

Part II

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Early arguments against animal research were based on the obvious pain and suffering of animals in response to laboratory procedures. Research groups counter these arguments by claiming that scientific advancement is not possible without continued animal experimentation and that anesthesia is used whenever possible in order to minimize pain.

For the sake of "argument," let us assume that you must make a decision regarding the future of animal research. The question you must answer is this;

Do the benefits produced by animal research outweigh the pain and distress animals endure, or is it absolutely wrong to conduct any animal research whatsoever?

Testing the Waters in Animal Research

Frequently the media portrays the debate over animal testing as a bipolar dichotomy, with Alicia Silverstone posing half-naked for a PETA commercial on one side united with protesters smearing paint on fur coats, and on the other cruel lab scientists only out to win a prize or a salary increase for the next miracle cure joining with people who think PETA stands for "People Eating Tasty Animals." The general public perceives the opinion they must take as one of two extremes: either permit all animal testing, or condemn any animal research whatsoever as absolutely wrong. Yet the issue, as most others, contains much more complexity than our sound-byte media cares to discuss. In choosing the direction to proceed in the debate on animal testing, one must first and foremost understand the place of the human person in the world and determine some hierarchy of goods. Such a process leads to the conclusion that one can allow animal testing only under certain conditions, namely that it promotes a higher good and takes account of the respective nature of human beings and animals. I can hardly prepare a full and conclusive treatise on the nature of the human person within the allotted time frame, but I hope to present some arguments for the abandonment of such a dichotomistic approach.

As per the natures of humans and animals, one could easily adopt the opinion that animals and humans differ in no significant manner, that to prefer animal testing over human testing commits a crime of discrimination against a species in no way inferior to our own. Contemporary utilitarian philosopher and ethicist Peter Singer takes this stance, identifying such a transgression as "speciesism." Singer goes on to equate a retarded infant orphan to a beagle (Goodman). Singer reduces the issue to the common denominator of the ability to feel physical pain. Since beagles—and many other animals—possess pain receptors biologically similar to those found in human anatomy, Singer concludes that any treatment that causes such pain to any animal is of equal magnitude to one perpetrated against humans. However, if we reduce all morality to simply physical pain, we unleash a flood of crimes no longer condemnable. Doctors have documented cases of individuals incapable of feeling physical pain. I remember in particular a news article several years ago about such a girl who, because of this condition, required an extensive medical examination each day after coming in from recess just to rule out the possibility of incurring any broken bones or other injuries. Now, operating under Singer's logic,

if I decided to kill this girl, I have committed no moral transgression as I have inflicted upon her no activity amongst her pain receptor. Furthermore, I am free at least morally to kill Peter Singer so long as I anesthetize him first.

Singer also denies the existence of psychological pain, or the pain of negated reality. If I call a child a fat and worthless mass of cells with nothing to justify them but pain receptors, Singer would claim no injustice, but what about the pain of obliterated self-esteem, of invalidation. Humans, given their sense of reason, have the ability to recognize such conditions and experience their pain. Animals, at least to the same degree do not. Simply put, something explains why humans have gone to the moon and created the Internet while my neighbor's beagle has gone to our apple tree to mark his territory and has only managed to create a hole under the fence dividing our yards. Other arguments could denote the transcendental nature of man, but I lack both the time and resources to venture into that realm.

Nonetheless, in claiming a distinction between man and other animals, I hardly intend to suggest the disregard of all respect due to animals and nature as a whole. Humans, given their place in the world, possess the ability to largely alter it, and as such must make all decisions in light of this gravity. However, times must come when pain must be endured to reach a higher good. This constitutes precisely the attitude of an Olympic marathoner when they wake up each morning, legs sore in aching, to run ten miles in pouring rain. This constitutes the attitude of a firefighter when he slams himself against the door of a room in a burning home as he tries to save the two children trapped inside. This constitutes the thousands of soldiers who lost their lives in the 1940s attempting to put an end to the mass extermination of Jews and various other discriminate sects in Europe. We must determine when the good merits such risk of pain or even loss of life.

First, the good must transcend the potential loss. In the case of animal testing, this presents itself in the debate as to whether rabbits and dogs should die just so a new line of thicker, longer-lasting eyeliner can reach the market safely. To what degree does eyeliner promote the good of humanity, as opposed to a new formula for insulin to be administered to children with type-1 diabetes. As one might see, times exist to answer both yes and no.

A second point to consider is the potential for alternative, whether other methods exist to ensure product safety rather than through animal testing. Furthermore, do such tests produce reliable and useful results? As studies have shown—and to the rebuttal of Singer's claim of human-beagle equality—thalidomide produced no deformities in the offspring of dogs while ultimately proving dangerous to unborn children (Reines). Perhaps tests on biologically similar species such as chimps might prove more comparable to human results, but even they can prove ineffective.

Ultimately, I find taking a wholesale approach to animal testing somewhat foolish. While the simplicity of an absolute declaration one way or another seems tempting, I think each case merits individual consideration to the extent that it introduces variables or conditions distinct from previously consulted cases. Perhaps this makes me a fence-sitter, but a thorough one nonetheless. Animal research—and even human testing—will remain a contentious issue of debate for years to come. History suggests this. As we strive to know and succumb to the truth of reality, we must come together toward the common good in the very process that drives us so frequently apart.