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Consistency in treatment and moral concern

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This is a discussion of the issue of fair and consistent treatment of living creatures. Although it is specifically about the use of nonhuman animals in research by human beings, the principles can be applied to other aspects of human and nonhuman animal interaction. My premise is that human beings do not have a prima facie right to use other animals, if they are unwilling to apply the same treatment to fellow human beings. That is, human animals, when acting as moral agents, do not have a moral right to use other animals in ways they would not permit themselves or, in particular, human moral patients, to be used. This premise, I believe, is the crux of the argument. Most arguments on this subject start with the premise, usually tacit, that human concerns tower above those of others. Such arguments, therefore, provide a biased theory or discussion of moral concern and fail to deal with the issue in a serious and fair manner.

What I discuss is based on ideal circumstances. When I refer to interactions between human beings, for example, I realize that not all people treat each other with respect, nor hold to the highest moral principles. However, to consider a moral principle invalid simply because not all adhere to it would be inappropriate.

I did not always hold the views I express now. I have been involved, either principally or as a spectator, in the following uses of nonhuman animals for part of my life: research, testing, education, food, fiber, entertainment, fishing, and "pest" control. In the area of vision research, I received several large grants from the National Eye Institute, one of the branches of the National Institutes of Health, all as principal investigator, and published numerous scientific papers. I believed that the use of nonhuman animals by human beings was permissible, albeit with the usual and trite caveat that they should be treated "humanely." I had not, however, carefully explored the ethical considerations of this value judgment.

Over the past couple of decades, I slowly have eliminated my overt and intentional involvement in the exploitation of nonhuman animals. Although it did not come about at once, I eventually came to realize that all arguments in support of harming, in the broadest sense, and killing nonhuman animals for human purposes, except in immediate life-and-death dilemmas, fundamentally are flawed, partic-

ularly from a moral perspective. The major defense put forth is that human beings, or other animals, derive benefits from this use. Even a charitable interpretation of such arguments is that the end justifies the means. This notion, however, is something we have rejected when it comes to our interaction with each other, and I see no compelling reason not to apply the same moral proscription to our interaction with other animals.

There is no question that the primary issue is one of morality. If it were not, we would be compelled, on a purely scientific basis, to use human beings for all research aimed at understanding human diseases or for tests of drugs for toxicity, for example, even if it meant harming or killing these human subjects. That this practice would provide human beings as a whole with far greater benefits and safety, and far more quickly, is irrefutable, because there are too many species differences to rely on extrapolation from one species to another. This research would be immoral, however, and I do not advocate such behavior. As I will later argue, such treatment, if applied to nonhuman animals, logically must be considered immoral for precisely the same reasons.

For human beings, we do not accept the notion of a master race, or of an inferior race that could be used in the stead of others. We also do not believe that having the strength or other ability to overcome someone gives us the right to exploit that person, nor do we allow the prospect of benefits to the human species as a whole, no matter how monumental, to guide our conduct toward each other. We refrain from harming each other, not just out of fear of retaliation, but because these proscriptions are part of our moral code.

In the case of nonhuman animals, most human beings disregard this moral code. In the name of science and other activities, we subject other animals to things we would consider highly unethical and immoral if we did them to each other. No one, however, has ever put forth a rational, nonself-serving argument that nonhuman animals are not deserving of the same degree of moral concern we have for members of our own species.

Our sense of morality in dealing with each other stems from our highest capacity for benevolent action, transcending the largely amoral situation in nature. This morality is not limited to, nor simply the result of, the fact that we are dealing with human beings. If I labeled a chair a "human being," you easily could appreciate the difference

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in moral consequences between gratuitously cutting off a leg of the chair and cutting off a leg of a person. Doing such to a chair has no moral significance: it does not matter to the chair that a leg has been removed. It does matter, however, and greatly so, to the human being whose leg was removed, regardless of whether anesthesia and analgesia were provided.

The reason harming another human being is wrong, therefore, is not simply because he or she is a human being *per se*. It is wrong because of certain qualities a human being possesses that are important to consider and protect. A person is an individual who has a life that fares better or worse, depending on what happens to her or him; no such claim can be made for inanimate objects. A person has value that is independent of her or his utility to another; the value of an inanimate object generally is negotiable. A person has interests, pursuit of which is a source of enjoyment and denial of which is a source of frustration; no such claim can be made for inanimate objects. In part, these are the bases for the so-called inalienable rights we give each other. Even people without concept of right or wrong and without obligations to others (so-called moral patients) are granted these minimal rights. I refer to children, the permanently comatose, or the mentally handicapped.

Like human animals, other animals are not inanimate and do have lives that fare better or worse, depending on what happens to those lives; their lives can be enriched or impoverished. Also like human beings, other animals have interests, although they may be difficult to define and may be different from those of human beings, just as those of one person may be substantially different from those of another. Nonhuman animals can experience painful and pleasurable stimuli and most can probably suffer in the general way in which human beings do.^{1, a} When you examine the issue without prejudice and with humility, there do not appear to be any morally relevant differences between human beings and other animals that justify denying other animals similar rights, consideration, or respect, on the basis of their interests or whether what we propose to do matters to the individual animal.

Physical or intellectual equality is not a mandatory criterion for proposing equal consideration. Inalienable rights are not accorded because all people are created equal. Quite the opposite, they are a means of protecting disadvantaged individuals from tyranny at the hands of those superior in certain traits. These differences between various people (eg, intelligence or physical strength), as well as differences in gender or race, are biological, and are irrelevant from a moral perspective. The major differences between nonhuman animals and human beings also are biological—usually a difference in degree, not in kind. But more to the point, essentially all characteristics stated to be important and uniquely human actually are shared, to some de-

gree, with many other animals and do not even exist in some human beings. Language (in a broad sense, not just the artificially narrow human construct), thinking, intelligence, and other things that people try to declare as separating human beings from other animals, even though these are morally irrelevant, are present in many other animals.²⁻⁵ For example, experiments have revealed that nonhuman animals can seriate and that they use at least some of the important information management processes exploited by human beings.⁶ Other arguments put forth by some (eg, that other animals do not have political systems or do not compose symphonies) are nonsensical, vacuous, or irrelevant from a moral perspective, and are rejected by those who view this issue in a rational and thoughtful manner.

On the basis that all mammals can experience pain and suffering, the phrase arose, "... a rat is a pig is a dog is a boy."^b Those arguing against equal consideration for other animals frequently quote this phrase out of context, attempting to portray those who use it as not valuing human life. This portrayal is absurd for many reasons, not the least of which is that the critical first part of the phrase, which puts it in the context of pain and suffering, is ignored. To equate human beings and other animals in this context is scientifically correct and in no way demeans human beings. Rather, it raises the status of other animals and emphasizes the biological and moral similarities between all mammalian species. Even those who support vivisection, for example, believe at least the physical aspect of this analogy; they argue that rats are models of boys when justifying experiments on the rats.

Those who defend the harming and killing of nonhuman animals in research state that the animals are treated "humanely." This defense flies in the face of common sense. To be humane is to have sympathy for another, to have mercy, to be tender and kind. If you provide pain relief after you have broken the spine of a cat for an experimental study, in what way can this be considered humane? If it were not for you, there would have been no pain in the first place. Regardless of your beliefs about the propriety of using nonhuman animals in research, the use of the word "humane" in this context is inappropriate if the animal is harmed or killed, even if done painlessly. Those who argue otherwise should reflect on whether they would consider similar treatment of a human child "humane," even if the intent was to understand a disease so that other human beings could be helped. Bear in mind that there only is one definition of the word "humane"; it is not defined one way for human beings and another way for other animals.

When the preceding argument is discussed, many will point out that people suffer daily from various diseases. This reality cannot be denied, and I share their concern for the misery those people endure. Appealing to the suffering of or potential harm to a human being (or other being of interest),

however, simply is not adequate from a moral perspective. Why is one group of animals (human beings, in this case) more important than another?^c Is it the fault of the other animals being used, harmed, and killed in research that human beings also are subject to disease and death? Why do we believe that because we suffer, innocent others must pay a price? In that context, the harming and killing of other animals in the name of science appears to be an expression of unconscionable selfishness on our part, something that opposes all the best qualities of human nature.

When you critically and honestly evaluate the situation, it becomes clear that we use other animals not out of some moral imperative or because it is right, but rather because we believe we will benefit from such behavior and because we have the power to dominate the animals. We tacitly act on the morally repugnant principle that might makes right. The question that should be raised by those purporting to be acting morally in such instances, therefore, is not whether benefits are derived or whether there are adequate alternatives to various uses of nonhuman animals. The real question is whether our domineering behavior is appropriate for such a highly developed, intelligent, and potentially compassionate species such as ours. If we consider ourselves to be so much better than other animals, we behave in a most despicable and self-degrading manner by subjugating and destroying those "below" us.

People often ask questions such as, "Who would you save in a situation where your mother and your dog were in mortal danger?" Such questions, although interesting, do not bear on the question of whether human or nonhuman life is more valuable. Rather, they speak to the question of which individual is more valuable to another individual. Suppose that the situation was a life-or-death scenario between 2 human beings, your daughter and someone else's daughter. I believe that most people would choose their own child over another. This choice does not mean they are callous or that they do not value human life; they simply have a closer, more familiar, and more compelling relationship with their own child.

What are we to do if we do not use nonhuman animals in research? Such a question presumes that progress is not possible without such use. Many even state that most or all advances in medicine have depended on use of nonhuman animals. Such statements are pure speculation on their part. A good scientist would ask if a controlled study had compared advances with and without the use of nonhuman animals; such a study is virtually impossible retrospectively. Nevertheless, I believe that the issue of alternatives is primarily one of mind-set. We are an incredible species with respect to our capacity to change our environment, to develop means by which to overcome natural obstacles to understanding biological processes. We do our-

selves a great disservice and minimize our abilities when we claim that we have no alternatives except to rely on the subjugation of unconsenting beings.

The present level of sophistication for ethical human studies is considerable. For example, Kiyosawa and coworkers,⁷ using human volunteers and positron emission tomography, demonstrated a regional reduction in cerebral glucose metabolism in patients with optic neuropathy. Uematsu and coworkers⁸ have studied patients with refractory seizure disorders and who were undergoing evaluation for therapeutic brain surgery. These patients had had subdural electrode grids implanted. Cortical mapping was done by electrical stimulation of the cerebral cortex, to learn important neuroanatomic details of the human motor cortex, information virtually impossible to derive from studies of other animals.

Other investigators⁹⁻¹¹ have used positron emission tomography or magnetic resonance imaging to measure activity-related changes in regional cerebral blood flow, to identify brain regions active in human beings during reading or playing the piano. This combination of cognitive and neurobiologic approaches has provided information about the functional anatomy of perception, attention, motor control, and language in human beings, again, something not likely to be possible with nonhuman subjects.

These types of studies provide us with information about human brain structure and function that will be invaluable in understanding and treating human disorders. They also reveal that claims that nonhuman animals are absolutely necessary for research are simply not true. These and other methods can be used in numerous other disciplines. I cite these studies not just to point out specific examples of alternatives to nonhuman animals, but more importantly, to emphasize what could be done if there were a change in mind-set, a change from viewing other animals as mere tools to considering them as deserving of the same respect as human beings. If we changed our attitude in this respect, we could concentrate our efforts in improving available alternatives and developing new ones. Necessity would become the mother of invention. We could begin the journey out of the dark ages of violence and destruction perpetrated on unconsenting and, presumably, unwilling animals in the name of science.

When contemplating or discussing the issue of nonhuman animals used in research, the most important point to consider is that these animals are living beings who share with us the drive to live freely. They are not here for us; they are simply part of the complex web of life on this planet. Their value does not depend on their utility to us. Harming or killing these animals in the name of science does not make it noble or right. Our own sense of morality demands that our treatment of them be fair and just.

^aAlthough most people do not consider this an important issue when it comes to invertebrates, there is evidence that such a view is narrow and scientifically unsupported.

^bNewkirk I, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, Washington, DC: Personal communication, 1994.

^cWhereas you may balk at considering human beings and dogs, for example, moral equals, you cannot rationally argue that morally relevant differences exist between one dog and another. All the substantive ethical considerations that would apply in protecting a dog of one status, such as one that is a human companion, would apply equally to a dog in another situation. This logic would make any argument supporting the destruction of one group of dogs to "save" another morally bankrupt.

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The future of animal research

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A visionary can only look at the future through the thick and foggy globe of a crystal ball. Vision is never perfect until after an event has occurred. To predict the future, one can study current trends, events in other countries, and recent advances in related disciplines, and one can brainstorm with insightful colleagues. In the end, however, the vision is still foggy, and the prediction just that—one person's opinion of what the future might bring.

From the depths of history through the foreseeable future, animals have been used in research for 2 primary reasons—to learn more to help animal populations and to learn more to help human beings. Examples of learning how to understand human diseases as a result of learning about similar conditions in animals are many. The opposite also has been true—animals have benefited because of knowledge gained from plagues and diseases of the human population. Although the names of the specific diseases, surgical procedures, or drugs will change, these 2 situations will continue. Animals and human beings can each benefit from animal

research, but the approaches will change over time.

Animals Helping Animals

Predictions of benefits to the animal populations is the first stop in a vision of the future. A great deal still needs to be learned about contemporary problems, to better serve the animal community. For example, heartworm disease in dogs is still treated with iv injections of sodium thiacetarsamide. Although veterinarians know much more about this parasite's physiologic features and life cycle for use of preventive drugs, safer and more efficacious drugs for treatment are still needed. As other examples, is the increased incidence of autoimmune diseases related to better diagnostic capabilities, to the increasing number of proteins used in animal vaccines, or to environmental pollutants? When will veterinarians be better able to diagnose and treat feline infectious peritonitis?

Only a few years ago, parvovirus appeared as an important killer of young pups, and equine monocytic ehrlichiosis (Potomac fever) hit the horse population. Much detective work was needed to determine the cause of each of these conditions, and much more to develop ways to protect the an-

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