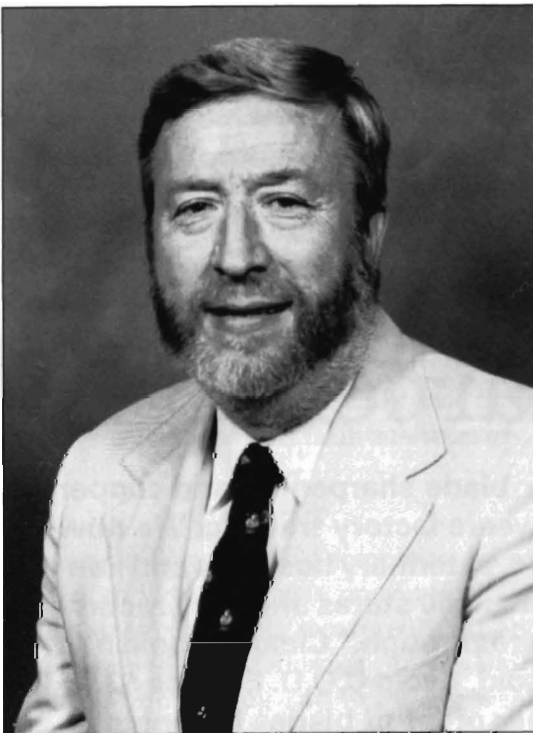


Malcontents disillusioned with science are unknowing beneficiaries of animal research as members of the healthiest generation in history.

Animal Rights Philosophy



* Adrian Morrison, a graduate of Cornell's College of Veterinary Medicine, is both Professor of Behavioral Neuroscience and Senior Research Fellow at the University of Pennsylvania College of Veterinary Medicine.

Veterinary medicine stands opposed to the concept of animal rights, although a number will readily contest this statement. Opposition comes from a misunderstanding of the veterinarian's role in society and a lack of knowledge of what the animal rights philosophy demands. Properly understood, it is diametrically opposed to the Veterinarian's Oath, which enjoins us to "participate in the advancement of medical knowledge." We cannot do this and meet the demands of the animal rights movement.

This essay will parade the realities of a movement that a leading conservation writer described as "elevated ignorance about the natural world almost to the level of a philosophical principle,"¹ focusing primarily on its injunctions against the use of animals in biomedical research.

Although experimental medicine has encountered antivivisectionist sentiment throughout its history, publication of Australian philosopher Peter Singer's book, *Animal Liberation*,² sparked development of a movement that extends its concerns into any human activity using animals.

Verses Biological Reality

Why the power of this book? Goodwin³ answers, "...there began to evolve in the mid-1960s, a kind of demoralization or nihilism concerning the human condition; in the USA, part of this shift reflected a post-Vietnam, post-Watergate mistrust of society's establishments and institutions." There is also a climate of cultural relativism that allows any idea to lay equal claim for attention. He could have added that these disaffected individuals, disillusioned with science in particular, are unknowing beneficiaries of animal research as members of the healthiest generation in history⁴ and well-removed from a dependence on animals for their livelihood. For example, only 2% of our population have an association with farming while 25% did pre-World War II.⁵

Stimulating the increased sensitivity toward animals is the aforementioned philosophical thought, which was developed by just a few individuals. That thought forced the issue. They have analyzed the ethics of using animals for our need. And, their verdict is that it is unjust; that it is wrong.

Two major philosophers of the movement

are Singer and Tom Regan from North Carolina. Both have found our "exploitation" of animals to be wrong. Interestingly, they have reached that conclusion for different, even somewhat antagonistic reasons because they argue from two distinct traditions in moral philosophy.⁶ Let us look at their arguments, which fail to convince for one main reason: they are too far beyond the bounds of common sense.

Singer titled his book *Animal Liberation* and not *Animal Rights*, for rights to him are established by law and, therefore, are arbitrary. His argument is based on the idea that actions should do the most good for as many individuals and the least harm as possible. This point of view is called utilitarianism.

But, Singer has added a novel dimension, which drives the animal rights movement. He includes animals when he writes that we must give equal consideration of interests to individuals. Not to do so is evidence of "speciesism," a term first coined by another philosopher who objects to the use of animals in research, Richard Ryder. "Speciesism" is a take-off on racism and is accorded equal

moral weight with racism. Many would argue, though, that racism is based on no legitimate mental or physical differences among humans; while decisions to use other species for various species are in accordance with fundamental biological imperatives.

Singer focuses on one characteristic that animals share with people: their capacity to suffer. He echoes the concern of the early 19th Century, philosopher Jeremy Bentham, who stated: "The question is not, 'Can they reason?,' nor 'Can they talk?,' but 'Can they suffer?'" It is this "vital characteristic that gives a being the right to equal consideration," in Singer's eyes.⁷

Minimizing or eliminating pain is a good thing, of course. But pain is a part of the everyday world. Animals inflict pain on other animals for a good purpose, which is to survive. Should we deny ourselves the ability to survive through using animals to solve medical problems? Singer essentially says we should, "... if a single experiment could cure a major disease, that experiment would be justifiable."

However, he adds, "Since a speciesist bias, like a racist bias, is unjustifiable, an experiment cannot be justifiable unless the experiment is so important that the use of a retarded human being would also be justifiable."⁸ He states further, "I do not believe it could *never* be justifiable to experiment on a retarded human. If it were really possible to save many lives by an experiment that would take just one life, and there were *no other way* those lives could be saved; it might be right to do the experiment."⁹

With readers' umbrage at the idea of experimentation on retarded humans, Singer is setting the reader up to accept the statement that "not one tenth of one per cent of the experiments now being performed on animals would fall into this category."¹⁰ Of course not, one would have to be mightily ignorant of the process of science to use this tactic to condemn the use of animals in research. To support his philosophy (and his cause) Singer trivializes a number of research projects in one chapter, "Tools for Research," which is full of errors and half-

truths.¹¹ By so doing, he makes certain that maximizing good comes out in favor of animals, where enough good cannot come from trivial experiments to outweigh the suffering of animals.

One might argue that Singer lacks training in science and thus misrepresents science out of ignorance. There may be some truth to this, for he clearly has no understanding of what makes a grant application stand out sufficiently to attract monetary support. He assumes "a proposal for a new experiment with animals is something that the administrators of research funds will be ready to support, if they have in the past supported other experiments on animals. New non-animal-using methods will seem less familiar and will be less likely to receive support."¹²

In fact, it is the quality of the applicant's ideas and the most appropriate approach (animal or nonanimal) that win funding. And it is scientists, not administrators, who rank proposals for funding. It is silly to think that scientists serving on review boards, who are trained to look for the clearest findings using the most refined methods available, would reject new approaches out of hand.

I think it is telling that, after questioning the judgement and good sense of the research establishment, Singer does not hesitate to fall back on its authority to support one of his arguments. In responding to the hypothetical suggestion that we would have to extend our consideration to plants to avoid being speciesists because they might suffer pain as well, thereby condemning ourselves to starvation, he responds, "Although a recent popular book, *The Secret Life of Plants*, claimed that plants have all sorts of remarkable abilities, including the ability to read people's minds, the most striking experiments cited in the book were not carried out at serious research institutions, and more recent attempts by researchers in major universities to repeat the experiments have failed to obtain any positive results."¹³ Note the convenient inconsistency with his earlier views on the good judgement of scientific researchers.



This young rat, being held by Iowa State University Laboratory Technician Jackie Jens, is one of the many animals in the lab animal resources department available for study.

While many adherents and opponents of the animal rights movement assume that Singer views humans and animals as moral equals, this is not so. Singer states, "The preference in normal cases, for saving a human life over the life of an animal when a choice *has* to be made is a preference based on the characteristics that normal humans have, and not on the mere fact that they are members of our own species who lack the characteristics of normal humans. This is why when we consider members of our own species who lack the characteristics of normal humans, we can no longer say that their lives are always to be preferred to those of other animals."¹⁴

Singer's apparent lack of compassion for his fellow humans is astounding. Yet, again, ignorance of science may be at play here. It would be next to impossible for scientists "... to save many lives by an experiment that would take just one life..."¹⁰ Much human misery has been averted when one considers just the past four decades, thanks to the early experiments using thousands of rats and monkeys that resulted in a vaccine against the polio virus in the late 1950s.

Those consigned to iron lungs for years because the polio virus paralyzed their respiratory muscles are no longer in evidence and medicine has consigned those iron lungs to museums.

Unfortunately, other things cause paralysis, most notably trauma. Each year, about 10,000 people are paralyzed by spinal cord injury, and the care of the 200,000 surviving costs 10 billion dollars per year.¹⁵ Because of the many, many experiments designed to determine what prevents nerve cells from regenerating and what toxic products are released after injury, eventually, we will succeed in keeping people out of wheelchairs. Using the principle of utilitarianism, that is the greater good.

Although philosopher Tom Regan, author of *The Case for Animal Rights*,¹⁶ comes at the question from a different philosophical tradition, he, like Singer, crusades against the use of animals. But his book is not a political tract which, to a large extent, *Animal Liberation* is. Regan spends very little time pointing out the cruel uselessness of animal experimentation because, unlike Singer's, Regan's philosophical stance does not require

him to stack the deck against biomedical research or other uses of animals. He believes that animals' lives have an inherent value that proscribes our harming them. Because they are conscious and goal-oriented, they may be regarded as being "subjects of a life," - the quality that gives them the inherent value upon which we cannot trample. Thus, Regan would leave us helpless against the forces of Nature, to fight disease and deformity through research on experimental animals. One finds the following in *The Case for Animal Rights*: "If that [abandoning animal research] means that there are some things we cannot learn, then so be it... We have then no basic right against nature [because nature is not a moral agent] not to be harmed by those natural diseases we are heir to."¹⁷

Like Singer, Regan does not say animals and humans are equal in every way and is not absolutist in his prohibition against using animals in biomedical research—he just makes it nearly impossible to do so. Although he argues that animals are equal to humans in their right not to be harmed arbitrarily, humans have much greater prospects for various satisfactions so that if a choice were to be made between saving an animal's or a normal human's life, the human would be chosen. Although, one senses the severely mentally handicapped would fare no better with Regan than with Singer.

What about biomedical research, where the connections between harming animals and saving human lives are decidedly more indirect than one-on-one situations? Regan says, "Not even a single rat is to be treated as if the animal's value were reducible to his *possible utility* relative to the interests of others, which is what we would be doing if we intentionally harmed the rat on the grounds that this *just might* 'prove' something, *just might* 'yield' a 'new insight,' *just might* produce 'benefits' for others."¹⁸

But, is there any *significant* area of life so simple that cause-and-effect can be assigned so easily? Regan really leaves researchers no room to maneuver to engage in animal research, no more than does Singer. Accord-

ing to them, for all practical purposes, animals are the equal of humans.

One can respond to these views as a philosopher or as a biologist. I am not trained as the former so I will present the thoughts and arguments of others (although they are certainly mine as well, as a "common sense" philosopher) before giving you my own views as a biologist.

Only few philosophers have bothered to respond to Singer and Regan. For many, the arguments presented in a book¹⁹ by Michael A. Fox, a Canadian philosopher, are the easiest to follow. In one chapter, Fox provides an accurate picture of experiments and their significance in advancing our understanding of disease, illustrating how these experiments have been misrepresented in animal-rights literature. (Please read the paper by Cohen.²⁰)

The basic philosophical argument is that humans are unique in so many ways. Ways such as, brain complexity, sophisticated use of language (consider Shakespeare's plays versus the human-taught sign language of apes), use of sophisticated tools (even tools which make other objects, such as automobiles), which lead us to consider even more ways that we are different from other animals that would justify anointing ourselves as "special."

What are they?

We have a concept of ourselves that goes well beyond a chimp's ability to "ape" itself in a mirror. We can see ourselves "as independent individuals with our own integrity, sense of purpose, and worth. We have a concept of our own lives—their origin, duration, self-guided direction, and terminus in death—of world history, and of the limitless reaches of time and space beyond the self... Humans are the beings who because of their acute sense of self experience anxiety, guilt, despair, shame, remorse, internal conflict, pride, hope, triumph and so many other emotion-laden states."²¹

Only with such capacities can a being be judged cruel or humane in its actions. My neighbor's beautiful, extraordinarily friendly cat playing a chimpunk to death on my



With injections of performance-enhancing drugs, this greyhound helps investigators at Iowa State University to better understand racing chemistry.

terrace cannot be judged cruel. But what would you think if my neighbor was to do the same? This brings us to the idea of killing only for need and as painlessly as possible. For a human, anything else is cruel.

I am sure that you, the only animal capable of reading these words, would recognize that you are bound by certain rules of behavior. You may have never thought in these terms, but you are a member of a “moral community.” You are a moral being because you can make and follow rules. You can appreciate the consequences of behavior outside the rules that have been established by the communities in which you live. You are an autonomous being – “...one that is critically self-aware and has the capacity to manipulate concepts in complex ways, use a sophisticated language, reflect, plan, de-

liberate, choose and accept responsibility for acting.”²¹

You can recognize your obligations to others and to the laws of the government that protects you. You can have rights because you are an autonomous being capable of recognizing the rights of others. Animals are not autonomous beings in the sense mentioned above and can certainly not recognize obligations to others in their own instinctual drive to stay alive, unless we consider their raising of young as something beyond a biological imperative.

If we say that animals cannot have rights in the sense that people—autonomous beings—do, why do we have an obligation to treat them humanely? Fox suggests that we have the knowledge to empathize with their pain and recognize our evolutionary relat-

edness to them. We also acknowledge our dependence upon them for our personal well-being and our success as a species. He notes that it is in our self-interest to treat them well for additional reasons: they may become vicious and turn on us; senseless slaughter may disrupt the ecosystem; and unhealthy, ill-treated animals are less useful animals. But, perhaps the best reasons of all are that cruelty to animals demeans us and it is beneath human dignity.

Before I go on, though, I have a confession: Professor Fox has retracted the excellent arguments I have presented to you, although I am still in full agreement. He is now committed to the animal rights position. Indeed, he recanted only a year after the publication of his book in 1986. According to Fox, a radically feminist friend was more persuasive in her views.²²

I remember thinking, upon learning of our philosopher's "betrayal," that we scientists who had exulted in having our own champion got what we deserved. Why did we think we needed someone else to think for us? Had we really not considered our ethical position before the animal rightists came along to challenge us? I realized then I did not really need a philosopher to tell me what to think.

I believe that humans are more worthy of my concern than animals. If not, I would not have spent a career using the latter in research. I do not offer sophisticated philosophical arguments, yet, they are arguments any reasonable person can understand.

Although I come from a tradition, which gives a special place to humans in Nature while teaching that cruelty to animals is wrong, I have realized that my thinking comes as much from my background as a biologist as a general observer of the world around me. From this perspective, our use of animals is natural and not the heinous activity that the animal-rights movement announces it to be. (See also the excellent article by Ott²³ for a more extensive treatment of these ideas.)

Not killing animals is an unnatural act. For a number of species, it is out of step with Nature. Many species inflict their "will" on

one or more others. The others serve as prey. We call this the balance of Nature. We are constructed to gain nutrients from a variety of sources, including animals. A quick, informed look at the structure of our teeth informs us how much we resemble the omnivorous pig. Further examination of the rest of our digestive tract will demonstrate a similarity to the even more carnivorous dogs. A human can certainly live as a vegan (just as one can live as a celibate) but only with much more care and attention than Nature had intended.

Using animals in biomedical research satisfies two of our needs as a species but presents a special ethical problem as well. If an experiment requires that animals be killed (and many do), there is no ethical problem if the number killed is appropriate for the purpose and the method used provides for a death as quick and pain-free as possible. I hasten to add, though, that I do not minimize emotional cost. That can be considerable. For example, after speaking of these issues at one university, one of my hosts told me over lunch of how he felt on the "bad" days when he had to kill many rats to perform biochemical assays on their livers. We, who study animals in behavioral experiments over long stretches of time, find it heart-rending at times to kill these animals in order to do the necessary examinations of their brains.

The ethical problem comes when animals have discomfort or real pain for extended periods. We move beyond the activity that characterizes many of Nature's creatures to one that is uniquely human: inflicting pain of varying degrees in order to learn. Most frequently, the pain is a by-product of the inquiry, such as, experimental surgery to develop new operations or to implant measuring devices. But, in special cases, pain results from the study of pain, itself. This is a problem with which both researchers and society must wrestle.

What species-specific needs does biomedical research satisfy?

First, we are a very intelligent, highly curious, inventive species. It would require

unnatural constraints to prevent our exploring the uses of the world in every way imaginable. Not only do we seek to improve our health by research using animals among other means, but we seek various ways of enjoyment, which can also include animals. Thus, we play at rodeo, fishing, going to zoos and circuses.

At the same time, we sense our obligations to animals and debate the appropriateness of any number of their uses and the way those uses are carried out. We pay attention to animal welfare as we pursue our interests. The irony here is that the animal rightist argues that every other species should be free to pursue its interests free of our interference. Yet, we are held to a different standard—to our detriment.

Second, there is the struggle to stay alive and protect one's own. The value we place on this personal struggle stands out very clearly when we award medals for heroism. For example, the Congressional Model of Honor winner is revered for a selfless act to protect not his family but his buddies at great risk - sometimes losing his own life in the process.

Animal rightists value their lives very much. Though they do not use animals for food and clothing (in an effort not to exploit them), not one, particularly among the leaders, has been principled enough to refuse all treatment derived from medical research.²⁴

In an abstract way, biomedical researchers engage in an activity designed to protect their own. Through our intelligence we can project our lives well into the future so that taking many rats' or dogs' lives because we can foresee a benefit to ourselves or our progeny seems no different from a cat's killing several animals to gain energy to feed her young. Both activities meet the needs of survival. Viewed this way, our intelligence makes us no more culpable. To conclude otherwise, one must ignore the power of natural impulses and the realities of Nature.

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