Can we still morally justify testing candidate drugs on animals?

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Our attitudes towards other members of the animal kingdom keep changing. While in many cases, such as animal farming, it seems convenient for people to retain traditional views that animals are merely the means to our ends, scientists and philosophers recognize the fact that many nonhuman animal species can form social interactions and suffer from painful scientific practices. In this essay, I will outline the problem of the moral status of nonhuman animals and analyse the work of a modern philosopher, Peter Singer, titled *Animal Liberation*. Subsequently, I will contrast his views with those held by Roger Scruton in his *Animals rights and wrongs* to argue that testing candidate drugs on nonhuman animals is not morally justifiable. Finally, for the sake of simplicity of an argument, in the next paragraphs of this essay, I will refer to nonhuman animals as animals, what the reader should understand as entailing all the animal species apart from humans.

Historical views on our duties towards animals

The moral status of animals is an old ethical problem that has been addressed by multiple philosophers before. Aristotle in his *Politics* says that *it is undeniably true that she* [Nature] *has made all animals for the sake of man* (Aristotle, p. 16). His views seem to be echoed by Aquinas, who claimed that *things, like plants which merely have life, are all alike for animals, and all animals are for man* (Aquinas, art. 2). Both of the arguments are based on references either to anthropocentric interpretations of a natural hierarchy or to literal translations of biblical texts where humans constitute the apex of God's creation. The one thing that connects animals and humans is a *mere* ability to have a life, but the purpose of animal lives is only to satisfy the needs of humans. This reductionist position seems to prevail for the time being, even when the other life characteristics are taken into consideration, such as self-consciousness and the ability to suffer. Descartes argues that animals experience neither pleasure nor pain and that they are governed by the same principles as a clock, with an exception that animals are more complex machines because they are created by God (Descartes, vol. 5). It should not, therefore, surprise the reader that, except for the nomenclature of the deontological theory, Immanuel Kant repeats the prior arguments stating that *animals are not self-conscious, and are there merely as a means to an end. That end is man* (Kant, pp. 239-240). It is only when Jeremy Bentham confronts the views of Kant that the traditional status quo starts being questioned. Bentham believes that animal suffering alone is a good enough reason to change human attitudes towards animals. He also seems to be the first one to draw an analogy between racism and speciesism, claiming that, at some point, some members of the human species were also denied basic freedoms and rights. Bentham hopes

to see the day *when the rest of the animal creation may acquire those rights which never could have been withholden from them by the hand of tyranny* (Singer, p. 203).

Can the new scientific evidence help us understand animals better?

In the previous paragraph, I wanted to show that up to the Age of Enlightenment, most of the philosophers denied animals any rights, claiming that the purpose of their existence is to be the means to a human end, whether it be the source of food or clothing. The animals were characterised as automata that are not self-conscious and do not possess the ability to suffer. It is not the point of this essay to analyse the precise roots of such attitudes, however, it is clear that the sources the philosophers based their views on were hardly scientific and could have only falsely emphasised the central role of a human being in the world. Contrary to that, modern ethics must consider scientific facts when forming an informed opinion. In the case of our treatment of animals, such facts come mostly from the fields of neuroscience and behavioural research.

David DeGrazia in his book, *Animal Rights,* offers a summary of what is currently known about behavioural and physiological similarities between animals and humans. It is now apparent that most of the animals tend to avoid stimuli causing unpleasant sensations as well as limit the use of the injured body part to permit its rest and healing. DeGrazia believes that such an adaptation to novel circumstances might only strengthen the claim that these behaviours indicate pain and, therefore, sentience. Physiological evidence also highlights the fact that changes in the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenocortical system in response to noxious stimuli are almost identical in all the vertebrates, thus signifying that vertebrate animals are capable of experiencing pain similarly to humans (DeGrazia, pp. 41-45). Furthermore, the existence of a fight-or-flight response together with the presence of numerous benzodiazepine receptors, serving in humans as substrates for most of the anti-anxiety agents, indicate that vertebrate animals are not only capable of feeling pain, but might also experience states of distress and anxiety (DeGrazia, pp. 45-48).

Modern science, therefore, reduces the biological distance between animals and humans, rejecting Cartesian views that animals are automata that cannot experience painful sensations. Nonetheless, the same fields of science uphold the traditional status quo and continue testing thousands of chemical compounds on vertebrate animals, such as mice, rats, dogs, and rabbits. It seems that the shift in our understanding of animal biology has not caused a similar shift in our attitudes towards animal species. Evidently, most of the researchers decide to adhere to the Kantian moral theory, treating animals merely as ends to our means, whether it be a discovery of a new drug or mechanisms of metastatic cancer growth. To that, I claim that such attitudes create a logical dissonance: at the same time as we use animals for research, due to their physiological and behavioural similarities, most of us abhor the idea of animals having the similar moral status to humans. In the next paragraphs, I will ar-

gue that we need to revisit our traditional views on animals if the logical dissonance is to be resolved. I will focus on vertebrate animals, as they are the main victims of medical research, and I want to avoid making arbitrary decisions as to which animals deserve which rights, based on their overall level of similarity to humans.

An argument from analogy

Peter Singer, an Australian philosopher and a proponent of the Animal Liberation movement, believes that animals deserve the right of equal consideration. He claims that equal consideration does not mean that we should start treating animals in an identical way as we treat fellow human beings. Following that, it is not a requirement that animals and humans must enjoy the same rights and freedoms. For instance, by drawing an analogy between men and women, we do not expect men to have a right to abortion, as, by their natural constitution, men cannot get pregnant. In the same manner, it is not expected that laboratory animals should acquire rights that are outside the sphere of their natural capabilities, e.g. rights to vote. Thus, while the basic principle of equality recognises the fact that animals and humans, by their nature, enjoy different sets of rights, it emphasises the need for the equal consideration of the rights they actually can enjoy (Singer, pp. 4-5).

Then, if the scientific data tells us that animals can experience states of distress and anxiety, it means that they could very well enjoy the right that says that animals should not suffer unnecessarily. However, as it often happens in the research field, the rights of animals are rarely acknowledged under the principle of equal consideration. In the experiment quoted by Singer, researchers wanted to establish whether learned helplessness is a good and predictive model for studying depressive disorders. Throughout the investigation, the experimenters subjected dogs and goldfish, both being vertebrate animals, to multiple aversive shock sessions, to finally conclude that there is not enough agreement about the cure of depression to validate animal learned helplessness as a solid model for studying depression (Singer, p. 47).

If such an experiment was conducted on selected women or black people, it would be, rightfully, called sexist or racist, not to mention that the design of this experiment would never get approval from any ethical board, due to the level of suffering humans would have to be subject to. An identical experiment performed on humans might even remind the reader of medical trials conducted on the prisoners of the concentration camps. If that is the case, how can we morally justify repeated torturing of laboratory animals, not being called speciesists? It seems to me that a prevalent lack for equal consideration for animals in academia results in a multiplicity of experiments that are badly designed and do not, in fact, provide the field with new and useful information. Hence, if both humans and laboratory animals are vertebrate organisms, and therefore, both can exert the right not to suffer unnecessarily,

then as it was not morally justifiable to conduct medical tests on prisoners of the concentration camp, it is not morally justifiable to conduct similar medical tests on animals, either.

Roger Scruton, an English philosopher and an author of *Animal rights and wrongs,* claims that it is not possible to compare animal and human suffering due to the different nature of this experience between different species. He claims that humans who, contrary to animals, are self-conscious, experience pain in more dimensions than animals do (Scruton, p. 39). What he means is that only humans can anticipate painful experiences, rehearse them, and accompany them with dreadful thoughts of their cause. However, as DeGrazia describes, in an experiment with thirsty rats, the ones that were randomly punished drank less water than the others. Only after the punished rats received anti-anxiety drugs their behaviour went back to normal and they started drinking again (DeGrazia, p. 47). Then, is not it a proof that punished rats anticipated pain and were anxious to start drinking again before having administered an anti-anxiety drug? If that is so, then Scruton's argument about multiple dimensions of experiencing pain is not sound, as it is lacking factual support from the scientific evidence.

Scruton also believes that sometimes it is good to be in pain and it is not always wrong to inflict it. He continues by saying that, for instance, a just punishment is painful, and it is right to suffer and inflict pain on this occasion, even if no other benefits are proceeding from doing so (Scruton, p. 39). However, it is hard to imagine what type of just punishment laboratory animals deserve. If Scruton himself declares that animals are not self-conscious, there exists no plausible possibility that an animal purposefully acts in a wrong or a good way. If we consider utilitarian calculus in defending animal testing, what is the benefit of inflicting pain to thousands of the laboratory animals if many of such experiments are of a trial-and-error character and do not benefit the scientific field, not to mention the general public? Even if an animal life is considered less worthy than a human one, inflicting pain in such a case to a helpless animal cannot, in utilitarian terms, be morally defensible.

Lastly, Scruton believes that *just as human beings can develop as persons only through a measure of pain, so do animals enjoy the fullness of animal life only if they are exposed to the risk of suffering. To remove that risk is easy, but the result is not a life that an animal should lead* (Scruton, p. 39). Again, it is hard not to have an impression that Scruton does not know the nature of suffering the laboratory animals experience. I do not disagree with the fact that rats, mice, dogs, and rats do suffer from hunger or a lack of shelter while living freely. However, I will argue that, while the ability to search for food and to forage is indeed beneficial for the development of an animal, inflicting constant pain in a form of electric shock sessions or by putting an animal in a stainless cage with an electrified floor is not.

An argument from capability

In his defence of animal rights, Singer quotes Ludwig Wittgenstein, who believes that we cannot meaningfully attribute states of consciousness to beings without language. Interestingly, we now know that there are animal species, such as chimpanzees, that can be taught a simple form of a language. However, for the sake of the argument, let us assume that Wittgenstein could not be aware of this fact. Singer argues that while language is a necessary tool for expressing abstract thoughts, there exist simpler emotional states, such as the fight-or-flight response, that developed early in the evolutionary process and are shared among humans and many other vertebrates. Jane Goodall goes even further, by claiming that basic signals that convey emotions such as pain, fear, and anger, are not specific to our species (Singer, p. 14). And, if parents claim that they recognize different emotional states of their infants, can we still believe that language is required to properly express our states of consciousness?

Singer continues with the argument and proposes a thought experiment: even if we agree with Scruton that animals do not exhibit anticipatory behaviour when it comes to suffering, does not the same statement apply to infants or adults who are mentally incapacitated (Singer, p. 19)? In the end, the best biological model to test candidate drugs for humans is a human model. If we go further and assume that the incapacitated adult suffers from a neurodegenerative disease and has two years of life left, would not then the utilitarian calculus suggest that it would be more beneficial to test a drug on this human than on healthy animals that could enjoy their life otherwise? What is more, if we agree that people should have a right to euthanasia, would it also be morally justified to ask them if before their death they would like to participate in an experimental drug trial? I believe it would not, but knowing the fact that studies on human embryos are allowed only in a few countries worldwide, the traditional notion of the sanctity of human life at the cost of animal lives still dominates the scientific and political fields, even if the same people prove to us that animals feel more than we have ever thought before.

Scruton, in his critique of Singer's reasoning, claims that infants and brain-damaged people do not lie on the moral side of the dividing line. Infants are potentially moral beings that will develop into full members of the moral community, while incapacitated adults are no longer members of it. He asks, however, whether the exclusion from a moral community justifies treating marginal humans, as he calls them, just like we treat animals? Scruton further claims that this is part of human virtue to acknowledge human life as sacrosanct, to recoil from treating other humans as merely disposable (Scruton, pp. 42-44).

In response to Scruton's criticism, it is important to note that the word *potential* informs us that there is a certain probability of a thing happening. Thus, while most of the infants have the potential of developing into moral agents in the future, some of them will nonetheless become incapacitated. If we go further, we can rightfully claim that embryos also have a potential of developing into moral agents, therefore both abortion and in vitro fertilization,

with such an assumption, should not be morally permissible. What the original argument shows is the fact that the presence or absence of the language and the anticipatory behaviour cannot morally justify the fact that we decide to test potential drugs on animals and not on humans who exhibit similar characteristics. As for the incapacitated adults, it is hard for me to believe that offering them an experimental drug treatment equals to treating them as disposables. Contrary to that, they may provide the scientific community with more reliable data and, thus, save thousands of laboratory animals and people from unnecessary suffering.

An argument from utility

Eventually, it is very often misleading and even dangerous to extrapolate results obtained in animals to human patients. Following Singer, thalidomide, which caused multiple deformities in humans, did not produce similar effects in prior animal tests that included dogs, cats, rats, monkeys, and chickens. Similarly, a drug Opren, that was extensively tested on animals, caused 61 deaths and almost 3,500 adverse reactions in humans (Singer, p. 57). There are many drugs with similar outcomes to humans. This is because metabolic systems and the presence of certain enzymes are both specific to different species, therefore, the translational value of such animal trials is often doubtful. However, attitudes of scientists towards animals continue to evolve and many animal trials are now replaced by alternative methods, involving cellular and tissue models. It is equally satisfactory to observe that certain jurisdictions started treating animals as beings and not merely as things. That was the case with the Non-Human Rights Project, where lawyers were arguing on behalf of chimpanzees for courts to consider them as persons, what would confer their legal standing (Berns, p. 252).

Conclusion

In this essay, I argued that testing animals for medical purposes is not morally justifiable. Members of the ethical boards should no longer ignore the fact that animals are sentient beings that can experience different emotional states and, therefore, they cannot be treated merely as objects. With the presence of an increasing number of alternative methods to animal testing as well as the possibility of performing certain drug trials on affected humans who, otherwise, would have no chances of survival, it is not unrealistic to think that animal testing might be stopped entirely. Knowing that many experiments do not benefit the general public and many drugs will cause different outcomes in animals and humans, it is hard to believe that unnecessary suffering of thousands of laboratory animals might be morally justified. And the fact that animals cannot verbally describe their suffering should not support the belief that they cannot suffer.

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