

# Ethics & Medics

A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE ON MORAL ISSUES IN THE HEALTH AND LIFE SCIENCES

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## It's All in the Nature of Things

Whether it be through reports of animal rights activists taking an increasingly militant position in their opposition to laboratory use of animals or through investigations of arson cases involving research veterinary laboratories (see *New York Times*, January 19, 1988, I, 14:4), the spotlight is focused once again on the question of animal rights. Do animals have rights? More specifically, do animals have a right to life? And, consequently, is the use of animals for scientific research morally prohibited?

### Animal Activists Respond

One response to the first question comes from animal activist Ingrid Newkirk, national director of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). She contends that just as racism once kept blacks from enjoying their rights because they were not Caucasian, and sexism prevented women from holding equal rights because they were not male, so *speciesism* is barring animals from enjoying their rights just because they are not human, i.e., because they happen to be a different species than humans.

Newkirk also has an answer to the second question. The criterion for the right to life is having an *interest* in living. "They (animals) *are* alive," she explains, "therefore they want to *be* alive, and therefore we should *let* them live." ("Just Like Us?" *Harper's Magazine*, August, 1988, p. 46).

And, finally, a statement from animal rights advocate Colman McCarthy provides an answer to the third question. Animal vivisection is a violation of the fifth commandment (Thou shalt not kill) because, he claims, "there's no asterisk on that commandment. It applies to more than human life." (*The Animals' Agenda*, September/October, 1988, p. 8).

### National Research Council Responds

Of course others answer the above questions differently. In a response to the rising tide of animal activism, especially activities aimed at the control and/or elimination of animal research, the National Research Council published a report on the use of lab animals. The thesis of their report is three-dimensional: first, humans are morally obligated to improve the human condition; second, the use of lab animals is

sometimes the only means to obtain information and skills necessary to insure that improvement; and third, essential animal experimentation does not give humans the license to act irresponsibly but charges them with the duty to guarantee the well-being of research animals and to eliminate, as much as possible, their pain and suffering.

The NRC statement goes on to explain that their position has been influenced by two Judeo-Christian principles generally accepted in American society: 1. Humans have dominion over animals, and 2. Humans are obligated to fulfill that stewardship responsibly.

### Guiding Principles

It might be helpful to the discussion regarding the moral parameters of scientific research involving animals to elaborate on these two principles and others related to them. The key to lucid thought, in what can oftentimes become an emotional debate about animal rights, is both to make distinctions between the nature of human beings and the nature of animals and to recognize the hierarchical order of the material world. The following considerations, then, are of capital importance to any discussion of the morality of the use of experimental animals in research:

1. *Animals do not have inherent rights*, i.e., rights that arise from the very nature of the animal. From the perspective of reason we say that inherent rights, including the fundamental right to life, are conferred by natural law on human beings precisely because they are moral beings who are responsible for their free choices. Or, from the perspective of faith, we say that human beings possess rights because of human dignity which arises from the fact that

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humans are created in the image and likeness of God. Animals come from the hand of God, but only human beings are fashioned in God's image.

2. *Animals do not have a spiritual component.*

Of all material creation only the human being is body and spirit. The life principle of an animal, the so-called sensitive soul, is intimately bound up with its corporeality; when the animal dies so does its soul. Unlike humans, animals are incapable of knowing God and do not have an eternal destiny.

3. *Animals do not have the capacities of intellect and will.* Since the intellect and will are spiritual powers, animals lack both. This is precisely why we say that there is a radical *qualitative* difference between animals and humans. Although various species of the animal kingdom exhibit remarkable signs of "intelligence," they do so because, somewhat like computers, they are programmed to act that way. So the word "intelligent" in reference to animal behavior is used only in analogous sense. Although some chimps have been taught sign language, there is no conclusive proof that even these highest primates are capable of mastering the syntactical organization of language. This is why aardvarks do not write poetry, cows do not build bridges and chimpanzees are not up to grasping abstract concepts such as beauty, goodness and truth. Animals are not capable of the exercise I'm engaged in now: describing by written word the difference between the human and animal species.

Furthermore, because animals act instinctually, they do not exercise freedom of choice and, therefore, are not held morally responsible for their actions. Animals eat, sleep, defend themselves, and reproduce not because they choose to, but because they are responding to instinctual drives. If they prey on other animals or kill their own young, they are not brought to trial for murder.

4. *Animals are created for man and for his*

*use.* Material creation is intended to assist human beings to reach their transcendent goal. Men and women have been given dominion over all animals (Gen. 1:26b), but this dominion is not an absolute one. While it is morally acceptable for human beings to use creation for food, shelter, and clothing, it is not morally justifiable to *misuse* or *abuse* the animal or plant kingdoms. While it is licit to use animals in laboratory experiments which will contribute to human well-being, it is not morally responsible to subject lab animals to unnecessary suffering or pain. As Pope John Paul II points out in his recent encyclical on social concerns, the human person is morally obligated to use material creation wisely. We all must answer to God for the kind of stewardship we exercise. The Pope cautions: "One cannot use with impunity the different categories of beings, whether living or inanimate—animals, plants, the natural elements simply as one wishes, according to one's economic needs" (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, #32).

### Conclusion

In sum, then, once we make important distinctions about the differences between the nature of animals and the nature of humans, we see that the human person emerges as the apex of creation and the steward over lower forms of life. Consequently, although animals do not have inherent rights (e.g., the right to life), human beings do have the moral duty to use animals rationally. Misuse or abuse of animals in scientific research is a betrayal of man's God-given trust of stewardship and represents an impoverishment of the person's humanness.

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