

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.

This response was submitted using the online facility:

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QUESTIONS ANSWERED:

1. Background: the use of animals in research

ANSWER:

While animal research likely to cause suffering should be deliberately kept to a minimum, there comes a point where research must be conducted either on animals or humans. It's reasonable to think that the former is preferable. There can be few people, even amongst the most fervent animal-rights activists, who do not practise some level of moral relativism with regards to other creatures: they may claim that monkeys have the same "rights" as humans, but would happily wipe out thousands of microbes by disinfecting a kitchen surface. If we must thus accept that we do consider some life more "important" or "valuable" than other life, then it follows that experimenting on, say, mice, must be preferable to experimenting on humans. (This issue is complicated by the fact that humans are capable of volunteering for trials, but this is only likely to happen at a stage where suffering is considered to be unlikely.)

I think it reasonable to assume that the degree to which an animal "suffers" is proportional to the complexity of its brain. However, it is wrong glibly to assume that, since no animal other than a human is capable of suffering exactly as a human would, therefore it cannot significantly suffer at all. For this reason I feel animal experimentation capable of causing any level of distress or suffering should consciously be kept to the minimum scientifically necessary. As to whether the results of such research are relevant to humans, only a scientist could answer that. Obviously it is part of this conscious minimising for researchers only to undertake such experiments if they have good reason to believe the results will be meaningful to us.

On the other hand, to say that animals have "rights" is patently absurd. A right is part of a socio-political construct, a social pact that involved the corollary of duties or responsibilities. Since no animal other than a human is able to understand and agree to take part in such a pact, to undertake duties as such, they cannot be said to have any rights in return. Rather, I think we should treat animals responsibly simply because we can. I believe no animal other than a human can exhibit compassion per se (though I'm happy to be proved wrong here). It would be foolish to expect a cat to be ethical enough not to toy with a mouse nor to hunt for creatures it does not need to eat. But humans can make such ethical decisions, and I think that this is reason enough to do so.

Yes, I think the purpose of the research has a lot to do with whether it is acceptable. Research for cosmetic, or other patently unnecessary, products should never be conducted on animals. Better to test such products on the people who might want to use them--they can consider it a free sample.

2. Genetically modified animals

ANSWER:

I suppose creating a GM animal falls into the same ethical category as experimenting on

them in any other way, so my feelings about this issue are the same as for any other type of animal research. Certainly GM animals are unnatural, but so is most of what we have done to the planet. That is neither here nor there. To be a human is to be "unnatural". The most controversial area for the future? If you rule out the area of GM humans (which isn't really to do with animals) then perhaps we'll find ourselves using GM to create animals more and more medically similar to ourselves, to make research on them more scientifically useful. There might come a point where our creations are so similar to us, mentally, that it gets harder to consider them any different from ourselves ethically. I can feel a sci-fi novel coming on...

3. Alternatives

ANSWER:

Sorry, I don't work in the field so I can't answer technical questions. As for who funds research into alternatives, that's a good question. Unless animal experiments are banned or legally controlled, private firms would have no incentive. Perhaps legislation should require that a certain proportion of all money spent on animal-based research should be earmarked for research into alternatives. Sounds a bit unwieldy, though, doesn't it?

4. Ethical issues

ANSWER:

My answer to Q.1 covers a lot of this. To say that animals have "rights" is patently absurd. A right is part of a socio-political construct, a social pact that involved the corollary of duties or responsibilities. Since no animal other than a human is able to understand and agree to take part in such a pact, to undertake duties as such, they cannot be said to have any rights in return. Rather, I think we should treat animals responsibly simply because we can. I believe no animal other than a human can exhibit compassion per se (though I'm happy to be proved wrong here). It would be foolish to expect a cat to be ethical enough not to toy with a mouse nor to hunt for creatures it does not need to eat. But humans can make such ethical decisions, and I think that this is reason enough to do so. Yes, I think the purpose of the research has a lot to do with whether it is acceptable. Research for cosmetic, or other patently unnecessary, products should never be conducted on animals.

5. The regulations

ANSWER:

I'm not really qualified to comment on this area.

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6: Providing information to the public

ANSWER:

It's always going to be hard for members of the public to understand the technicalities of whether a bit of research is justified. It would be a disaster to govern approval of research by public referendum: that's why we have a representative democracy. I guess it

should fall to an expert government agency to monitor this area. Labelling medicines? As in, "1,258 beagles died to bring you this pill"? I would have thought that, given that the beagles had already died, it would be a bit depressing if patients then refused to take the drug, but I guess if people demanded this sort of information it shouldn't be denied them.