

REVIEW

Commentary:

Can Animal Researchers and Their Supporters Engage in Useful Dialogue with Animal "Protectionists"?

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The authors argue that the religious fervor and dishonesty that characterize the leaders of the animal rights/liberation movement preclude useful dialogue with them or their adherents by members of the scientific community on issues related to animal research.

The suggestion has been made frequently that animal research–animal rights/liberation issues could be resolved if the members of the opposing camps would simply engage in a frank and open exchange of views and ideas. Many of the advocates of such exchanges believe that by engaging in dialogue the polarized parties could arrive at some sort of "middle ground" position that would be more or less mutually satisfactory. This belief is based on an inaccurate assumption and misinformation about the issues involved and the motivations of the animal "protectionists." At this juncture, it should be emphasized that all members of animal "protection" organizations are not cast from the same mold. Indeed, Jasper and Nelkin (1) have described three categories of animal protectionists:

1. Absolutists advocate that all use of animals by humans must stop immediately. Parenthetically, Galvin and Herzog (2) referred to the absolutists as fundamentalists.
2. Pragmatists believe that animals deserve to have certain rights, but they recognize that some use of animals by humans is necessary for the foreseeable future.
3. Welfarists are concerned about animal well-being and are not necessarily sympathetic with agenda of the animal rightists/liberationists.

One of the assumptions of the proponents of dialogue is that the views and objections of animal rights/liberation (AR/L) advocates represents one pole in a continuum, whereas the beliefs and practices of animal research sup-

porters are at the other extreme. This assumption is erroneous because the extreme position of the AR/L philosophy maintains that the use of animals by humans for any purpose cannot be morally justified and must cease immediately (1,2). The less extreme position of the pragmatists holds that although a limited amount of animal use by humans may be unavoidable in the immediate future, such use should be strictly regulated and then terminated as soon as possible.

The opposite extreme of these positions of the AR/L advocates is that our use of animals for our own benefit raises no moral questions whatsoever, and that there should be no regulation on any human usage or treatment of animals. Clearly, few if any supporters or practitioners of animal-based research subscribe to this extreme view. In fact, as was first emphasized by Horton (3), it is the philosophy of the animal research community that occupies the moderate or middle ground of the continuum. The vast majority of members of the biomedical research community believe that although the "exploitation" of one species by another is not a rational topic for moral consideration (because such use is a fact of biology—even plants and microbes "exploit" other species), *how* animals are used by humans is subject to moral consideration and should be regulated appropriately (4).

At the annual meeting of the National Association for Biomedical Research that was held in Washington, DC in June of 1995, members of several animal "protection" organizations were invited to present their views. The invited participants included Jane Goodall of the Jane Goodall Institute, Wayne Pacelle of the Humane Society of the United States, and Henry Spira of Animal Rights International. The purpose of this program was to educate members of the biomedical research community about the views and positions of the opposition, and to initiate a dialogue. Although some of the meeting's participants may have been enlightened by hearing the presentations of the animal "protectionists," we are doubtful about whether any meaningful dialogues emerged from this conference.

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The position of the majority of individuals in the animal research community is consistent with the views of the animal welfarists, and we have made substantial progress in improving the standards of welfare, care, and use of laboratory animals in recent years with their support and encouragement. Useful dialogue with some of the pragmatists might be possible, but we are not aware of any examples of that. However, it is extremely unlikely that anything useful would be derived from attempting to engage in discussion with the absolutists, who hold such extreme—and uncompromising—views, or with many of the pragmatists.

During the fall semester of 1988, we attempted to establish a dialogue with local AR/L advocates in the San Francisco Bay Area. Several faculty members on our campus who do research with cats had been targeted by animal activists, who conducted a persistent smear campaign on the researchers. We naively thought that if we could arrange some opportunities for open communication, some of them at least would become aware that their leaders were grossly misrepresenting the truth about the use of animals in research in general, and about their use (and alleged neglect and abuse) on our campus in particular. Accordingly, we arranged a series of seminars on various aspects of human–animal relations and on the animal rights/research issue. The first speaker in this series was Steven Sapontzis, an animal rights advocate and Professor of Philosophy at Hayward State University, Hayward, CA, who described the moral arguments of AR/L philosophers, which are reviewed in detail in his book (5). Other participants in the series included Walter Howard, Professor Emeritus of Wildlife Biology at the University of California, Davis, who presented his views on how the AR/L philosophy is inconsistent with the realities of biology (6); Harold Markowitz of San Francisco State University, who discussed means of promoting the welfare of captive animals (7,8); and Dale McCullough, Professor of Forestry at Berkeley, whose topic was the impact of hunting on deer populations (9).

After each seminar, members of the audience were invited to attend a social with refreshments to discuss the material covered in the lecture. After the first seminar, about a dozen AR/L supporters (out of about 50 in the audience) attended the social along with an equal number of animal researchers. All participants engaged in often animated discussion in small groups for over an hour. We were encouraged by this and looked forward to further discussions after subsequent seminars. After the second lecture, however, only three of the AR/L advocates attended the social, and thereafter none of them participated, although fair numbers continued to attend the seminars.

In retrospect, it should have been obvious to us after the first social that any dialogue with the activists would not be fruitful. The AR/L advocates clung to their beliefs with a religious fervor, even though we showed them several lines

of evidence that allegations made by the leading figures in the field were untrue. This refractoriness to the truth on their part was again demonstrated to us by more recent events.

Several years ago the leader of an animal “protection” organization that has its headquarters near San Francisco requested that our university release the necropsy reports on animals that had died in the vivaria or in research laboratories by means other than by intentional killing for experimental purposes. Seven targeted investigators in particular were selected for this inquiry, including one of us (C.S.N.). The objective of the search was to uncover evidence of abuse or neglect that resulted in animals dying unintentionally, or in animals that had to be “euthanized” because of abuse and/or neglect.

Our university attempted to protect the targeted principal investigators (PIs) from potential personal harassment by agreeing to release the necropsy reports after deleting the names of the PIs and the species of animal covered by each report. A few of the PIs were using “exotic” animals (e.g., ground squirrels or spotted hyenas), and so in those cases it would have been easy to identify the investigator if the species name was included on the document. Although the courts expressed concern about the possibility of harassment of the targeted investigators, they ruled that the university must release unredacted reports to the animal rights group.

Unfortunately for the animal activists, they were not able to uncover any evidence of animal abuse or neglect from any of the reports. That fact did not deter them from making use of the documents, however. The activists simply fabricated evidence and then produced a pamphlet detailing eight alleged cases of animal abuse or neglect. Each of those descriptions contained either grossly distorted accounts of the information contained in a necropsy report or more subtle alterations of the reports, such as quotations out of context or insertion of words that changed meanings.

One of the most glaring distortions involved the death of an old male rhesus monkey. The activists’ pamphlet claimed that the necropsy report stated that the animal “underwent profound weight loss, losing almost half of its body weight in just one year. Found dead in cage.” This statement was presented as if it were a direct quote from the necropsy report. It implied that the monkey had been allowed to starve to death or that it had suffered from some serious illness that caused a catastrophic weight loss, an illness that must have been left untreated because the necropsy report contained neither information about an ailment that could have caused such emaciation nor any account of attempts to treat the animal for the malady.

In fact, what the necropsy report on that particular animal, Monkey #87062, showed was that he lost 5% of his body weight over a 1 yr period, not almost 50%, and it stated that the probable cause of death was heart failure associated with old age. The report also indicated that

the animal had been observed to be alert in its cage just two hours prior to being found dead there, hardly a sign of neglect. When we showed evidence of this kind of misrepresentation to other local animal activists, they were unfazed.

The dishonesty of some of the leading proponents and moralists of the AR/L movement has been well documented (see 10–14). Their distortions include rewriting medical history to support their bias, and misquoting authorities or quoting them out of context. Honesty is a fundamental requirement for meaningful dialogue to occur between individuals of opposing views. Since this basic need is lacking on the part of many AR/L advocates, and a majority of their adherents refuse to recognize this problem, it is pointless to consider further attempts at communicating with the fundamentalists or most of the pragmatists.

The above conclusion does not mean that members of the animal research community should remain cloistered in their laboratories while ignoring these issues, nor should the few of our number who have ventured out to educate the public about the practice and consequences of animal research abandon their efforts. It is still possible to have meaningful communication with animal welfarists (particularly about the “hijacking of the humane movement” by the AR/Ls; see 15) and with the public in general.

AR/L advocates are tireless in their quest to achieve their goals, and their efforts are well funded. Although many are now focusing their attacks on the fur industry (which they regard as a “soft” target) for fund-raising purposes, they are concentrating much of their efforts and

resources on the propagandizing of children in our schools. If this campaign of disinformation is not successfully countered by the animal research community, we can anticipate the passage of much more restrictive legislation on all aspects of animal acquisition and use in biomedical research within a few years, because the current crop of “brainwashed” youngsters will be of voting age early in the next century.

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