

The response reproduced below was submitted to the consultation held by the Nuffield Council on Bioethics on the ethics of research involving animals during October-December 2003. The views expressed are solely those of the respondent(s) and not those of the Council.

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Response to consultation on the ethics of research involving animals

1. What is your view about the use of animals in research?

As I oppose animal experimentation on ethical grounds, questions of the need for it or of its reliability are not my main concern. On these empirical points, I would only say, first, that there is evidence from reputable, if minority, sources that it is neither necessary nor reliable; but second, more importantly, that had the use of animals never been seen as a morally acceptable option, human ingenuity would almost certainly have found other effective methods from the start, and the question of whether animal research worked would not have arisen.

I do not think the acceptability of using animals depends on the purpose of the research, any more than would the acceptability of using non-volunteer humans. It is always useful in judging these issues to test your reactions to the substitution of 'non-volunteer humans' for 'animals' in the wording of the question.

There is evidence of extreme animal suffering in laboratories (see Diaries of Despair evidence, BUAV undercover reports); and where we cannot be sure, the animals should be given the benefit of the doubt.

2. What are your views about the use of genetically modified animals in research?

This should also be put to the test suggested in my second paragraph, question 1. Particularly and self-evidently wrong is the breeding of animals as models of human disease. If a disease is harmful enough to be worth doing animal experiments in search of a cure for it, then it must be harmful to any animals bred as models of it.

3. What is your view about the use of alternatives?

When you are doing something wrong, you should give it up first and find alternatives later. The stance of researchers claiming they must find alternatives before giving up animal experiments is like that of a burglar in court assuring the judge that he will stop stealing as soon as he finds an equally well-paid job.

4. What is your view about ethical issues relating to the use of animals in research?

'Value', 'importance', 'moral status' and 'rights', mentioned in your background paper, are not verifiable qualities, but expressions of the policy preferences of those who assert or deny them. It is true that qualities which are at least potentially verifiable (such as rationality, power, or sentience) evoke responses that inspire those preferences. Animal rights supporters respond to sentience, are less impressed by human rationality and are not at

all impressed by human power, especially when the latter two are used to justify cruelty.

In other words, I hold the subjectivist view that ethical systems reflect the kind of world people want to live in; if detached from goals, ethics would become meaningless. I cannot prove that animals 'should' have rights – any more than humanists, with their different responses to the situation, can prove the opposite; but I hope that more and more people will come to reject the feeling that our greater power condones animal usage.

As to distinctions between insects and other animals, this is an evasion of the vivisection issue, since insects are not used in experiments. On the benefit-of-the-doubt principle, one should avoid killing or harming insects, although as with other animals or other human beings, I find it acceptable to kill in self-defence. The animals used in experiments are all known to be sentient and I would draw no moral distinctions among them.

Regarding whether animals 'really' suffer – that is, as per your document, can concepts of 'pain', 'distress' etc be extended to them – it is only when exploitation, as in experiments, is being considered, that this question is raised: no doubt is expressed regarding laws against cruelty towards domestic pets, in which case behavioural evidence (or 'common sense') is relied on. This inconsistency shows the biased motivation behind such questions.

The subquestions -- 'what factors should be the most important when considering whether research involving an animal is justified or not?'; comparison of medical research with pet-keeping, food, clothing, or sport; and the importance of the environment in which animals are kept – should, again, be put to the 'substitute non-volunteer humans' test. If it were found that helpless humans were being used for experiments, all these questions of purpose, comparative usage, and environment would seem outrageous against the background of a fundamental wrong.

5. What is your view about the UK regulations on research involving animals in the UK?

The Imutran disclosures made clear that the government places the interests of researchers ahead of compliance with regulations. However, this case cannot be seen as one bad apple in the barrel, nor is tightening up inspection the answer. The underlying problem is that neglect of any regulations that exist is inevitable once people have so little respect for animals as to be willing to use them in experiments in the first place.

The logic of the belief that human health must come first is that any restrictions on research are seen as a betrayal of humanity, thus causing resentment and an absence of shame or guilt in bypassing them.

6. What do you think about the information that is available to the public about research involving animals?

The comment in the background document – ‘reporting tends to go for “shock value” and, on the whole, presents the negative side’ – reflects the tendency to exclude emotion from what is rightly an emotional issue, and to present instead only sanitized versions, in technical language, of what happens in laboratories. Unfortunately, it is the ‘shock value’ accounts which reflect the truth of the matter as it affects the animals, and the supposedly objective, clinical accounts which are a distortion.

I certainly trust animal protectionists more than researchers, as the former have no substantial career or financial interests in exposing cruelty to animals, while the latter do have such interests in denying or justifying it. There is quite enough cruelty in the world for animal supporters to campaign against, without their having to invent it where it does not exist.

However, I do agree that all products, including medicines, should be labelled to inform people of the use or non-use of animals in their development. Where animals were used, full details of the procedures and number and type of animals used should be given in understandable language.

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