Correspondence

Duty and the beast: animal experimentation and neglected interests

Sir,
I suppose one should be wary of arguing with philosophers. Nevertheless, Dr Benatar’s Commentary article¹ on the ethics of animal experimentation is more an attack on those who eat animal meat than an examination of the moral issue of medical research involving animals. He conceives that ‘animal experimentation does substantially benefit humanity’ (omitting to mention its considerable contribution to the health and welfare of animals themselves), but argues that humans should treat other species largely as they would their own; to do otherwise is to be guilty of ‘speciesism’. Dr Benatar sees biology as a continuum; some apes have more mental capacity than severely retarded humans. Although one has some sympathy with this view, the concept of ‘do as you would be done by’, which is the core of the argument against speciesism, racism, etc., was developed by and for the human species alone. Humans have an intuition about their own mortality, an independence of thought and an altruism which is quite different from the largely ‘conditioned’ reflexes of other animal species. But, in the matter of life and death, every species, including our own, is concerned to reproduce itself and to survive, even to the extent of killing members of its own (regrettably, in the case of humans) and other species to ensure it. Medical and veterinary research is also concerned with species’ survival (and also, more subtly, with the ‘quality’ of life); nowadays, animals are only used for this end when there are no feasible alternatives.

Many veterinarians, well-versed in the treatment of pain in animals, have no moral problem with research which uses animals, provided the animals do not ‘suffer unduly’. Their dilemma (and ours) is: ‘Given the considerable benefit to humans and animals from research, how much pain and suffering is it justifiable for humans to inflict on a particular species for the benefit of its own species, and other animals and humans.’ That is the moral problem that Dr Benatar should be addressing, rather than tilting at ‘speciesism’.

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Sir,
Professor Hughes begins his letter with the claim that my Commentary article on the ethics of animal experimentation ‘is more of an attack on those who eat animal meat than an examination of the moral issue of medical research involving animals’. He concludes his letter by saying that, instead of attacking ‘speciesism’, I should have addressed the question of ‘how much pain and suffering is it justifiable for humans to inflict on a particular species for the benefit’ this brings.

Professor Hughes seems not to have noticed that my paper engages the very question he says I should confront. In my paper, I suggested that on a charitable interpretation of the animal experimentation debate, the central question is: ‘Do the benefits outweigh the costs?’ The purpose of my argument was to show how unreliable our answers to this question are. My discussion of the consumption of meat was a key step in demonstrating this. In short, I argued that because humans routinely rank even the most important of animal interests (avoiding pain, injury and death) beneath even the most trivial human interests (gastronomic pleasures) that we have excellent reason to doubt that we are employing reasonably calibrated scales. ‘Speciesism’ best explains why animal interests are treated so lightly. That is why I raised and argued
against this form of prejudice and discrimination. I showed that even some people who are vegetarians on moral grounds may not be immune from speciesism. The same could easily be said of veterinarians.

Professor Hughes claims that I concede that ‘animal experimentation does substantially benefit humanity’,1 when what I really did was grant this ‘for the sake of argument’. Professor Hughes also claims that not only humans but also animals benefit from animal experimentation. It is hard to see how the benefits to animals could justify animal experimentation, any more than painful or injurious experimentation on some non-consenting humans could be justified by the benefit it would bring to other humans.

Professor Hughes cites a self-preservation principle to justify animal experimentation, claiming that such experimentation takes place only when there are no feasible alternatives. It is far from clear that animal experimentation really is conducted only in such circumstances. Moreover, a person’s judgement of what constitutes a ‘feasible’ alternative is likely to be affected by how seriously he considers animal interests. There is a greater incentive to consider alternatives when one is convinced of the necessity of finding them. Finally, even when animal experiments are necessary for human well-being or preservation, it does not follow that we are always entitled to perform them. There are limits on what one may do to others in order to secure benefits for oneself. Professor Hughes thinks that such limits apply only to the treatment of humans, including, I presume, those humans who, by reason of immaturity, have only ‘conditioned reflexes’ rather than a full-blown moral sense. This, he says, is because self-preservation entitles favouritism of one’s own kind. If that were really so, then the way would be open to the racist to make similar claims about his narrower conception of what his ‘own kind’ is. One does not determine what beings are worthy of moral consideration by asking whether prejudiced moral agents would accord them such consideration.

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