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EWP Ethical Research

Assignment 2.3

October 27, 2015

The Ineffectiveness of Singer’s Comparison between Human Suffering and Animal Suffering

Animal subjects are an important part of scientific research. Animals have been used as subjects in biomedical research to test the effectiveness and safety of drugs that would eventually be released to the public. Animals have also been used to test commercial products. However, many scientists and nonscientists have fiercely debated the morality of using animals in biomedical research. Because there is no way of knowing if animals can consent to participating in research, the topic of animal experimentation has become very controversial (Barnbaum and Byron, 191).According to Deborah Barnbaum and Michael Byron in their article “The Use of Animals and Other Resources in Research,” there currently are United States government regulations “developed by the Interagency Research Animal Committee,” (Barnbaum and Byron, 196) and by other agencies that provide some protection to animals when it comes to their participation in research. These protections ensure that the animals used in biomedical research are fed well, not subject to unnecessary physical abuse, and are provided proper shelter. The protections also encourage scientists to minimize the amount pain inflicted on animals in the research process (Barnbaum and Byron, 196).

Despite these protections there still remains a lot of debate about whether it is ethical to even use animals in scientific research. Those who object to animal research argue that because animals can’t consent, animal research is wrong.Another argument made by those against animal research is that “animals should not be used in experiments because these studies ultimately benefit humans and not animals.” (Barnbaum and Byron, 192). This view has been widely disproven by several studies involving animals as subjects that have benefited animals as well as humans. Others say that because we have computer models today, animal research has become obsolete and thus unethical. However, computer models aren’t always sufficient enough when it comes to testing products.

There are several arguments that defend the use of animals in research. Of these arguments, the most extreme argue that all animals can’t feel pain. This argument has been scientifically disproved and thus isn’t valid today (Barnbaum and Byron, 193). Another argument asserts that the lives of animals are less valuable than the lives of humans (Barnbaum and Byron, 193). This means that it is morally acceptable to kill an animal to save a human life. The problem with this argument is that it ignores that several different kinds of animals do have human qualities such as the ability to feel emotions (Barnbaum and Byron, 193). However, the strongest arguments defending the use of animals in scientific experiments “are those that focus on the benefits of using animals in research” (Barnbaum and Byron 194). Proponents of this argument cite the number of successful cures to illnesses that have been discovered from studies that used animal subjects and that the harm done to a few animals outweighs the benefits that these experiments provide to many animals and to the human populace. One flaw in this argument is that the results from experimentation on animals aren’t guaranteed to be the same for humans.

Peter Singer, a philosophy professor at Princeton University, is one of the most vocal objectors to the use of animals is scientific research. In his article, “The Significance of Animal Suffering,” Singer attempts to argue against the use of animals in scientific research by trying to disprove the already mentioned belief that humans are superior to animals. He states that the same research morals and ethics that are applied to humans should be applied to animals (Singer 233). The belief that humans are superior to animals is similar to the past racist belief that whites are superior to blacks and also to past sexist belief that women are inferior to men because they all come from an unjustified idea of one group being superior to another (Singer 235). Singer defines “speciesism,” (Singer 235) as when one believes that the interests of one’s own species should be given “more weight [than] to those of the interests of another” (Singer, 235). He then claims that those who argue that humans are superior to animals to defend animal experimentation are defending speciesism and the discrimination of animals (Singer, 235).

Also, according to Singer, the belief that all humans are equal isn’t true. Babies are incapable of comprehending morals and humans that are born intellectually disabled have less mental capabilities than other humans (Singer 236). Thus, humans shouldn’t assume that animals are inferior to them and that the interests of humans should come before the interests of animals. Instead, people should try to imagine themselves in the positions of suffering animals so we would be able to sympathize more with them (Singer 241).

On the surface, Singer’s arguments seem to make a lot of sense in their appeal to the reader’s pathos that it’s morally wrong to inflict pain on living creatures because they aren’t human. In addition, one would be inclined to think that since issues like racism and sexism are prevalent in our society, of course speciesism should also be a concern of the United States. However, Singer's argument comparing human suffering to animal suffering is flawed as he fails to understand that discrimination against humans is a complete ethical violation, while the discrimination of non-human animals is acceptable in some cases. Moreover, the fundamental problem with the argument of speciesism is that it misses several key differences that exist between animals and humans that do not exist between different human races and sexes. Therefore, we can’t compare the discrimination of humans to the discrimination of non-human animals.

Before understanding the difference between speciesism and racism, one must realize that there are many different animal species. This ranges from humans to mosquitos. If we were to apply Singer’s definition of speciesism in this context, then we would notice how much of an overgeneralization Singer is making. Why do we feel entitled to eat clams knowing that to satisfy our appetite an animal has to die? Do we feel that we are that much more important than clams? And aren’t some small animals parasites? To remove a tapeworm from a human is to assume that our lives are more important than its life. These statements sound ridiculous but they would be viable if we were to accept Singer’s definition of speciesism. Thus, speciesism doesn’t make any sense. If we didn’t experiment on other animals, we would still be discriminating against other lifeforms by just looking out for our general welfare.

In addition, there is almost no comparison between our supposed discrimination of animals and the discrimination of other genders and ethnicities. Racism can be defined as the belief that one ethnic group of people is superior to another. Racist actions such as the Jim Crow laws, which severely limited the rights of black Americans in the south, are actions taken with harmful intent. Sexism is the belief that one sex is superior to the other, and is also wrong. Today, if an individual is mistreated or denied a right because of his/her race, sex, religion, or sexual orientation, our society would rightfully defend that individual. However, even if we were not mistreating other animals, and not experimenting on them, we would still be practicing speciesism because the animals that we are experimenting on would not have all of their rights. Until animals are able to hold public office, attend the same schools as us, and play on the sports teams that we play on, we will remain a society that discriminates based on species. However, it’s common knowledge that we can’t grant animals these rights. Moreover, by comparing speciesism to racism and sexism, Singer completely oversimplifies and undermines the latter two issues. Throughout his essay, he makes comparisons between the racism towards African-Americans and the discrimination of other species. These comparisons are inherently discriminatory themselves as they imply that there is a similarity between animals and traditionally disadvantaged people.

Singer conveniently fails to address the most important argument used to defend animal research: its benefits to society and to other animals. Although as previously mentioned, there are problems with the human benefits argument, it does show that there is a huge difference between human suffering and animal suffering, especially when dealing with biomedical research. There has never been an experiment discriminating against other humans that had utilitarian benefits to society. According to research ethicist Shrader-Frechette, racism and sexism is also a concern in ethical research, as many traditionally disadvantaged groups have a much higher chance of being harmed in a research process (Shrader-Frechette, 13). These groups have been historically more vulnerable to deception by scientific communities (Schrader-Frechette 13). A famous example of this discrimination is the Tuskegee syphilis study. This study was done on a black community from the start of the 20th century to the 1970s to examine the effects of syphilis on the members of the community. No treatment was offered to the subjects. This was an ethics violation because in addition to this study having little to no benefit to society, the participants in this study were deprived of their right to consent. Several subjects were coerced into participating because they were too financially dependent on the measly benefits the researchers gave them to leave the study (Barnbaum and Byron, 22). This experiment was racist because the ethics violation was directed at a specific racial group. Therefore, because human suffering doesn’t have utilitarian benefits to society and because it is unethical, it is different from animal suffering.

However, there have been animal experiments when the harm done to a small number of animals has benefited all of human society and also non-human animals. An example of such an experiment is a recently conducted study testing cures for the Ebola virus. According to Lisa Oestereich in her article, “Successful Treatment of Advanced Ebola Virus Infection with T-705 (favipiravir) in a small animal model,” researchers were working on the best treatment for the Ebola virus using animal experimentation and encountered a good amount of success (Oestereich, 17). All the “animal experiments were carried out….in strict accordance with the recommendations of the German society for laboratory animal science under supervision of a veterinarian.” (Oestereich, 18). Thus, this shows that there are animal experiments where animals can be treated humanely and where the result will benefit society as well as animals.

Another major flaw in Singer’s argument is that he makes an assumption that all humans are not equal (Singer 236). This assumption, in addition to legitimizing discrimination against other humans, is morally flawed. The Nuremburg Code is a universally accepted document which states that all humans have the same basic rights and are thus equal. It is the original document on research ethics (Barnbaum and Byron, 3). The Nuremburg Code was the result of the Nuremburg trials which were put in place to punish the war criminals of Nazi Germany. After the most deadly war in world history during which the world witnessed some of the most horrific violations of human rights, a certain set of rules needed to be established. In addition to the Holocaust, Hitler enacted a program that killed hundreds of thousands of mentally challenged people without getting consent from their families. Even though these people couldn’t consent, their family members would still have been able to understand them. We can’t understand even the brightest of animals this way. Although families do own pets, we don’t entirely understand our pets like we do our own family members. Thus Singer’s argument that humans have different levels of intelligence doesn’t prove that humans aren’t equal**.**

Singer does try to get the reader to understand the suffering of animals by asking the reader to put herself in the mind of an animal in a given circumstance. For example, “to defend a proposal for improving the housing of battery hens, at the cost of making it more difficult for some families to afford eggs,” (Singer 241) Singer would “imagine what it is like is to be a hen in a battery cage, compared with being a free ranging hen” (Singer 241). Singer’s assertion here completely ignores the fundamental issue that the entire animal rights debate is based on: animals can’t give free and informed consent because we can’t understand them (Barnbaum and Byron 191). For that reason, we simply can’t visualize what it would be like to be a hen in a cage. Instead, we would be visualizing what it would be like to be a human in a cage. On the contrary, we can definitely foresee the consequences of raising the cost of eggs for some families. Therefore, Singer fails to understand that the suffering in humans is completely different from the suffering of animals.

Whether the use of animals in research is ethical or not, one can’t use Peter Singer’s argument that animal suffering is the same as human suffering to argue against animal experimentation. Humans have morals and thus can feel obligated to treat other humans equally. Those humans who are intellectually disabled are still equal to other humans because there are people who can fully understand them. Because animals don’t have morals and because animals can’t consent, we can continue to use them in scientific research so long as animal participation in research continues to produce results that benefit both humans and animals.

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