

BOOK AND VIDEO REVIEWS

Lives in the Balance. The Ethics of using Animals in Biomedical Research. Edited by Jane A Smith and Kenneth M Boyd. Oxford University Press (1991): Oxford. Pp 352. price £19.50. ISBN 0-19-854744-7

Nowhere are the issues raised by human use of non-human animals brought more sharply into focus than in biomedical research. In the past, individual animal lives have not weighed very heavily when balanced against the hope of therapeutic advance. However, concern about the ethics of animal use in research has increased greatly in recent years. The findings and recommendations of a three year study by a Working Party of the Institute of Medical Ethics are summarized in this book, which is explicitly aimed at those who feel 'less than fully and impartially informed about the facts and arguments which they should take into account when making up their own minds on the subject'. The subject is an emotional one, and when the first page warned that some (unspecified) moral points of view were not to be represented here, I became worried that the book might present a rather one-sided defence of the status quo. However, as I read further, one potential objection after another was nipped in the bud. Although self-admittedly centred on the middle ground, the arguments presented in this book extend into a variety of more distant territories.

The book begins by summarizing the facts about animal use, with inevitable emphasis on the UK where the most detailed statistics are published. The benefits that have accrued from animal use in the past are then listed although, it is indicated, these benefits do not necessarily provide a moral justification for continued use. The costs to animals are discussed in terms of pain, stress and anxiety, and the general mental and cognitive abilities of different species are considered in relation to their capacity to suffer.

Practical strategies for recognizing, assessing and reducing the costs imposed on animals in biomedical research are then suggested. Some excellent practical advice is given to reduce costs during all stages of housing, handling and research. However, greater coverage of the use of demand theory to assess high priority needs, and the use of behavioural measures of aversion would have been valuable in this section. The possibilities for replacing animals in research generally, and in toxicology testing specifically, by the development of alternatives are also considered, although there appeared to be a fundamental difference in opinion within the Working Party about whether total replacement would ever be achieved. The highlight of the book for me came in Chapter 7 when attempts were made to balance costs and benefits. A number of real but anonymous research projects were selected (how?) for consideration as 'case studies'. A framework for evaluating the costs and benefits were devised and the deliberations of the Working Party summarized for each project. Here the expertise and time of the Working Party appeared to have been put to exceptionally good use, and this chapter could stand as a model to any ethics or research review committee in both the breadth and depth of questions asked, and the practical suggestions made. It seems impossible that Home Office Inspectors, responsible for similar evaluations of proposed

research projects in the UK, could conceivably have the time to review all projects in this detail. The conclusion of the Working Party that local research review committees could play an important complementary role to that of government seems fully justified by this exercise.

The uses of animals in teaching and education are also discussed, although one would not realise this from the book's title. After my own experiences in both school and university I was fascinated to read how attitudes have changed in recent years with, for example, dissection no longer an absolute requirement of most Examining Boards. Some members of the Working Party felt there was now little continued justification for the use of animals in secondary schools or 1st degree courses. Others felt that some careful use was acceptable although, strangely recommended that animals should not be killed in front of students. Is this sort of protection really the best way to promote humane and realistic attitudes towards animals? A unanimous agreement was reached that the practice of 'survival surgery' reported from the USA and The Netherlands, was unacceptable.

The last part of the book debates moral and philosophical views of animal use. The writings of authors such as Singer, Frey and Clark are summarized very briefly but, on the whole fairly, eg (p 301) 'There is no good reason, Singer argues, not to respect or give equal consideration to the interests of animals alongside those of humans', or (p 304) Rachels concludes 'Therefore our treatment of humans and other animals should be sensitive to the pattern of similarities and differences that exist between them. Where there is a difference that justifies treating them differently we may; but where there is no such difference, we may not'. The crux for the Working Party was to establish whether there is any morally relevant difference between humans and all other species which justifies treating all non-human animals so differently. Unfortunately this section of the book is confused, perhaps reflecting the difficulty there was in reaching any semblance of an agreed conclusion. The overall impression is one of a quick search for some (any) difference eg 'temporal self-consciousness', 'rationality' which could be used to maintain the difference in research ethics for animals and humans. On p 321 the Working Party states that 'if there are primate species who display intelligent behaviour which points in the direction of the possession of self-consciousness, then they should be extended the protection of a research ethics closer to that used for human beings'. Even given the paucity of information we have about the cognitive capacities or indications of self-awareness in other species, I would think that the word 'if' could already be replaced by 'since' for at least some primate species. After more than 300 pages of excellent, thought-provoking and comprehensive discussion I was disappointed that the bullet was not bitten at the end, and that a human-animal divide rather than a human-animal continuum was ultimately defended.

I also wondered why no women were included on the 16 member panel of the Working Party. My last, more generous, thought was to recommend this book as essential reading for anyone involved in research or teaching with animals.

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