A PHILOSOPHER’S ARROGANCE

The effort to limit—or even prevent—the use of animals in laboratory experiments has grown so strong and so insistent that the emergence of a counter-attack should not surprise us. A recent article published in the prestigious New England Journal of Medicine, for example, threw down the gauntlet to the “animal-rights” people in such an extreme way that the author, a philosophy professor at the University of Michigan, concluded that not only should animals continue to be used in laboratory experiments but also that such use should be increased!

The same point of view was expressed by M. Roy Schwartz, assistant executive vice president of the American Medical Association, who called for scientists to “counter-attack” against the animal-rights movement, whose members, he declared, were “infiltrating” federal agencies, health organizations, and universities.

“Our opposition uses emotion, and we have to respond in kind,” was Mr. Schwartz’s challenge.

Such statements bring to mind the extraordinary experiment in human behavior by Stanley Milgram and associates. What we learned from that exercise is that ordinary, decent human beings are capable of inflicting physical pain on one another—without remorse or guilt—provided that they believe themselves to be acting for some long-range benefit.

It is, in short, a form of self-induced seduction that permits “nice folks” to diminish or repress their normal human impulse toward such higher virtues as pity, charity, or even sympathy. Can we imagine more depressing knowledge about ourselves and the potential for evil in even the best of us? As T.S. Eliot asked, “After such knowledge, what forgiveness?” The answer, as we shall see, is: “None.”

The philosophy professor and I happen to be at the same university and I know him slightly. He is a thoroughly decent fellow—which is what makes his essay in favor of increasing the use of animals in laboratories all the more fearsome and loathsome. He methodically opts for inflicting death (while glossing lightly over the issue of pain) on increasing numbers of animals—writing not as a sadist but rather as a rational human being whose only concern is the welfare of his own species.

There are, after all, worthy goals to reach in the laboratory, and implicit in such arguments is the promise that the experimental use of animals, no matter how the suffering of those creatures might anguish us, will lead finally to medical breakthroughs. The laypersons who read such an article must deal with the specter of a loved one who might die of a disease like cancer because laboratory animals had been spared. The argument thus becomes personalized, and it is easy to lose perspective. We might ask, what if I were the one to die for the lack of an anticancer injection?

The scientists reading such arguments share many emotions in common with lay readers. They, too, are eager to be persuaded by a point of view that will clear their conscience and sweep away the cobwebs of doubt. And doubts there are, which is why so many practitioners of science have labored so creatively to find ways of reducing pain and reducing even the number of animals needed in the process of discovery and proof. It is, after all, not the lay philosophers and essayists, but the laboratory scientists themselves, who have devised such means as tissue cultures and computer simulations to replace at least some of the repetitive trashing of animal life.

To be fair, let us acknowledge that not all who urge expanding animal use would push their arguments beyond certain limits. They would favor only those scientific experiments that would make life healthier, rather than merely happier, for human beings. They probably would not, for example, condone or support most of the animal research done in commercial laboratories, let’s say, by cosmetic or tobacco companies. To our shame, test animals endure indescribable hardship and catastrophe for the sake of, say, beautiful eye shadow.

But how much of a leap is it, we must ask, from suturing a monkey’s eyelids shut to taking a newborn cub from its mother and isolating it in a cold cage in order to confirm that babies suffer if deprived of cuddling? And, again, how great is the next leap, to bashing the skulls of various primates in a university laboratory, a procedure once financed with federal tax dollars, in a study of head injuries?

We need Oscar Wilde with us again, to offer a fitting epithet, one to equal his description of fox hunting: “The unspeakable in pursuit of the inedible.” At the very least, we need to focus on questions of how we can reduce animal pain, anguish, fear, and deprivation in the process of laboratory testing.

To say, as does the philosophy pro-
Professor, that animals have no “rights” in the strictly formal sense (because, he says, they have no moral system as we all know it) is like arguing about the number of angels that can dance on the head of a pin. In ordinary human terms that most of us immediately comprehend, we know that if I lock a dog in a room, it has the right to receive food and water from me. Let us say that I fail to provide food and water, and the dog annoys me by howling. What would happen if I were to beat the animal senseless? I would have to answer to the police—as I would not if I had vented my anger on a piece of furniture that I own. In the professor’s stark black/white view of the world, only human beings have “rights”; most of us, however, inhabit a more complex world, one with varying shades of gray. We “own” an animal differently from the way we own a chair, a fact which complicates the whole system of “rights” far beyond any arbitrary and limited set of definitions.

If, however, nothing else I have said is persuasive, if, indeed, the conviction persists that scientific progress makes all animal suffering necessary and therefore unavoidable, then let me close with an appeal to the self-interests of the laboratory scientists. Perhaps an eminently practical argument will succeed where all other arguments fail.

What I need to convey most of all is that a vast audience of people more or less like me exists out there. We want—in fact, we now demand—that the scientific community act in as humane and sensitive and creative a manner as possible in the use of laboratory animals. Only then will our approval—the approval of a very large “middlebrow” class—continue to support science. When I say “support,” I refer not only to what happens to our tax dollars and private donations, but also to our political support. The bashing of primates’ heads stopped, after all, not for lack of funds, but rather because an outraged public forced the feds to act.

In a democratic society, science needs the support, or at least the approval, of the general electorate. Most of us in that majority have been willing to pay homage to the men and women in white, and we want to continue to do so. We therefore tend to disdain illegal raids on laboratories, and only very few of us would join in extremist groups.

It is therefore in the best interest of scientists not to drive us—the sensible middle-of-the-road people—into the camp of ideologues. There is no rational or ethical basis for using “as many animals as possible” in experiments; indeed, neither science nor humanity would be well served by making matters worse in the laboratory, as the scientists will surely find out if they are careless enough, and callous enough, to embrace such a program.

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