

Animal ethics in relation to desensitisation and extreme compartmentalisation

Dr Rebekah Humphreys, a Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Wales Trinity St David, Lampeter, discusses animal ethics and the morality of our treatment of animals in testing and intensive farming

Having become interested in the subject since studying it at university as part of a BA Degree in English and Philosophy, I have researched animal ethics (a sub-discipline of philosophy) for the past 25 years. I became conscious of the ways in which animals were being used in animal experimentation and factory farming (partly because of the work of Compassion in World Farming and (what is now known as) Cruelty Free International.

This led me to an MA in Ethics and Social Philosophy before completing a PhD, specialising in animal ethics.

I wanted to examine the justifications given for the suffering of animals used in these practices to understand how such treatment could be possible on such a vast scale (more than 100 million animals are used in research globally every year, with 4 million being used in the UK alone (RSPCA, 2023a); and approximately 50 billion animals are factory-farmed worldwide every year (CIWF, 2023)).

My current research includes issues of justice, equality, desensitisation, compartmentalisation, and dignity in relation to animal ethics, ethology, and environmental ethics. My work is influenced by the work of many philosophers, particularly that of Robin Attfield, Peter Singer, Raimond Gaita, Mary Midgley, Richard Ryder, and Stephen R. L. Clark, and by ethologists such as Frans de Waal and Pamela J. Asquith to name just two.

What is the biggest struggle with animal testing currently?

I believe it is partly public perception and the narrative of our use of animals (Watson and Humphreys, 2019). Animal experimentation is often conceived as a special area of research – a place where miracles and cures are made (Humphreys, 2022, pp.238-46). This (mis) conception exists despite many experiments causing suffering for peripheral purposes, such as the testing of new products or ingredients.

Even where suffering is caused for medicinal purposes, it does not follow that causing such suffering on such a vast industrial scale is justifiable. The RSPCA estimates that 10 million animals undergo severe suffering each year across the globe in the practice of animal experimentation (2023b).

Further, the language used in reports on animal tests tend to use highly mechanistic language that distances us from the experiences that the animals endure (for example, distress tends to be depicted as a stress response, rather than a subjective experience felt by the animal). This reinforces unchallenged norms and assumptions about our use of animals in research and distorts our moral compass by acting as a veil over the reality of the lived experiences of animals in laboratories.

How we present the sufferings of such animals in the media is important because, just as in other contexts, language can serve to hide that which in plain language would be described as brutalities on humans and animals (for more on language in relation to animal experimentation, see Linzey, et al., 2015, pp.45-45).

Additionally, animals in experiments are often viewed as abstractions of what they truly are (sentient individual animals with their own pains, pleasures, and lives); a reality that is separated from what they are in the experiments (when they are used merely as a means to an end). This abstracted view may foster desensitisation to their suffering, which could enable us to do things to animals in certain contexts that we would not be prepared to do to animals outside of these contexts (see Humphreys, 2022, pp.242-44).

We do things to animals in this practice that we would not be prepared to do to animals of the same species outside of the practice

As such, with animal ethics, we should be wary of a certain type of extreme compartmentalisation of mind that could go along with desensitisation; one that relates to the practicalities of the work.

One might consider that a mild sort of compartmentalisation is permissible (in relation to the different treatment of animals within science) and may have some ground because science is a knowledge-obtaining institution. Such mild compartmentalisation can be seen across all professions – it's often one that varies according to social roles (see MacIntyre, 2006, p.196).

However, in contrast to extreme compartmentalisation, mild compartmentalisation need not involve desensitisation, nor involve incoherences in moral judgments (Humphreys, 2022, pp.238-41).

Extreme compartmentalisation and desensitisation may foster a certain unresponsiveness to the sufferings of animals used in experiments; sufferings that would be met with horror were they inflicted outside of the scientific arena (even for great benefits).

This is deeply problematic as exercising compassion towards animals and reflecting on their sufferings can make us sensitive to actions that harm and benefit them, just as it does with human beings.

The cultivation of moral emotions in animal ethics, then, is important for developing safeguards against the unethical treatment of animals, and as such, should not be overlooked as mere sentimentality or as an unwelcome interference in carrying out the practicalities of animal research. Such emotions and reflections can make us alert to what we should not do to animals, as well as promote respectful treatment (Humphreys, 2022, pp.247-48).

Another important issue with animal ethics concerns the funding and legality of certain experiments, such as the LD50 (lethal-dose 50) Draize test. This is a cruel test that causes considerable suffering and is used in respect of certain toxicological requirements. For chemical products and ingredients, it's a legal requirement that toxicology tests are conducted.

There are now humane alternatives for many experiments, and in relation to the LD50 test, a ground-breaking in-vitro, an animal-free alternative has been created by XCell R8 and is now ready to be used. This animal-free alternative was funded by Animal Aid (see Animal Aid, 2022; and XCell R8, 2023). It is wonderful to see such alternatives being funded.

Indeed, part of the struggle with animal testing is making humane alternatives recognised and supported through funding initiatives. It is vital that such alternatives are implemented as part of the aim to reduce, refine, and replace animal experiments (the 3Rs) (see further RSPCA, 2023a).

Will there ever be an option to end animal testing?

If so, how could we do it?

There are already excellent options as alternatives, but ending animal testing involves challenging the drivers that maintain the continuance of the practice. Such drivers are complex and involve economic and political factors, as well as practical and psychological ones. It also involves a genuine non-anthropocentric recognition that the causing of suffering to animals and the taking of their lives is not necessarily justifiable based on the accrument of human benefits, whether peripheral or not.

There are parallels here with experimentation on humans, and although some research on humans is undoubtedly justifiable, we should remember that history is littered with cases of unethical experiments on humans (such cases often involved vulnerable people), and we should bear in mind that animals in experiments are some of the most vulnerable creatures on earth whose interests are thwarted from the time that they come into existence for the very purpose of being used in experiments.

Arguments that humans are of greater value than nonhumans do not make for helpful arguments here, because animals' significant interests (at the very least, their interests in not suffering) are often overridden for peripheral reasons, such as the testing of new

products or ingredients that are to be put on the market. And besides, as Attfield claims, recognition of the intrinsic value of animals and their flourishing ‘does not commit us to respect (or treating) all creatures equally’ (Attfield, 2023, p.16).

But we need to consider if we would be prepared to inflict such suffering on animals outside of the laboratory for the same purposes, or whether we would be prepared to inflict that same amount of suffering on humans for the same purposes. If not, then we should question our readiness to use animals in experiments.

Such questioning may involve a profound reevaluation of animals and their lived experiences. Indeed, animal ethics and Critical Animal Studies more generally, have much to contribute here via their challenge to the normalisation of animal experimentation (see Linzey et al, 2015), the commodification of animals and their lives, and the recognition of animals used in experiments as having a value in and of themselves, rather than as a ‘free’ resource (see further Humphreys, 2023, forthcoming).

Powerful interests are at stake with animal testing

There are huge-vested and powerful interests at stake, particularly within the pharmaceutical industry, made stronger by animals not having a voice. Although they will often dissent from being used (via their body language, for example), properly responding to animals’ dissenting behaviour would have massive implications on what we are permitted to do to animals in the name of our own interests.

Sadly, animal discrimination has become part of everything we do and consume, making the movement for change difficult on motivational, habitual, and political levels.

This is one reason why some political theorists have considered the potential of genuine deliberative justice in relation to animals and their interests (see Garner 2019). Robert Garner clearly explains the deficiencies with the current ‘strong’ anthropocentric approach within political systems – ‘which holds that only human preferences regarding animals ought to be promoted’ (Garner, 2016, p.464) drawing on the well-established all-affected principle (see Warren, 2017) to claim that ‘animals themselves have a democratic right to have their interests represented in the political process’ (Garner, 2016, p.460), irrespective of whether humans desire or would prefer to have better protections afforded to animals (ibid., pp.459-77).

Such representation would be a central step forward in creating a meaningful political platform for change for the animals themselves. Most notably, this claim is made outside of traditional animal ethics theory and thereby avoids the debates regarding the moral status of animals and the conclusions of those debates, including abolitionist ones (see, for example, ibid., pp.461-63, and 471-72). For information on deliberative justice and animals, see the research being carried out by The Centre for Animals and Social Justice (CASJ).

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