Whose Rights are Right?
The Debate Over Animal Rights in Research

Brianna Blunck
Animal research has been conventionally practiced under the notion that it has played a vital role in scientific and medical advances, but our use of animals should not continue without periods of reflection on the morality and necessity of their use. George Yancy, PhD and professor of philosophy at Emory University, in his talk Teaching Dangerously, spoke regarding white privilege. He called upon people to enter what he referred to as “danger zones,” where people become un-sutured or open to engage in discourse that, while uncomfortable, would help bring rise to awareness of issues so embedded that one might not realize the extensity of. I, analogous to Yancy, call upon people to enter the “danger zone” of the ethical consideration and its implications for the use of animals in research. By applying care ethics and features from the Belmont Report, it is evident that we need to evaluate our mainstream stance on the permissibility of animals used in research. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) is an animal rights organization that is often criticized for its extreme marketing and communication tactics. However, I believe PETA’s messages positively force the public into danger zones regarding the plight of animals for our usage. Undercover videos reveal the gruesome scenes of animals being electrocuted, strangled, skinned alive, confined to tiny cages, etc. “in the food, animal, experimentation, entertainment, clothing, and pet-trade industries” (“Animal Issues”). Unfortunately, videos and advertisements like PETA’s are often disregarded because they reveal violent processes on animals that often raise empathy towards the animals that go into our products and entertainment. Society at large prefers to maintain a considerable distance between the living animal and the finished product.

During the spring of 2016 I joined the 3% of the U.S. populations of vegans. Vegans do not use any product that is derived from an animal or is tested on one. I do not consume meat (including fish) or dairy, wear leather or suede, or wear any product tested on an animal, such as makeups. Prior to becoming a vegan, I was a vegetarian for two years. My decision to become a vegetarian was driven by gaining knowledge of the atrocities in the meat industry through organization’s like PETA. My decision to become a vegan was driven by my desire to reach a level of consistent ethical consideration for all animals in all the facets of my life. I personally believe in condemning the usage of animals at all levels, but I understand that it would be unrealistic for all humans to give up engrained lifestyles. However, I argue against the use of animals in research because I believe that positive change for an increase in animal rights in this field is possible.

We should bring to fruition various premises that call for equal consideration of all species by employing philosophical ideologies. Arguments for animal rights are rooted in the application of virtue ethics under the criteria of sentience. Aristotle’s model of virtue ethics is exclusive to humans because the distinct capacities of knowledge and understanding of virtue that humans have are what give he believes gives moral worth. Claims for animal welfare are derived from the premise that the capacity for animals to feel pain -their sentience- gives them value and necessitates their moral consideration. Tom Regan, an American philosopher who specializes in animal rights, argues that a being’s usefulness can never outweigh its value and gives living things the right “to be treated in ways that do[es] not reduce [them] to the status of things” (Regan 490). Utilitarianism is one of the most common theoretical perspectives used to undermine the argument against the use of animals in research. Utilitarianism states that “actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reserves of happiness” (Mill Chapter 2). Those who adhere to speciesism, the philosophy that
nonhuman animals are available for humans unrestricted use, apply utilitarianism by promoting drug testing on animals rather than humans. However, the sentence criterion, “implies that the interests of certain nonhuman animals ought to be accorded the same weight as is accorded to the interests of human beings” (Singer, “All Animals are Equal” 477).

Research can take several forms, but specifically field research and controlled experiments utilize animal subjects. Field research, or ethnography, is regularly practiced on animals by researchers observing an animal’s natural habitat. This research is critical to understanding the patterns of animal behavior in the wild. There is no debate over disclosure of the researcher’s role because the only way to conduct ethnography in the wild is covertly. On the other hand, controlled experiments are regularly practiced on animals in drug, food, and cosmetic tests. The same ethical concerns for human involvement in controlled experiments should apply to animals.

Countering the claims of benefits from using animals in research is evidence that animal tests do not always reliably predict results in human beings. A 2013 study published by Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America found that despite being successful in animal tests, nearly 150 clinical trials to reduce inflammation in critically ill patients failed (Junhee, Seok et al.). An additional study conducted in 2013 and published in the Archives of Toxicology stated that, “the low predictivity of animal experiments in research areas allowing direct comparisons of mouse versus human data puts strong doubt on the usefulness of animal data as key technology to predict human safety” (Leist). Instead, alternative testing methods now exist that can replace the need for animals. There are commercially available products that mimic human skin by creating sheets of human skin cells in vitro, which can produce more relevant results than animal testing (Rogers). Computer models, such as virtual reconstructions, “can predict the toxicity of substances without invasive experiments on animals” (Watts). Thomas Hartung, professor of evidence-based toxicology at Johns Hopkins University, argues for alternatives to animal testing because "we are not 70 kg rats" (Humane Society International). For the reasons explained above, experimenters might fail to follow clinical equipoise, the notion that other available treatments should be used instead if they cause less harm.

People often confront me with the Desert Island Argument: if I was on a deserted island, would I eat meat to survive? In extreme situations, yes. In relation to research, I understand that it is a lot more difficult to never use an animal in fields such as academia and medicine. A solution is to apply care ethics, which places human obligation to animals as much as we decide to incorporate them into our lives. Animal research inflicts more pain and suffering on animals through controlled experiments than what they would endure in the wild, so our duty is to remove that suffering as best as we can. Rolston takes the question of “Can they suffer” and narrows it to “Is the human-inflicted suffering excessive to natural suffering?” (Rolston 61). The Belmont Report summarizes ethical principles and guidelines that pertain to human subjects used in research. Principles include respect for persons, beneficence, and justice as they apply to informed consent, assessing risks and benefits, and the selection of subjects. Features of the Belmont Report should be considered when using animals in research even though animals are not subject to the concerns of anonymity or confidentiality. “Respect for persons” entails acknowledging humans as autonomous agents. To respect animals would require acknowledging
nonhumans as more than just materials. Beneficence is the obligation to make efforts to serve “well-being,” which includes minimizing harm and maximizing benefits, and should be applied when using animals. Justice requires that careful consideration be included in the fairness of choosing individuals and groups for research. If animals are worthy of equal consideration, we must reflect on why we choose one species over another for our research?

To proceed with any research involving human participation, informed consent is required from the participant. He or she must be considered a reasonable volunteer, without the forces of coercion, undue influence, or unjustifiable pressure acting on them. If a human wants to stop the research, he or she can speak up and say so. Animals are not given the choice on whether they want to begin or end participating in a study, but I am sure if their cages were open they would try to escape.

Because I am vegan I come from a rhetorical position. It is easier for me, as an individual, to remain unfaltering on the side that argues against the use of animals. To expect the same resolute following of a vegan lifestyle on a larger population would be impossible on several assertions. There are “Desert Island Argument” exceptions, where animals might need to be used. The role of animals in accordance to humans is an ethical debate that is seeded in different beliefs regarding the worth of animals. To reconcile our usage our positions with animals requires the application of care ethics.
Works Cited


Leist, Marcel and Hartung, Thomas, "Inflammatory Findings on Species Extrapolations: Humans Are Definitely No 70-kg Mice," Archives of Toxicology, 2013.


