

Of Cures and Creatures Great and Small

By Claire Andre and Manuel Velasquez

In the spring of 1987, a veterinary lab at the University of California at Davis was destroyed by a fire that caused \$3.5 million in damage. Credit for the fire was claimed by the Animal Liberation Front, a clandestine international group committed to halting experimentation on animals. Three years earlier, members of the group invaded the Experimental Head Injury Laboratory at the University of Pennsylvania where scientists had been engaged in research on head trauma, a condition which now claims more than 50,000 lives a year. They took videotapes recording the deliberate and methodical inflicting of severe head injuries on unanesthetized chained baboons. Copies of the videotape were sent to the media, to University officials, and to government agencies which eventually suspended federal funds for the experiments.

About 20 million animals are experimented on and killed annually, three-fourths for medical purposes and the rest to test various products. An estimated eight million are used in painful experiments. Reports show that at least 10 percent of these animals do not receive painkillers. Animal rights advocates are pressing government agencies to impose heavy restrictions on animal research. But this growing criticism of painful experimentation on animals is matched by a growing concern over the threat restrictions on the use of animals would pose to scientific progress. Whether such experiments should be allowed to continue has become a matter for public debate.

Those who argue that painful experimentation on animals should be halted, or at least curtailed, maintain that pain is an intrinsic evil, and any action that causes pain to another creature is simply not morally permissible. Pointing to the words of the nineteenth-century utilitarian, Jeremy Bentham, animal welfare advocates claim that the morally relevant question about animals is not "Can they reason? nor Can they talk? but, Can they suffer ?" And, animals do in fact suffer, and do in fact feel pain. The researcher who forces rats to choose between electric shocks and starvation to see if they develop ulcers does so because he or she knows that rats have nervous systems much like humans and feel the pain of shocks in a similar way. Pain is an intrinsic evil whether it is experienced by a child, an adult, or an animal. If it is wrong to inflict pain on a human being, it is just as wrong to inflict pain on an animal.

Moreover, it is argued, the lives of all creatures, great and small, have value and are worthy of respect. This right to be treated with respect does not depend on an ability to reason. An insane person has a right to be treated with respect, yet he or she may not be able to act rationally. Nor does a right to be treated with respect rest on being a member of a certain species. Restricting respect for life to a certain species is to perform an injustice similar to racism or sexism. Like the racist who holds that respect for other races does not count as much as respect for his or her own race, those who support painful experimentation on animals assume that respect for other species does not count as much as respect for members of his or her own species.

"Speciesism" is as arbitrarily unjust as racism or sexism. The right to be treated with respect rests, rather, on a creature's being a "subject of a life," with certain experiences, preferences, and interests. Animals, like humans, are subjects of a life. Justice demands that the interests of animals be respected, which includes respect for their interest to be spared undeserved pain.

Finally, animal welfare activists defend their position by countering the claim that halting painful animal experiments would put an end to scientific progress, with harmful consequences to society. Much animal experimentation, they say, is performed out of mere curiosity and has little or no scientific merit. Animals are starved, shocked, burned, and poisoned as scientists look for something that just might yield some human benefit. In one case, baby mice had their legs

chopped off so that experimenters could observe whether they'd learn to groom themselves with their stumps. In another, polar bears were submerged in a tank of crude oil and salt water to see if they'd live. And, for those experiments which do have merit, there exist many non-animal alternatives. It is only out of sheer habit or ease that scientists continue to inflict pain on animals when, in fact, alternatives exist. And, where alternatives don't exist, the moral task of science is to discover them.

Those who argue for the continuation of painful experimentation on animals state that society has an obligation to act in ways that will minimize harm and maximize benefits. Halting or curtailing painful experimentation on animals would have harmful consequences to society. Indeed, pain is an evil to be minimized, and scientists do work to minimize pain when possible. Contrary to sensationalistic reports of animal rights activists, scientists are not a society of crazed, cruel, curiosity seekers. But there are instances when the use of alternatives, such as painkillers, would interfere with research that promises to vastly improve the quality and duration of human lives. Animal research has been the basis for new vaccines, new cancer therapies, artificial limbs and organs, new surgical techniques, and the development of hundreds of useful products and materials. These benefits to humans far outweigh the costs in suffering that relatively few animals have had to endure. Society has an obligation to maximize the opportunities to produce such beneficial consequences, even at the cost of inflicting some pain on animals.

Furthermore, many argue, while the lives of animals may be deserving of some respect, the value we place on their lives does not count as much as the value we place on human lives. Human beings are creatures that have capacities and sensibilities that are much more highly developed than that of animals. Because humans are more highly developed, their welfare always counts for more than that of animals. If we had to choose between saving a drowning baby and saving a drowning rat, we would surely save the baby. Moreover, if we move to consider animals as our moral equals, where do we draw the line? Technically, any living thing that is not a plant is an animal. Are oysters, viruses, and bacteria also to be the objects of our moral concern? While we may have a duty to not cause animals needless suffering, when we are faced with a choice between the welfare of humans and the welfare of animals, it is with humans that our moral obligation lies.

Others argue that moral rights and principles of justice apply only to human beings. Morality is a creation of social processes in which animals do not participate. Moral rights and moral principles apply only to those who are part of the moral community created by these social processes. Since animals are not part of this moral community, we have no obligations toward them. But we do have moral obligations to our fellow human beings, which include the duty to reduce and prevent needless human suffering and untimely deaths, which, in turn, may require the painful experimentation on animals.

Mice or men? Where do our moral obligations lie? The debate over painful experimentation on animals enjoins us to consider the wrongfulness of inflicting pain and the duty to respect the lives of all creatures, while also considering our obligations to promote human welfare and prevent human suffering, animals aside.

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For further reading:

Michael Allen Fox, *The Case for Animal Experimentation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986).

Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983).

Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: Random House, 1977).

Jerrold Tannenbaum and Andrew N. Rowan, "Rethinking the Morality of Animal Research," *Hastings Center Report*, Volume 1; (October 1985), pp. 32-43.

See more at: <http://www.scu.edu/ethics/publications/iie/v1n3/cures.html#sthash.44E1r5bL.dpuf>