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Forget the Short-term Unfairness for a While:

Analysis of the Fairness Concern of Animal Experiments and the Rationality of Experimenting on Animals

Experimenting on animals has continuously been an important approach for people to accumulate scientific knowledge for its low cost and good benefit. The history of animal experiments can be traced back to about 4th or 3rd centuries BCE; meanwhile, the rationality of performing animal experiments and treating laboratory animals differently from what they should be treated in the natural environment is also widely disputed. Also influenced by the thought of human rights that has emerged in the last few centuries, some people have begun standing for the right of animals and making the argument about the moral status of animal experiments unprecedentedly acute. These people believe animals have rights similar to human rights and therefore animals should have equal status and should not be used as human models’ alternatives for animal experiments because of the violation of fairness. Some radical animal rights activists even try to disseminate this thought in extreme ways like setting up bombs. Should we surrender to the violence of these radical activists and give up performing any animal experiments for the moral concern about fairness? Is these people’s thought about animal rights convincing enough? The answer of both questions is no. First of all, as a complicated philosophical debate, whether living creatures are equal or not is actually unclear. Secondly, just in case the activists’ statements about animal rights is considered to be right, forbidding all animal experiments for the concern of fairness is still a jejune generalization because there are exceptions that animals get benefit from animal experiments. Furthermore, regardless of the argument about fairness, experimenting on animals is so far one of the most important and effective approaches for researchers to accumulate scientific and technological knowledge which will benefit not only people but also animals in a long term and is more significant than the argument about the fairness of using laboratory animals. Thus, even though the fairness of using laboratory animals in experiments is controversial, we should still allow animal experiments. This article will explain all these reasons and discuss some proposals for considering lab animals’ moral concerns.

Before talking about any practical actions to deal with the concern about fairness, let’s talk about the concern itself first. Why do people doubt the fairness of laboratory animals? The reasons is we cannot use human subjects in experiments for human rights, then for the same logic, we should not use animal subjects because animals should have their rights to be treated equally. People use animals in experiments to replace human subjects because they can’t use human subjects for the broadly agreed statement that people have equal rights. However, this statement was not that convincing in previous centuries where the concept of human rights hadn’t been completely formed. At that time, some people who were different from the majority were treated in unfair ways like being used as human subjects in experiments because they were believed to be in lower level. Back to the present, these animals being put in experiments are now in the same condition which was faced by those people who had been treated as human subjects – they are considered and treated as lower-level living things but there is no indisputable evidence that they are. Animals being used in experiments often have to endure physical, mental or other forms of pains. However, these animals don’t gain any benefits from the pains they endure as individuals; instead, human beings benefit from the “lower-level” animals’ pains by accumulating data of animal experiments. Thus, it is understandable why people doubt the fairness of laboratory animals and want to extend the thought about human rights for animals.

However, whether this concern about fairness actually exists is still doubtful. As mentioned above, the foundation of fairness concern is an analogy – humans have human rights, so animals should have animal rights; human beings feel unfairness if they endure pain for no payback, and animals will have the same feeling. This analogy may be doubtful, because animals and humans are so different. They have different biological structures, different ways of thinking, and different positions in the food web. Animals can feel painful when they are harmed, but they might not feel the human-like sense of unfairness if they don’t receive any paybacks. Therefore, the “axiomatic” analogy made by human beings is doubtful because of its failure to stand in animals’ perspective. Because of the unclearness of the similarity between animals and human beings, it is possible to hold an opposite attitude regarding the fairness problem of laboratory animals – animals are different, so they don’t have equal positions, and therefore it is fair to use lab-level animals for experiments’ need. Stanley N. Gershoff, a biochemist who has worked in the field of public health and nutrition for 55 years, stands for this view. In his article *Animal experimentation – a personal view*, he says: “I also believe that all animals are not equal. I think that sub-human primates, especially the large apes are unique and require special care if they have to be used in experiments. I would never knowingly work with an animal that had been somebody’s pet” (4; pt. 4). The concern of fairness tries to speak for animal rights from humans’ perspective, while Stanley’s opinion is to group animals into different categories from a high-above point of view. Neither of them is convincing enough because they don’t and philosophically speaking (we are not animals) they are not able to see the problem from animals’ perspective. Thus, because whether using laboratory animals is fair or not is generally unclear, the request that animal experiments be forbidden because of fairness concern is not very convincing; if we believe it is unfair to use laboratory animals regardless of its lack of seeing problem from animals’ perspective, its counterclaim – it is fair to use laboratory animals because they are born to be used for experiments, which also lacks standing in that perspective, will be believable.

Secondly, just in case the activists’ statements about animal rights is considered to be right, forbidding all animal experiments for the concern of fairness is still a jejune generalization because there are exceptions that animals get benefit from animal experiments. These experiments should be indisputably allowed even though the majority of animal experiments is controversial. Stanley N. Gershoff shows us an example of how animal experiments save countless numbers of dogs’ lives in his article *Animal experimentation – a personal view*: “In 1947, a mysterious disease had killed 75,000 dogs in Chicago […] the famous British scientist Mellanby had associated this disease with the consumption by dogs of wheat ﬂour treated with a protein-maturing chemical called agene (nitrogen trichloride) […] As result of this work, the use of agene in the milling industry was halted and the lives of countless numbers of dogs were saved” (3; pt. 2). In this example, scientists have done many animal experiments to draw this conclusion about agene’s toxicity. We can also believe that many animals’ lives or health are sacrificed for the research in order to accumulate enough experiment data. It is unpleasant to have these animals sacrificed, but the data accumulated from the experiments did save countless number of animals’ lives. In addition, these animals are sacrificed for animals themselves, and they are not used as scapegoats of human subjects for experiments (The author also mentions that humans are very resistant to agene, so people actually don’t mind whether there is agene in the wheat flour when they are eating it.). In this case, although we can doubt the fairness to harm those animals in experiments for saving other animals, animals as a whole are treated fair.

So far, we know that the animal experiments focusing on improving animals’ living conditions is fair and should be indisputably allowed, but what about the majority of animal experiments that is not obviously for animals’ needs? For now, we should still allow these experiments even though they are controversial. We have to confess experimenting on animals is so far one of the most important and effective approaches to accumulate technological and scientific knowledge. Compared to the short-term unfairness concern of laboratory animals, accumulating knowledge that can improve not only humans’ but also animals’ quality of lives is more significant. In the periodic *Is Animal Testing Necessary to Advance Medical Research*, Laurie Pycroft, the founder of “Pro-Test”, an Oxford-based group in favor of animal testing for vital medical research, demonstrates the significance of animal experiments: “Without the ability to use animals in their research, scientists’ efforts would be massively hampered, not only in the direct development of new treatments, but also in the fundamental research which underpins all biomedical knowledge. For example, it was Alan Lloyd Hodgkin and Andrew Huxley’s work on the nerves of squid that elucidated the basis of nervous transmission; and it was John C Eccles’ work on cats’ spinal cords that first incontrovertibly demonstrated the nature of the synapse” (1; par. 2). In this statement, Laurie focuses on fundamental knowledge. Let’s just talk about the fundamental knowledge about nervous transmission. Could we learn how the nervous transmission works without experimenting on an animal? As the author points out, there is no way to do so. Experimenting on humans? It is unacceptable because of human rights. Imagining how it works? The conclusion might be close to the fact, but there is no guarantee that it is true. If we want to know whether our imagination is correct, we still have to go back to experiments to verify it. So, what if we didn’t learn the fundamental knowledge of nervous transmission for considering squid’s concern of fairness? We would lack all knowledge based on this fundamental knowledge. We would not be able to know how to start or stop or repair the nervous transmission, and we would know nothing about the diseases related to nervous transmission. However, luckily we did gain enough fundamental knowledge from experimenting on squids, which has enabled us to do further researches related on this knowledge like finding solutions for diseases related to nervous transmission. Once the solution for a nervous disease is found, people or animals that have this disease can be treated, which improves their quality of lives.

In addition, I mentioned above that laboratory animals may be facing “short-term unfairness”. Does it mean the fairness concern of laboratory animals will be solved in a long term by performing animal experiments? It sounds awkward but it is true. Doing animal experiments is a procedure of using animal models for accumulating data and knowledge from animal models. If we gain enough knowledge about an animal model, we can probably build a non-animal alternative that mimics this animal model. Once the alternative can be used, there will be no necessity to use animal models, and thus the animals that stand for this model will no longer face the unfairness of being used in experiments. So far, scientists have actually already built many non-animal alternatives, such as microfluidic chips and microdosing (“*Is Animal Testing Necessary to Advance Medical Research?*”). They are built by analyzing the animal models, and because of their existences, no more animals are needed for the experiments to derive data that can be provided by these non-animal models. Using non-animal alternatives is hopefully an ultimate way to solve all fairness concerns of laboratory animals, but the development level of animal models is still far from being able to replace all or at least most of the laboratory animals. Thus, in order to pursue the long-term fairness for laboratory animals, we have to thoroughly study on them in order to build non-animal alternatives to replace them.

By now, we can draw a conclusion that animal experiments should be allowed so far even if the fairness of using laboratory animals is doubtful, because the unfairness is also doubtful, laboratory animals can be used justly for their own benefit, and not only people but also animals can gain significant benefits from animal experiments compared to the possible unfairness during the experiments. The approach to totally solve the fairness concern of laboratory animals is to develop non-animal alternatives by studying these animals. In addition, instead of focusing too much on the fairness concern about animal experiments, we can try to consider other two more practical layers of moral concerns mentioned by Bernard E. Rollin, a famous philosopher and animal sciences professor – it is unnecessary to do animal experiments with predictable low-value outcomes and it is important to provide lab animals with comfortable living environments instead of bad environments that are only designed for researchers’ convenience (“*The Moral Status of Invasive Animal Research*”). I believe even radical animal rights activists will accept our experimenting on animals if we successfully demonstrate how we morally take care of animals during experiments.

Works Cited

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