Letters

Journal Editorial Vindicates

Vivisectionists

Michael W. Fox’s editorial, “The ‘Show Dog’ Syndrome” (Int J Anim Prob 3(1):3, 1982) cannot help but be extremely upsetting to anyone who wishes to see the particularly sadistic and useless experiments involving sentient beings recognized as such. I am referring to Fox’s reference to Overmeier’s “learned helplessness” experiments involving intense unavoidable electrical shock administered to dogs. Through reference to these kinds of experiments, Fox lends credibility to them; it would seem there is no other way to understand the “show dog” syndrome from a scientific perspective. Fox therefore validates Overmeier’s research and others who engage in such experiments.

Surely more accurate, applicable results should be derived from studies that occurred “in situ”: studies which looked at actual dogs, at the adaptability of dogs that go through a lot of handlers versus that of dogs that always go to shows with their owners. (For anyone who attends dog shows, the difference is marked and obvious between dogs that are shunted about and dogs that are always attended by someone who cares about their interests.) Certainly, an “in situ” project is not as convenient as a lab setting and, I suppose, such a project would not even call for a vivisectionist. In fact, it appears that the “show dog” syndrome calls for an observation of “anthropomorphic” kinds of responses, that is, responses for which we can recognize as having similar emotional roots as our own. Vivisectionists are not “into” observing and recognizing the sentience of sentient beings.

A further objection I have to Fox’s use of such research, apart from lending credibility and validation to questionable work, is that I don’t think Fox has demonstrated how Overmeier’s experiments are anywhere near applicable to the “show dog” syndrome. The “dependency” that a dog forms upon its human owner is surely not similar to a situation in which dogs of unknown origin (often unwanted dogs abandoned to the dog pounds) cannot avoid intense electrical shock and ultimately succumb to it. This even be called “dependency”! And does it have anything whatsoever to do with “relating” to other sentient beings?

I have been subscribing to International Journal for the Study of Animal Problems since its inception. As long as the Journal questions the most fundamental issues regarding the whole concept of vivisection (which ultimately question the “scientific principle” itself), I shall continue to subscribe. But, if the Journal becomes simply yet another vehicle for vivisectionists to publish and conclude with the usual “more research in this area is needed,” I would not be able to, in conscience, contribute my money toward such goals. This magazine has appealed to both sectors (vivisectionists and anti-vivisectionists) thus far—but I am alarmed by the fact that Fox’s editorial suggests that the magazine is taking a more accurate, applicable results for a vivisectionist.

Certainly, there is no other way to look at Overmeier’s use of electrical shock repeated at several days, and I would criticize “in situ”: studies which looked at actual dogs, at the adaptability of dogs that go through a lot of handlers versus that of dogs that always go to shows with their owners. (For anyone who attends dog shows, the difference is marked and obvious between dogs that are shunted about and dogs that are always attended by someone who cares about their interests.) Certainly, an “in situ” project is not as convenient as a lab setting and, I suppose, such a project would not even call for a vivisectionist. In fact, it appears that the “show dog” syndrome calls for an observation of “anthropomorphic” kinds of responses, that is, responses for which we can recognize as having similar emotional roots as our own. Vivisectionists are not “into” observing and recognizing the sentience of sentient beings.

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Surely more accurate, applicable results should be derived from studies that occurred 'in situ': studies which looked at show dogs, at the adaptability of dogs that go through a lot of handlers versus that of dogs that always go to shows with their owners. (For anyone who attends dog shows, the difference is marked and obvious between dogs that are shunted about and dogs that are always attended by someone who cares about their interests.) Certainly, an "in situ" project is not as convenient as a lab setting and, I suppose, such a project would not even call for a vivisectionist. In fact, it appears that the "show dog" syndrome calls for an observation of "anthropomorphic" kinds of responses, that is, responses that we can recognize as having similar emotional roots as our own. Vivisectionists are not "into" observing and recognizing the sentiment of sentient beings.

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Pat Allan
President
An Understanding Heart
3609-IA-St. S.W.
Calgary, Alta.
Canada T2S 1R4

Dr. Fox Responds

I have never condoned studies of learned helplessness in animals that entail great physical and psychological trauma—such as 5 milliamperes of inescapable electrical shock repeated at intervals for several days, and I have severely criticized psychologists (Fox, 1981) for such poor experimental design and needless repetition. You clearly overlooked my stating in my editorial that such experiments are ethically questionnable. I also find them morally repugnant and wonder about the state of mind of those doing such experiments. Even so, such research is of value (and that's why I cited Overmeier's book) in convincing those who in treating animals as unfeeling things (and treating show dogs like mere objects) can cause unnecessary suffering. Why? Because it is only objective, "controlled laboratory data" that will convince them that animals are sentient. I therefore cite such research not to give it credibility, but to further the understanding of animals by those "Cartesian mechanists" who have a limited ability to empathize, do not believe animals have emotions or a subjective world of their own (Griffin, 1981) and who can only believe "objective" data.

References


Michael W. Fox
Associate Editor

Behavior Inconsistent with Attitudes?

I welcome John and Valerie Braithwaite's survey on "Attitudes Toward Animal Suffering" (Int J Stud Anim Prob, 1(2), 42-49, 1982) as a good beginning in establishing a much-needed empirical basis for discussions of the issue. Their selection of survey items is exceptionally well designed, in that it provides for a systematic comparison of attitudes across relevant values of several important variables.

However, in my opinion the Braithwaites' analysis of the data obtained reflects a mistaken assumption that one can infer behavior from written responses to a questionnaire. They note the inconsistencies revealed by the findings, that while 90% of the respondents disapproved of the use of inhumane killing methods at an abattoir, only 41% disapproved of the practice of eating the meat from such abattoirs; and that while 73% disapproved of force-feeding geese to produce pate, only 46% disapproved of eating the paté. They conclude from these and other findings that their study "raise[] the question of whether more fruitful avenues for future research might lie in exploring the structure of the inconsistencies between attitudes and behavior [emphasis in original], rather than in further analysis of the structure of attitudes alone." Further, they state in their abstract that "The results, though preliminary, strongly suggest that attitudes may be in great part supportive of animal welfare and animal rights. However, as reflected in the answers to the questionnaire, actual behavior does not always follow suit."

The Braithwaites are certainly correct about behavior not always being consistent with expressed attitudes, but their survey data do not show this. Rather, the data indicate that people have different attitudes about different behaviors: killing and eating. Perhaps this reflects differences in attitudes about what others should do and what is permissible for oneself to do (others have the job of killing animals in abattoirs; everyone has the option of eating meat); or maybe the issue is an unwillingness to take moral responsibility for an act already committed ("I might as well eat it since the harm is already done"), or a feeling that it is unethical for an individual boycott to be futile. At any rate, attitudes about behavior—either the behavior of killing or that of eating—are not the same thing as the behavior itself. It would be interesting to know whether the 46% who disapproved of eating pate would actually refrain from eating it at a dinner party; only that kind of information would show if there is an inconsistency between attitude and behavior, or the Braithwaites claim there is.

I would like to make one other comment about this study. The Braithwaites' brief analysis of the data presented in the accompanying table does not mention some very interesting aspects of