

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.

Wendy Rooke, UK

What moral status do different animals have?

As humans, we have a huge bias in favour of our own species, and we are too often blind to the rights of other species because of our anthropocentric view of the World. Just because we deny rights to non-human animals does not mean that they do not have those rights, it means that we were wrong to deny them in the first place. Just as slave traders and owners were wrong to deny rights to slaves and just as the public were wrong to collude with that view and reap the benefits of that exploitation, I believe that we are wrong to undertake research involving animals simply because we can benefit from it.

As well as non-human animals having rights, we have a duty of care to captive species, just as a doctor has a duty of care to his or her patient. We should show to other animals the compassion that we show to vulnerable members of our own species. We should not exploit our position of power over them.

Future generations will look back on our experimentation on other animals with the horror with which we reflect on the atrocities committed by slave traders and the Nazis. Slave traders exaggerated and invented the differences between white-skinned people and black-skinned people in order to justify the subjugation of black-skinned slaves. The Nazis treated Jews with that same contempt. What we ought to have learnt from that shameful, racist past was that we should focus on the similarities, not the differences. Instead of viewing animals as non-human, we should treat them as fellow sentient beings capable of suffering and of experiencing a sense of well-being. We have been using the wrong delimiter. It shouldn't be human/non-human, but sentient/non-sentient.

Although altruism has been observed in non-human animals, I think it is safe to assume that animals would not consent to be experimented on. Consent with full understanding is the all-important issue and humans are the only ones capable of giving informed consent. Testing is already done on human volunteers, and I am sure that there is scope to extend that if necessary (e.g. by greater publicity such as is used by the National Blood Service). After all, it is humans that are the ones who derive the benefit from most research. Other animals are sentient and non-consenting; therefore, it is immoral to perform any experiment on any non-human animal.

What we should be aiming for is to phase out the breeding of domesticated and non-native animals so that eventually there are no captive animals, only wild, native species living autonomously without human interference. That would negate the need for further development of veterinary medicines or procedures. That is both logical and achievable, although it would be a gradual process, which would take several decades to see through.

This all begs the question: do we experiment on animals because it is right or because we can?

How can we know how much animals suffer?

I believe that the most basic, survival-dependent sensations such as fear, pain, hunger, thirst and tiredness are experienced in a very similar way by all animals, human and non-human alike. These physical and psychological sensations have to be sufficiently intense to motivate the individual to take the appropriate action to survive.

Non-human animals are continually found to be more sentient than we had previously given them credit for. For example, many claimed that fish do not experience pain, but it has recently been proved that they do. Natural history programs increasingly reveal the finer side to animal nature and we see that non-human animals not only have complex social lives, but that some have been observed to exhibit behaviour that can be described as cultural. Confining an animal to a cage without company or adequate mental or physical stimulation causes huge psychological damage from loneliness, fear, boredom, a lack of control, helplessness and despair. The captive environment is no substitute for the natural environment that animals evolved to survive in; therefore, laboratory animals suffer from their captivity whether they are actually used in procedures or not.

Although a fish dangling from a hook can't tell us that it is in pain, a miserable-looking gorilla caged in a zoo that it is depressed, a dog yipping in its sleep and wagging its paws that it is dreaming or a bird drinking from a puddle that it is thirsty, actions speak louder than words and I think we should let empathy and common sense lead our judgement of these things rather than resort to cruel science. You don't have to communicate verbally with someone to gauge how they feel; there are plenty of other clues. I think we are so wrong to work on the assumption that a non-human animal doesn't experience pain and suffering as we do until scientifically proven otherwise. That makes monsters of us.

To deny human-like emotions and experiences in other animals certainly makes it easier for us to exploit them. After all, white-skinned people once claimed that black-skinned people didn't suffer in the same way. Jane Goodall was frowned upon for naming the non-human primates that she was studying and for ascribing to them human emotions, which is a prime example of our fear of acknowledging the sentience of non-human species and all the consequences that entails. We have underestimated the sentience of non-human species because it has been to our advantage to do so; therefore, it doesn't necessarily follow that our perception and treatment of them have been correct. I believe that where there is any doubt about sentience, we should give the benefit of the doubt and assume sentience. We should certainly not do experiments to find out!

Can we justify making animals suffer?

If non-human animals are sufficiently like us for experiments on them to be relevant, surely they are sufficiently like us for the act of experimenting on them to be unethical. And if they are not sufficiently like us to warrant the same basic rights as us, how can experiments on them be relevant to the human condition?

I don't think we should expect a cure for everything, especially if the price is too high, and I think that animal exploitation and suffering is too high a price to pay. To seek a cure for one's own ills at the cost of suffering to another is certainly not commendable, let alone ethical. Illness is unfortunate, but to deliberately inflict it on others in search of a cure is immoral. After all, we would learn a great deal if we experimented on non-consenting humans such as those with significant brain damage or those who have forfeited certain rights by committing serious crimes, but that is deemed unethical. Is it really such a huge leap to extend that protection to vulnerable sentient beings that are non-human? I believe that to strive to reduce human suffering and promote our well-being is laudable only when it does not impinge on non-human animals.

We have to accept that if you can't go there without animal experimentation, then don't go there. A ban on research involving non-human animals could be compensated for in numerous ways and so avoid the devastatingly negative effect on human welfare that many fear. The compensations include more intensive efforts to develop alternatives; increased use of epidemiological studies, the number of post mortems performed, organ donation, donation of cadavers to medical schools and the use of human volunteers; better prevention of illness; wider use of more traditional therapies (e.g. herbalism, homeopathy, acupuncture); enhanced morality and a reduction in net suffering.

Where there is a will, there is a way. If research of non-human animals were banned tomorrow, what stronger motivation could scientists have for developing alternatives? After all, necessity is the mother of invention. To date, far too few resources have been invested in alternatives to experiments involving non-human animals, so the government and pharmaceutical and chemical companies need to correct that.

Prevention is better than cure; therefore, we should do far more to prevent disease rather than focus so much on the cure. The major medical problems of our modern society (obesity, diabetes, cancer and heart disease) are closely linked to diet and lifestyle, so there is huge benefit to be gained from health promotion and the government would do well to put more resources into it. The cost of prevention is far less than that of treatment, and that's not just in financial terms.

It amazes me that so little is taught to medical students on human nutrition. We are what we eat and if we get our diet wrong, ill health is bound to follow. This suggests that human nutrition should play a prominent role in medical training.

Sleep can prevent and alleviate many physical and psychological problems, yet its healing powers are greatly undervalued; largely because it is not fully understood and

because no one can make money out of it. People should be encouraged to rest and recuperate when they are ill, not take drugs to keep going regardless. That often leads to worse problems later on. We need to be more tuned in to what our bodies tell us. The advertising of quick cures ought be banned and public health advice about the healing powers of rest strongly promoted.

Pharmaceutical companies make their money selling us cures for our ills not from preventing us from becoming ill in the first place and so it is a quest for profit that drives so much research on non-human animals. The National Health Service is on its knees trying to provide treatment for us all. As well as doing far more to prevent illness developing in the first place, we should go back to using more traditional therapies that have been tried and tested over generations of humans. There is a place for modern medicine, but not the one it holds now. It shouldn't override more traditional therapies, but complement them. I think we have lost perspective and put modern medicine on a pedestal where it does not belong.

Many of the products tested on non-human animals are just me-too products, where small changes have been made to the formula to increase sales with a 'new, improved' product or so that a different company can also exploit the market. Such products are totally unnecessary and so is the animal testing associated with them.

If you look at the broader picture, research using non-human animals does us more harm than good. Experimentation on other animals degrades us as a species by impoverishing us morally. A more compassionate attitude to other animals can only improve our attitudes towards other humans. Desensitization to the suffering of non-human animals brings us one step closer to being insensitive to human feelings and so to the risk of human against human atrocities. Also, the shame of animal experimentation has a negative impact on the quality of life of countless people like myself who are sensitive to the plight of the millions of fellow sentient beings used in research and the injustice of it. These costs should be given due consideration when the costs and benefits of using non-human animals are considered.

The suffering of millions upon millions of non-human animals sacrificed in the name of research is not balanced by the suffering spared humans as a result. I believe that it has added to the net suffering in the World, not subtracted from it. Furthermore, the questions are never ending, and so too are the animal experiments. Each discovery generates new questions for investigation, so there is no end point, just a continual cycle of experimentation to find answers, which in turn create yet more questions.

Those who experiment on non-human animals can be blinded to ethics by habitude, personal ambition and money; therefore, it is those furthest from it and have nothing at stake who are best able to judge whether it is ethical.

Finally, at the age of 17 I watched my father die of cancer, but even the experience of losing someone that I loved hasn't made me believe that animal experiments are justified.