

Alternatives and Animal Rights: A Reply to Maurice Visscher

Andrew N. Rowan, Editor-in-Chief

Many scientists are uneasy about the idea of alternatives to the use of laboratory animals. One reason for their tentativeness could be the vigorous promotion of the alternatives concept by traditional enemies of the biomedical research establishment. As a result, innuendo, misinformation and emotion cloud a rational discussion of the topic. Too many simplistic claims have been made by opponents of biomedical research, but defenders of the present level of animal experimentation are also guilty of overgeneralization and faulty reasoning.

A classic example of such flawed argument, albeit superficially convincing, which is propounded by extreme elements in the research community, can be found in the recent article by Professor Maurice Visscher entitled "Animal Rights and Alternative Methods" (*The Pharos* [Fall] 11-19, 1979).

The author's first attack is aimed at a statement, attributed to animal liberation philosopher Peter Singer, that it would be no more immoral to perform painful and even lethal experiments on mentally defective human beings than on other animals. This misrepresents Singer's central argument that the criterion of rationality is an insufficient reason for regarding human beings as objects of greater moral concern than animals. Singer reasons that if rationality were to be our criterion for moral concern, then some animals would be included in that universe, or some mentally defective human beings would be excluded. He illustrates the consequences of such logic by arguing that, if we permit experiments on chimpanzees, then we should not object to similar experiments on certain severely mentally deficient human beings. However, Singer argues that rather than diminish the number of living creatures worthy of moral concern, we should expand that number to include many nonhuman species as well.

Visscher also takes exception to Singer's advice to students to refuse participation in animal experiments required for their courses and to demonstrate against those university departments which abuse animals. No doubt such activity would be uncomfortable for both the students and the academic staff, but the freedom to demonstrate in favor of certain moral values is one which Western society takes pains to defend. The forms of protest advocated by Singer are, therefore, legitimate.

Visscher objects to attempts to legislate what he terms "kindness" and argues that "our society" punishes criminal acts but does not "harass law-abiding citizens to prevent them from committing crimes." This is incorrect. Much of the American civil rights legislation attempts to legislate for "desirable" behavior patterns and, therefore, legislating for ethical values is not without precedent.

In October, 1977, the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) issued a report (*FAS Public Interest Report 30(8):8*, 1977) which was critical of the reactionary attitude of spokesmen for biomedical scientists toward animal welfare questions. The report suggested that a scientific association dedicated to the promotion of animal welfare be formed and, in due course, this suggestion came to fruition with the establishment of the Scientists' Center for Animal Welfare (SCAW). Visscher reacts strongly against the tone of the FAS report and the foundation of

SCAW and alludes darkly to the fact that several of the SCAW founders are British-trained. It is not particularly clear why several of the more prominent scientific representatives on animal welfare issues should either be English or trained in England, but whatever the reason, it provides no sound grounds for insinuating that their arguments are invalid.

Visscher also takes issue with the FAS report's statement that "it is no longer possible to ignore the fact that animals have mental processes" and argues that, to his knowledge, no biologists have claimed that "lower animals do not have mental processes in varying degrees of development." This may be so, but biologists have certainly argued that the rudimentary nature of such processes is an important feature in making moral judgments concerning the use of animals in experiments. In an earlier paper, Visscher himself argues that, "the basic justification...for acceptance of the ethic that says it is proper for man to use other animals in decent ways to serve his own purposes, lies in the large gap that exists between man and other beasts with respect to mental capacities." (M. Visscher, *Proc Am Phil Soc 116:157-162*, 1972). As argued in the FAS report, recent research on primate (particularly ape) communication has indicated that the gap is by no means as large as was previously believed. Interestingly, Visscher's argument could conceivably lead to the conclusion that it *would* be moral to use certain mentally subnormal human beings in "decent" experiments to serve the purpose of those who have vastly greater (i.e., normal) mental capacities.

In general, Visscher's arguments are based on the age-old tactic of misrepresenting or simplifying the arguments of others in order to destroy their credibility. Recent animal rights arguments are categorized as "superficially more sophisticated" but "simplistic and unrealistically absolutist as, for example, in the naive assertion that ends can never justify means." The more sophisticated animal rights philosophies do accept that the rights of human beings can sometimes supersede the rights of other animals. Furthermore, several academic philosophers now exploring these questions are attempting to establish ethical guidelines to help researchers decide *when* the rights of animals can be overridden for the benefit of humanity. Similar problems have arisen in human experimentation. The general consensus now appears to be that such research can be justified, but only when the hazards to the individual are properly explained and where the risks to the individual do not outweigh the possible benefits.

Visscher's views are no longer (if they ever were) representative of biomedical scientists, and his arguments against scientists establishing dialogue with so-called "emotional advocates" are now beginning to rebound as the subjective basis of and errors in his own statements are pointed out. (For example, a British Prime Minister and the Council of Europe have *not* called for "absolute bans on certain types of toxicity testing" as claimed in the *Pharos* article.) Support for the animal liberation movement is, in part, a consequence of the unwillingness of biomedical organizations to accept that there are *any* abuses of animals in the laboratory and to discuss them in a constructive fashion with animal welfare organizations. There has been a softening of attitude and more dialogue is taking place, but there is still much room for improvement (see Comment by J.R. Lindsey).

Tension between those who conduct animal experiments and those who oppose them will always exist, but there are widespread pressures at the present to redraw the lines governing what is and is not acceptable in animal research. In

contrast to Dr. Visscher, I do not believe that the "future of experimental medicine is in jeopardy" as a result of promotion of the "alternatives" concept. Quite the contrary, full acceptance of "alternatives" could lead to valuable and exciting new perspectives for old problems.

Advocacy, Objectivity and the Draize Test

Peter Singer, Editorial Advisory Board

As Michael Fox and Andrew Rowan made clear in the first issue of this journal, a workable blend of scientific objectivity and humane advocacy must be achieved if the journal is to realize its objectives. The current campaign against the Draize eye test challenges scientists to combine objectivity and advocacy, and provides an opportunity of demonstrating how these often contrasted stances can be united.

Now that more than three hundred organizations have joined the coalition against the Draize test led by New York activist Henry Spira, and full-page advertisements have appeared in the *New York Times* and other major newspapers, most readers of this journal must be aware of the campaign; but for those that are not, the story can be briefly told. The Draize eye test is the routine use of the eyes of conscious, unanesthetized rabbits to test every substance which may be hazardous to human eyes. The chemical is poured in one eye of each rabbit by pulling the lower lid away from the eyeball to form a cup. The eyes are examined for injury at 1, 24, 48 and 72 hours, and sometimes also after one, two and three weeks. The official U.S. government guide describes some of the reactions as "ulceration of the cornea; opacity of the cornea; inflammation of the iris; hemorrhage; gross destruction." The object of the campaign against this test is to persuade the cosmetics industry to put up one hundredth of one percent of its gross income for a cash program to develop an alternative to the Draize test. (For Revlon, one of the industry leaders, this would mean a tax deductible contribution of \$150,000.)

That there is cause here for advocacy on behalf of animals, anyone whose ethical principles extend to nonhuman animals will see at once, but that scientific objectivity can in this context be combined with advocacy may take a moment longer to appreciate.

Scientific objectivity comes into this campaign with respect to three different questions: Is the test painful? Is the test reliable? Is the test unavoidable?

Some scientists will balk at the idea that the painfulness of a test is a matter for scientific observation. Admittedly, we cannot measure the subjective feeling of pain in rabbits — or in humans, for that matter. But that is no reason to take refuge in behavioristic evasions like describing the rabbits' reactions to having chemicals placed in their eyes as 'aversive behavior.' That animals like rabbits feel pain in these circumstances is not only common sense, it is also the simplest hypothesis which explains the behavior we observe; behavior which includes, as the official Draize test guide notes, squealing, jumping and attempts to escape.

The test is painful. Is it reliable? Carrol S. Weil and Robert A. Scala, writing in *Toxicology and Applied Pharmacology* (19:276-360, 1971) found considerable var-