Ethical essay about the moral status of animals in medical research

This essay is based on pages 4 to 17 of chapter “The use of animals in research” of the book “Responsible conduct of research” by Adil E Shamoo and David B Resnik

One of the most controversial questions in today’s medical research is whether animal experiments can be morally justified or not. This question did not exist back in the seventeenth century, when people did not really consider that animals can experience suffering like humans do. This attitude was highly influenced by philosophers like René Descartes (1596–1650), who believed that animals are only machines and their reaction to treatment is just due to non-conscious internal mechanisms resulting in animal behaviour. This attitude, however, changed during the eighteenth and nineteenth century, when people started believing that animals can actually suffer and experience pain consciously. From then on, many organizations were found, which still fight for animal rights. Also a lot of independent persons advocated that animals have, just like humans, an inherent moral value, which should be taken into account when using them as our research objects.

In the next paragraphs I will describe and discuss some ideas and opinions concerning moral value of animals that came up in the last century. Thereby I will focus on the perspective of the Australian philosopher Peter Singer, who stood up for the belief that animals have moral value and deserve moral consideration. Thereafter, I will shortly introduce the view of another philosopher called Tom Regan, who mostly agreed with Peter Singer, but believed that animals do not only have a moral value but also have rights. I will compare and discuss those two opinions and will also mention critics and questions that came up after they published their ideas.

Singer’s main idea is that animals should be morally treated like humans, since they have – like humans – the capability of suffering. For him it does not matter, whether animals do not have the same cognitive functions or abilities like humans. The ability of suffering alone is the backbone for their moral consideration, according to Singer. However, many people would argue now: How could we be sure that animals really can suffer? As mentioned above, this ability has not always been obvious to people, since we cannot look into the minds of other species or just ask them how they feel. The thought of animal suffering rather became generally accepted in our society than actually proved. I personally believe, however, that there are many indications for this general thought to be true, especially from a biological point of view. The genetic and anatomical difference between humans and several species is not very high, suggesting that such fundamental abilities like experiencing pain and suffer consciously are not considerably different between species. In stating this, the next question already comes up: Which species are close enough to the human species to experience suffering in a similar or rather morally considerable way? This was also discussed by Singer himself, who argues that lower organisms like bacteria or worms do not deserve moral consideration, because they do not experience pain like humans do. But where to put the imaginary border between animals that deserve moral consideration and those that do not? I guess this question cannot really be answered by Singer’s theory of taking the ability to suffer as the decision factor for moral consideration of a species, since there is probably no exact border.

Even though Singer was mentioning that some organisms or other species are lower than the human one, he still was of the opinion that if we do not treat animals like humans we commit “speciesism”. What he means with this term is that we value our species more than all other species, even though all species that suffer have a moral value. He was drawing parallels to the term “racism” and looking back in time to what happened in former times, when people believed that white people are the best race compared to all others. Black people have been
enslaved and tortured, since their moral value was seen as low in the white society. This is of course not the only case of racism – it was also a huge problem in the Second World War, when Jewish people were seen as inferior. Even nowadays racism still plays a big role, even though people are slowly revising their thinking. Singer thinks that this rethinking should also happen in terms of speciesism, which is equal to racism for him, but not very widely accepted in our society. Following the rule to not commit speciesism, Singer believes that experiments, which are not moral to perform in humans are therefore not moral to perform in animals either. In all other cases we would commit “speciesism”, meaning one species would be valued more than another one, even though both should be equally morally considered.

I have to say, I agree to some extent with the term of speciesism. Often, animals are not treated well or are sacrificed for the human’s sake, so that humans can have a better life. This does not only concern animal experiments in medical research, but also how we make use of animals in the meat and leather industry for example. We sacrifice them for our well-being, even if many people might agree that animals do have a moral value. But why do we do that? I guess the answer is not that we do not care about animals, but that we just care more about ourselves. Even though we might have the same objective value than other species, we do not have the same subjective value. People would tend to weigh human suffering more than animal suffering, even though they might also feel bad for animals. But if we had to decide to either let a human suffer or a mouse for instance, most people would probably go for the mouse, because we give more value to the human being. On the other hand, however, I think that there would be quite some people that struggle with this decision if it was a dog instead of a mouse. Dogs have a very high moral status in our modern society and many people would probably give them an (almost?) equal state as humans. That means, we do not only decide between human and animal. We also give higher values to certain species than to others within the animal kingdom.

In this regard, I do not think that we could ever act as if all animals have the same values than humans and I therefore also have to disagree in the end with Singers term of “speciesism”. I think we do have to consider the moral values of all animals, however in my view there is a grade of subjective moral value between different species. I mean, who would really feel bad for bacteria and worms and argue they would deserve the same moral consideration as cats or dogs for instance? Even in a biological view, one could not argue that they can feel or experience the same like mammals do. So I also disagree with the statement that speciesism is as bad as racism. The differences between races are much lower than between species and we can therefore not put those two on the same level.

One last thing I want to discuss about Singers view of moral consideration of animals is the actual term of “suffering”. What is suffering? The first thing we think about is feeling pain. But if it would only be about feeling pain, then we should probably not distinguish between a human and a mouse, since both have a similar ability of pain conception. In this case I would maybe agree that it is speciesism to say the pain conception of a mouse is less than the one of a human. However, the term “suffering” can mean much more than just actual pain conception. We can suffer, if we do not feel comfortable or if we feel stressed in our environment. We can also suffer if our needs are not fulfilled, such as food, sleep or most importantly social needs. This can affect all kinds of species, however, what is the main difference between humans and other species is our self-consciousness and awareness of what is actually happening. This might also be true for monkeys and some other higher species, but most other animals probably are not even aware of feeling the pain of discomfort and react more according to their instincts and reflexes, without really knowing what is going on. This is for sure not the same for the average human, who experiences pain and discomfort in a fully aware way.
In the next paragraphs I want to shortly discuss the perspective of another philosopher – Tom Regan. He agrees in many points with Peter Singer especially in regards to the moral status of animals. But he even went a bit further – he claimed that animals do not only deserve moral consideration but also rights, just like humans do. But can animals have rights in a social system built up by humans? Can they have rights, even if they do not understand our rules and do not actively contribute to our system? Well, for Regan the answer is definitely “yes”, they can. Many people disagreed with this statement, since per definition, only those ones have rights that follow the moral rules and are able to take over responsibilities in our society. Regan knew a good argument against this definition – what about children and mentally retarded people? Don´t they have rights then? Well, of course they do and everybody would probably argue for that. At this point it is difficult to neglect Regans perspective concerning animal rights, since the main opponent point looses its strength by claiming for instance that children do have rights without taking any moral responsibilities.

However, it is still obvious that there is a difference in rights between children, animals and an human adult. Regan therefore distinguished between “moral agents” and “moral patients”. Moral agents are the ones taking responsibilities and following the moral rules consciously. Moral patients on the contrary are the ones that are included in this system even if they do not contribute to it or follow the moral rules actively. Moral patients of course do not have the same rights, since they are not allowed to make any important decisions in society. However, they have certain needs and interests, like well-being and having enough food and they even can make their own decisions to avoid pain or experience pleasure. Therefore, they should have rights in order to protect those needs and interests, such as the right to live, the right to have food and the right for well-being. Here we again have to consider the imaginary border I mentioned above – which animals deserve to be protected by having moral rights in our society and which ones do not? Which animals can actually make (conscious) decisions about what they want and which ones just act out of reflexes and instincts to avoid tissue damage? For me there is again no clear answer to it, since we do not know about how aware or self-conscious certain species are and if they therefore should be morally considered in our system. As I stated before, there is no exact line between animals that deserve moral consideration and therefore rights in Regans view and those, which do not have to be morally considered. It is a grade of moral value within all the species, whereby the human adult has the highest value.

Regan tried to find a solution for the question of how to grade the moral value of a species – or better how to NOT grade it. He argues that every living species that is capable of deciding and experiencing has an inherent moral value, which does not differ between species. Here, he even referred to the term “speciesism”, if we do not account the same inherent value to each of the living species. I actually like this view, since it is very objective. We as humans do not have this objective view on all animals, since we are one of them and consider ourselves as the most valuable. A rat would for sure decide for the other rat in its cage rather than for a human being. In this case the rat is the one of the higher value compared to the human. This reminds me of a statement already made in the antique times in Greece - „If horses had gods, their gods would look like horses” (Xenophanes of Colophon [570 - 470 BC]). What I want to say with this statement is that everything we create in our heads is subjective and dedicated to a certain perspective, since we only can see life out of the perspective of a human being. The perspective of a rat, a horse of whatever other species might be completely different. They may care about us to a certain extent, since we in some cases live close together with them, however they would probably in most cases value the members of their own species more (to whatever extent they are able to “value” things). Coming to the point – every living thing does not only have an intrinsic but also an extrinsic value given by the others in its surrounding.
Objectively, we should therefore treat animals as if they have rights and an equal value like humans, since their intrinsic value is the same. That is what Tom Regan argues and this statement can also be compared to Peter Singers view that all animals should be equally morally considered. Taking this objective point of view into account, animal experiments could only be morally justified, if the purpose or the outcome of those experiments is in the animals interest. Otherwise we would sacrifice animals for the sake of a human interest, which should not be valued higher, since we have the same intrinsic value.

Subjectively, sacrificing animals seems more acceptable to us than sacrificing a human – even if it was for a human interest. This is kind of paradox, but can be explained by our view of giving the human being a higher value than other species. Our well-being is more important to us than the well-being of other species, which may sound a bit cruel and self-centred, but in most cases is true. Most people would argue that it is right to sacrifice animals in for instance medical research, but sacrificing a human would not be seen as right. In the end it has to be animals that are used to help us acquire essential knowledge about how our body works, in order to understand how diseases work and finally maybe find drugs to cure those diseases in human. And not only in human – maybe also in animals.

In the end, even though there are many theories and perspectives about animals in medical research, there is no answer that satisfies everyone. There are of course people that do agree with Singer and/or Regan, however there are also some people like Cartesians and behaviourists that think animals are only machines, object to their unconscious reactions to outer signals. I think that the truth lies somewhere in between those two opinions. I think that there is a difference between animals and machines and I believe that many animals can suffer consciously. I also think that we cannot just distinguish between human and animal, but we should rather distinguish between all kinds of species, since the ability to suffer is probably stronger in some species than in others. Thus, different species should be given different moral values and also different rights according to their needs and interests, especially when it comes to medical research. How much value we give to species can only be decided subjectively, since we can never know how much animals are aware of and there is no measurement for moral value either. If we do use animals for a human interest for instance in medical research, the most important thing we should keep in my view is the respect towards animals. Even if the experimental animal might just be a worm, we should still not play around with it as if it was a toy. If we perform our research on a basis built up on respect and awareness of the animals needs, the whole animal experimentation does not get out of control and stays within a tolerable ethic frame. Tolerable in a way that animal experiments can be accepted to be performed when necessary, even though they cannot be morally justified to 100%.