

Ethical aspects of animal experiments and the principle of solidarity

Karin Blumer

The question of the ethical acceptability of scientific animal experiments was first systematically discussed in philosophical ethics in the 1970s. The discussion was mainly triggered by the writings of the Australian philosopher Peter Singer, who laid the foundation for the new movement on animal protection with his 1976 work - *Animal Liberation*. Philosophy has been occupied for centuries with the question of man's responsibility for non-human life. Philosophers have used various theoretical approaches to address the complex theme of the relationship between animals and man.

In classical anthropocentrism, animals have no inherent value at all; this can now be regarded as out-dated. It was traditionally supported by such important philosophers as Aristoteles and Immanuel Kant, together with the Christian moral theologians. Its basic assumption is that only man is worth protection, as only man is a rational and reasonable being (or in the image of God). This led to the justified accusation of speciesism, first made by Jeremy Bentham in 1789. Bentham proved that this was egoistic group behaviour, as solely the membership of the biological species *Homo sapiens* served as the ground for justification. At least since the general acceptance of the theory of evolution in the mid 19th century, the thesis of man's biological uniqueness can no longer be maintained.

However, many other ethical positions on the relationship between animals and man are equally unsatisfactory. Thus, holism, which demands an independent right of existence for even mountains or rivers, suffers from its highly metaphysical premises,

which assume, for example, that nature is "animated". The Nobel Peace Prize winner Albert Schweitzer developed the concept of radical biocentrism, which includes all forms of life in the moral community. Although this appears plausible at first sight, it is based on an extremely deontological standard. It forbids the damage of all forms of life - whether animal, plant or bacterium - and thus places the active agent before irresolvable dilemmas.

Finally, pathocentrism, as propagated by Peter Singer and many other proponents of animal protection, is incapable of providing a clear proof as to why only animals with an intact central nervous system may possess an inherent moral value. What however is a much greater problem is the proposal by many pathocentrics that some animals should be declared to be "persons" and to refuse to accept the personality of some humans. Peter Singer has been particularly prominent on this issue. For him, great apes, whales and dolphins are certainly, and all other mammals very probably, persons, whereas newborn babies, persons with severe mental handicaps and comatose persons are degraded to "mere members of the species *Homo sapiens*".

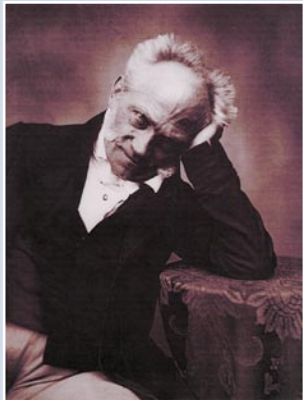
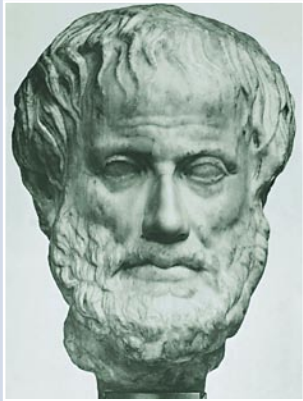
"Moderate biocentrism" or "moderate anthropocentrism" is a moral theory which might be widely acceptable and plausible these days. Both theories ascribe a moral status to all forms of life, although the binding inherent value of this increases with the position of the species on the evolutionary ladder (hierarchy of the organisms). Thus, for example, there would be more reason to protect the health of a dog than of a hamster or of a



Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965)

His radical biocentrism includes all living creatures in the moral order. According to this, harm to any form of life - whether animal, plant, parasite or bacterium - is forbidden.

An ethical balance



According to **Aristoteles** (384-322 B.C.) possess both a “vegetative” and an “animalistic” soul. They are capable of fulfilling their own needs in a deliberate manner, but cannot act reasonably. **Arthur Schopenhauer** (1788-1860) considered that animals possess the same characteristics as man. This means that they are capable of suffering and feeling.

worm. However, the human being retains a special position even within “moderate biocentrism” or “moderate anthropocentrism”.

A principle objective of philosophical ethics is to develop standards for human actions and to provide reasons to justify these. On the basis of formal guidelines, every violation of animal interests must be justified by a balanced consideration of values. This does not only apply to animal experiments, but to all actions in which animals are used for human requirements.

Animal experiments have a special status in the discussions of the relationship between animals and man. This is not only because many people regard them more critically than, for example, slaughter of animals for meat or the specific breeding of beautiful but anatomically or physiologically sick races. A much more important consideration is that the motive of the scientific animal experiment is to increase knowledge. This increase in knowledge is by no means an end in itself, but has a concrete objective: the maintenance and furtherance of the health and quality of life of men and animals and the increase in the knowledge of nature. Although this goal cannot be attained in each individual experiment, philosophical considerations indicate that it possesses greater value than, for example, excessive supplies of animal proteins to people in industrial countries or the aesthetic demands of the owners of domestic dogs or cats. As in our society an increase in knowledge possesses a high moral value, animal experiments can be justified if the following conditions are fulfilled:

▶ The increase in knowledge is essential and serves ethically justifiable objectives.

- ▶ The increase in knowledge can be achieved in no other manner. Alternative methods cannot be used.
- ▶ This is not an *unjustified* repeated experiment.
- ▶ No more animals are used than is absolutely necessary.
- ▶ The animals used are as low on the evolutionary ladder as possible.
- ▶ No *avoidable harm* is inflicted on the animals. This particularly applies to care, husbandry and possible use of analgesia.

Committees on animal protection comply with these guidelines when approving animal experiments.

This argumentation is also both permissible and necessary for animal experiments in basic research. The fact is often overlooked that the balanced evaluation does not simply compare the interest of the animals with the increase in knowledge as an aim in itself. It is rather the case that the interests must be included of the innumerable people who suffer from diseases which cannot be treated or cannot be treated adequately. With these premises, a massive restriction in biomedical research, as is sometimes demanded, becomes ethically indefensible, as not only actions, but their omission, must be morally justified. It would only be conceivable to dispense with animal experiments completely, if increases in scientific knowledge in wide areas of biomedical research could be sacrificed. This sacrifice would be of possible therapies for many diseases, which are not peripheral phenomena, but very common. These include cancer, HIV infection and AIDS, cystic fibrosis, cardiovascular diseases and Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases.

A complete prohibition of experimental animal research would also be in conflict with another valid fundamental moral standard,

the solidarity principle. This describes the principle of providing the best possible support to all those requiring help - the weak and the sick. The solidarity principle is not only one of the many preconditions for life in human communities; it is a special characteristic of man as a morally responsible being capable of solidarity.

People who perform animal experiments always experience conflict between two obligations. The first of these is positive and is the obligation to use one's own knowledge and abilities to reduce human and animal suffering. In contrast, the negative obligation is not to inflict avoidable suffering on other creatures. In the context of human activity, we often find it difficult to reach deci-

sions when we are compelled to violate one obligation. As long as it is scientifically impossible to unravel complex causal activity relationships in living animals without animal research, this conflict between obligations will remain the theme of ethical discussions. There will never be a general answer to the question of whether an animal experiment is justified. Only specific individual answers are possible. ◀

from: *Animals Experiments in Research – a brochure issued by the German Research Foundation DFG*