

For an ethics of experimentation. Moral arguments supporting 3Rs

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Abstract

A non-ideological approach to the moral questions posed by the use of animals for experimental purposes involves taking into account: i) the debate that has developed since the modern age on the ontological status of animals and on what is due to them or we must recognize; ii) the new frontiers of knowledge opened up by disciplines such as ethology, anthrozoology, animal psychology; iii) the arguments in support of or against experimentation with animals, referring also to new perspectives opened up by methodologies commonly defined as alternatives.

Referring to the 3Rs, an important starting point is to critically consider the impasse generated by the conflict of interests between human and animal welfare or, in another respect, by the conflict of benefits for humans - costs for animals. Effective development of the 3Rs requires epistemological awareness and ethical competence as the assumption of responsibility by researchers and OPBA members for the well-being of humans and animals, giving reasons for the choices that are made.

Introduction

D.L. no. 26/2014, art.1, proclaims that the use of animals for scientific or educational purposes should only be considered where a scientifically valid, non-animal alternative is unavailable to achieve the result. This is a principle assertion, very demanding and difficult to apply. The definition of “desired result” raises specific epistemological and ethical problems in experimentation, for example the use and function of *ad hoc* assumptions, as well as the methods and modality of experimentation. History teaches that scientifically valid, reasonable and desirable methods are not neutral at all, but strictly connected to philosophic, metaphysic, scientific views. Galileo’s theories, in fact, were not scientifically valid or reasonable for his time, and raised ethical and theological issues.

A non-ideological approach to moral

issues about animal use in research involves that: i) the debate developed since modern age to these days about ontological status of animals and what is required or we have to recognize to them; ii) new knowledge issues initiated from ethology, anthrozoology, animal psychology; iii) evidences supporting or in contrast with animal use in experimentation, with reference to new points of view initiated from alternative methods.

Reference to 3Rs is an important starting point for critical consideration of the impasse caused from the contrast between human and animal “wellbeing” (that is difficult to define) or humans’ benefits – animal costs.

We need to critically analyze (pseudo) utilitarian approach upon which cost-benefit analysis rests.

A correct cost-benefit analysis requires: i) same consideration for all stakeholder interests; ii) measurable and predictive consequences; iii) agent neutral position; iv) results not influenced by morally irrelevant parameters.

All these conditions are usually not considered in the project evaluation.

J. Harsanyi introduced the notion of “imaginative empathy” to enable an interpersonal comparison of utilities and explain how we can imagine to be in the shoes of another person, simulating another’s desires and discover his preferred course of action. If we assume the “similarity postulate”, *a priori* we can look at human reactions and basic feelings as similar, considering difference factors. How far is possible to extend this postulate to animals?

Researchers, ethics committees, animal-welfare bodies, do not look at the issue of developing a related interspecific social utility (assuming it was possible).

If we support the method of calculation, is cost-benefit analysis the most appropriate to answer to the question: “animal experimentation can considerably reduce human risk?”

As to animal welfare we can consider the issue from two perspectives. The first is that instrumentally animal welfare is functional to the experiment’s correct outcome; the second is that humans are responsible of animal welfare, whether in captivity or in cohabitation with them. Anywhere, this issue involves: i) centrality of animals’ cognitive dimension; ii) the transition, both for humans and animals, from a quantitative (material resources based) to a qualitative approach to welfare; iii) consider wellbeing as opportunity of realize the capabilities in specific contexts, and develop physical and cognitive abilities, both species specific or biographically gained.

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Results

The result is that the management of animal suffering in experimentation and cost-benefit analysis (in the case of use) must be reconsidered. We should replace the word “cost” with “harm”.

In view of this, I support an effective, aware, increasingly widespread use of 3R through the implementation and the development of an ethics competence of researchers and animal-welfare bodies members. Ethics competence is the ability to make moral judgments, justifying the choices, and the extension of ethics of care to interspecific relations.

Environment is very important in biography of animal used in experimentation, just like “sentience” and opportunity of realize their cognitive abilities in the context they are living in.

That means issues of animal use in experimentation need to be studied and considered as processes in a complex system. In this complex system, animal-human otherness is, ethically, and requires a specific and aware accountability: researchers and animal-welfare bodies members have a moral duty to take care of animal welfare.

Moral responsibility ensures possible well-being of animals used in experimentation, so we have to deal with underestimations in customary practices. In particular, we have to consider: i) the environmental conditions in which animals are kept or used influence animal’s stress and quality of life; ii) these conditions are usually not considered as researcher’s responsibility; iii) assessment of psychological stress must be

associated to no invasive procedures too, because animals don't get easily used to routine procedures; iv) ethics committee and animal-welfare bodies members, often underestimate the harm and distress caused to animals by daily routine procedures; v) the animals' capacity to experience pleasure is underestimated.

D.L. no. 26/2014, art.1 requires, ethically, that researchers and therefore animal-welfare bodies members must assume the burden of proof about the need for use of animals for scientific purposes, considering rigorously all the available alternatives.

For this to happen there is a need for a strong epistemological awareness and an

effective ethics competence that they cannot delegate to experts. Everyone is responsible to himself, to others (animals too) for his choices. Everyone must evaluate critical issues of his choices and rationally justify them.

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