally evolved than humans, nothing indicates that we would ever find out. As Wittgenstein elegantly put it, “if a lion were able to talk, we wouldn’t be able to understand it”. Similarly, if we would view the behavior of a runaway chimp, swinging off street signs as it randomly scampers across town, as the indication of its mental limitations, then in the same way a high-perched community of baboons may very well find us just as ignorant when lost in a jungle and trying to find our way out. In all practical terms, therefore, it appears that the essential difference between animals and humans is not one in nature but one in degree.

How then does this affect the moral consideration we should have in regards to animals? Let’s here consider a slightly new take on the matter. If we recognize that life, strictly understood as the animation of an otherwise inanimate thing, is identical in all living beings, then the sole reason one species lives differently and longer than another is not due to the animation itself, but to the characteristics of the physical envelope that embodies it. This in turn means that, in view of the current state of the world, the conquering physical body is the one of the human species. It is thanks to our particular cognitive and intellectual capacities that science was invented in the first place and that we are now capable of rationally pursuing our activity, evaluating its effects and reorienting it progress. In this sense, morality *is* something that is typically human. If lions suddenly came to rule the world, it is not likely that they would feel any kind of sympathy for the *homo sapiens* condition. This, by the way, allows us to sidestep the whole issue of “animal rights”. The fact that we recognize obligations towards animals may allow us to identify what we call “their corresponding rights”, but we must not be mistaken on how this symmetry works. The chicken-and-the-egg problem can here be solved, for the obligations we owe to animals don’t stem from preexisting rights; more, their rights stem from the obligations we impose on ourselves. From then, we can assuredly say that if human morality is something that effectively guides and must restrain our activity, it should under no circumstance become our own worst enemy. In the most absolute of cases, if the extinction of a given species were the only means to ensure human survival, then it would be justified. This, of course, is the extreme case, but it lays down the foundation for how to apply our morality in more relative cases such as animal experimentation. By granting animals the same *type* of moral *value* as humans, we must seek to respect their well-being as much as possible, but at the same time, by recognizing that they have inferior *degrees* of moral *worth*, our interests must in some cases prevail.

II – The legitimacy of animal experimentation

This brings us to the more particular question of scientific experimentation on animals and its legitimacy. When phasing down from the absolute principle stated earlier (if the extinction of a species was the only means for ensuring the survival of the human race, it would be legitimate), we face the double problem of the *necessity of the means* and of the *importance of the end*:

* on the one hand, how necessary is animal experimentation for scientific progress?
* on the other hand, how important to human welfare are the fruits of those scientific advancements that require animal experimentation?

We must first and foremost point out the fact that any human activity that involves animals is necessarily detrimental to its well-being, insofar as it interferes with the natural course of its existence. This should allow us already to disregard the strict moral standpoint by which animals and humans have equal moral worth, for it would be both highly unfeasible (not only would we have to accept an abrupt slowing of our scientific progress, but we would have to seek alternative means of nutrition, restrictive urbanization policies, etc…) and it would also turn out to be shockingly immoral from an evolutionary perspective, as we would be forced into failing the most fundamental rule of life: self-preservation. In fact, even if one struggles to accept that such an egalitarian stance would be at some point suicidal, one can still adhere to its idealistic wish and yet excuse oneself of human-prioritizing by virtue of “moral weakness”. Be that as it may, these considerations corroborate the necessity for defining a case-by-case evaluation of moral legitimacy. Many activists agree that “the main problem may be less *whether* we should require a threshold in research with animals than *how and where* to draw the threshold line, [and maybe] in different places for different species.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

We shall now examine how necessary animal experimentation really is for scientific progress, and to do so we must first determine how *successful* it is before exploring whether or not it is *avoidable*. This question of its scientific relevance is essential for if we conclude that animal experimentation is not efficient, we can end the discussion now and rightfully call for such practices to stop. It would seem first off that when animal experimentation is done in view of providing solutions to animal-related problems, its use is unquestionable. It is really in the transfer of “animal results” to “human problems” that issues can be raised. Critics will argue that the results of animal testing cannot be 100% viable (drugs like Thalidomide and Vioxx caused harm to humans even after being successfully tested on animals) primarily because of the physical differences between animals and humans. This point actually serves as the basis for one of the most interesting attacks on animal experimentation, cleverly put into words by professor Charles Magel: “*Ask experimenters why they experiment on animals, and their answer is : ‘Because the animals are like us’. Ask them why it is morally okay to experiment on animals, and the answer is: ‘Because they are not like us’. Animal experimentation rests on a logical contradiction.*” According to this argument, either animal experimentation is morally wrong or it is scientifically inadequate. However smart it may sound, it fails to grasp the complex reality of the problem, for as we have seen there is no single moral answer to the dilemma and there are many different types of animals boasting various degrees of analogy with humans. Scientists can be equally persuasive in claiming the usefulness of animal testing, asserting that “because of evolutionary continuities in the form of behavioral, anatomical, psychological, neurological, biochemical and pharmacological similarities between animals and humans there are sufficient grounds for scientific hypothesis that, in specific cases, animals can be useful models to study particular aspects of biological processes in humans.”[[2]](#footnote-2) The Animal Procedures Committee further stated that scientific validity of animal experiments is “a condition capable of being fulfilled but has to be judged case by case”.

If so, justifying animal experimentation then faces a subsequent challenge: in what cases of research, where the quality of animal experimentation poses no doubt, is such a use unavoidable? The reason for this question is that, by virtue of the fact we recognize the same *type* of moral value to animals as we do to humans, we must actively seek to eliminate unnecessary pain or suffering caused to them. This means that we have a moral duty to find adequate *alternatives* to animal testing wherever possible. The fact that animal experimentation has been crucial to many scientific breakthroughs in the past does not automatically justify its continued recourse. To this effect, the recent doctrine of the three Rs (Reduction, Refinement and Replacement) is extremely valuable and should serve as a guideline for future animal experimentation, especially when it comes to finding Replacements (such as micro-dosing or electronic models). After all, “necessity is the mother of invention”, so stricter regulations could provide the necessary incentives to seek workable alternative methods. We can therefore conclude, in regards to the necessity of the means, that animal experimentation is so far justified only when it is resourceful and unavoidable.

However, the final question remains: should all research, where the recourse to animal experimentation is necessary in order to obtain a given scientific result, be morally permissible? To address this question, we must now gage the importance of the ends pursued. Two general types of ends can be distinguished for the use of animal experimentation. First of all, “educational ends”, constituted mainly by vivisection practices for medical students on one hand and experiments (often behavioral) carried out by wildlife specialists on the other. These ends are usually easily justifiable as not only their usefulness to human knowledge is irreplaceable, but the cost in animal pain and manipulation is comparatively low and no real alternatives can be produced. Secondly, there are the “scientific ends”, which are much broader and also the most subject to controversy. Here, we can draw a clear distinction in what practices should be justified and which should not. On the one hand, it seems that in the areas of “medical research”, the end pursued is of the highest order: sustaining and perfecting basic human welfare (creating vaccines, fighting diseases, testing surgical procedures, prolonging life expectancy, etc…). In research of this sort, it would seem that preventing animal experimentation from occurring, wherever it is necessary for obtaining results, would be a fundamentally wrong decision. However, in areas of “non-medical research”, where the end pursued is of marginal or trivial importance to human welfare, it would seem that our moral obligation to respect animal welfare as much as possible outweighs the benefits we would get from such results. The perfect example of an insufficiently important end is that of cosmetics. So vehement have its detractors been that the production and import of cosmetic products that resulted from animal testing has been legally banned in Europe. Similarly, another area of research motivated by superfluous human ends is often labeled as “toxicity testing”, where animals are submitted to horrendous amounts of pain in order, for instance, to test how irritating the chemicals in newer household products can be.

Conclusion

It seems that in dealing with the legitimacy of animal experimentation, it should not be deemed hypocritical to defend the protection of animals all the while justifying their use in certain circumstances. In many ways, the proposed approach seems to be, today, the most viable and moral one, as it combines the most rational and satisfying arguments of the different conflicting views on the relationship between humans and animals. By affirming that animals are to be considered as morally equal to humans in nature but morally inferior in worth, we can infer a principle that accommodates both animal welfare and scientific progress in the most pragmatic and uncontroversial of ways: outside of the principal obligation that humans have to respect and maximize animal welfare (which entails implementing the strategy of the three Rs), animal experimentation can only be justified when it is *necessary* (meaning efficient and unavoidable) in the pursuit of an *essential* human interest (thereby excluding all trivial ends).

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1. Barbara Orlans & co., *The human use of animals* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Nuffield council on bioethics, *The ethics of research involving animals* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)