

Yao Yao

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A Call to Practice Empathy on Animal Testing

Introduction

When I first heard of animal testing, I didn't think about it much. To the younger me, it seemed natural that we as humans need to do whatever we can to maximize the benefits for us, and animal testing seemed to be a stable way to provide safe solutions to many human illnesses. As surprised as I am now, I was convinced that the cosmetic products needed to be animal tested for safety as well. Unnecessary beauty products were a justifiable reason for animal testing to me. I wasn't the only one who considered animal testing morally acceptable. The environment which I was surrounded by thought so too and promoted it. However, as I became exposed to more education on critical thinking and the matter of the subject, I realized that my thoughts were irrational and did not go through the amount of consideration this topic deserves.

People support animal testing for different reasons. A number of them support animal testing because they have only been told the benefits of animal testing and never gave much thought about whether this is ethical, so education and awareness are the keys. More information and considerations on the subject need to be presented to the public. I am aware that a lot of work has been put into advocating for animal rights and some people might have gotten tired, but I believe this is an ongoing social issue that requires consistent attention and effort to be

resolved. In this paper, I will discuss the current situation on animal testing, the reasons why some people find animal testing morally acceptable, why it is unethical to continue animal testing, and some possible solutions.

Context

A large number of animals are being used for testing every year in the US, yet we do not know the accurate amount. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)'s animal usage annual report 2019, 797,546 animals were used in regular activities at research facilities, but this number does not reflect the actual number of tested animals. USDA only reports the animals that are protected by the US federal Animal Welfare Act (AWA), and 95% of animals like rats and mice used are not protected by AWA (Hu). It is estimated that 12 and 24 million animals are used every year in the US (US). More specifically, AWA does not protect cold-blooded animals at all, and birds, rats, and mice used in research (Favre). Not being protected means that there are no regulations for them at all. Because the recordkeeping is not required for unprotected animals, we have no way to know what kind of experiments they go under, whether it involved pain and pain drugs, etc. which makes these animals more susceptible to receiving cruel experiments.

Even if the tested animals are protected by the laws, it is difficult for them to escape the fate that they share with unprotected animals of losing their lives during or after experiments. According to USDA animal usage annual report 2019, 28% of the protected animals experienced pain and received pain drugs, and 6% experienced pain but received no pain drugs. Yet there is no experiment records on unprotected animals who are more likely to experience pain without protection from the laws. During the experiments, some animals undergo small experiments and await to be used the next time until death while other animals who undergo experiments such as

surgical experiments usually get euthanized because their body parts need to be removed for analysis (Murnaghan). The end of tested animals' lives is not usually pleasant. While some animals are sedated before euthanized, many animals are euthanized by gas chamber, decapitation, breaking the spine, etc. (Murnaghan). In rare cases, some animals get to be rehomed, but this is considered inhumane by some researchers because they think it is cruel for them to cope with a completely new lifestyle (Murnaghan).

With lots of people's efforts to advocate for animal rights for testing animals starting in the 20th century, more people are exposed to this issue (Hajar). People's opinions on animal testing differ significantly. In a survey conducted in 2014, 52% of people oppose animal testing while 48% favor and this does not seem to differ based on political parties (Strauss). However, the survey shows that the more scientific knowledge they have, the more likely they will favor animal testing (Strauss). A study conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2015 also showed that 89% of researchers favor animal testing for research purposes. In general, people grow to be more against animal testing over time. In 2001, only 26% of adults think animal testing is unethical compared to 52% in 2015 (Swetlitz). According to the Human Society of the United States, more than 40 countries have banned animal testing for cosmetics. Although it does not include the US as a country, some states like California in the US have banned animal testing for cosmetics as well.

Analysis

This paper analyzes how humans are motivated or convinced that animal testing is morally acceptable in three ways: the preference given to certain animals in society, the benefits humans perceive to achieve from only animal testing, and the tendency that humans set their own species superior to other species.

Humans give preferences to certain animals over the others, and this can create an environment where people think it is morally acceptable to do animal testing on the ones they don't favor. Recent research shows that in general, people believe that it is the least legitimate to use animals like non-human primates, dogs, cats, and followed by pigs and sheep while the use of animals like rodents and small fish is the most justifiable (Sandgren et al.). The researchers also find that people determine whether a certain animal could be used for testing is based on factors "familiarity, phylogeny, and capacities", in other words, how similar or how connected we feel to these animals (Sandgren et al.). Another study has also pointed out that humans are more "empathetic" towards animals that they perceive similar to them (Batt). Interestingly, animals that are not protected by the federal Animal Welfare Act are the ones that humans feel the least connected based on these studies, like rats, mice, and cold-blooded animals like fish, yet these animals also make up the most for tested animals. People's preferences contribute to the inequality in treating animals based on species. Being human companions, dogs and cats seem to receive major attention and care in human society. Even the Animal Welfare Act and Animal Welfare Regulations (Blue Book) have specified terms only applied to these two species. More surprisingly, it further specifies regulations on the exercise requirement for dogs at research facilities. The discrimination towards certain species gives people a psychological permission to operate upon other animals' lives.

Not only do people think they can morally do experiments on certain animals that they don't favor, but they also have their reasons to do so, namely, their perception of the potential benefits that only animal testing could bring. One of the most common believes is that animal testing is the most effective and only secure way to find medicines for curing human illnesses. However, the truth is, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) had approximated that 92%

of drugs that pass preclinical tests (involving animals) do not advance to the market and the failure rate has been increasing to now close to 96% (Akhtar). The major reasons for the failures are due to “lack of effectiveness and safety problems that were not predicted by animal tests.” (Akhtar). While animal testing has brought great outcomes to humans for years, it might not be as effective as many people perceive, yet we are sacrificing millions of lives every year in these experiments. A recent example also shows that animals are not the only option to test, humans can be tested too. Facing the severity and urgency of COVID-19, the world needed effective vaccines as soon as possible. On this special occasion, Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna were given permission to simultaneously test their vaccines on both animals and humans. Tal Zaks, chief medical officer at Moderna even said “I don’t think proving this in an animal model is on the critical path to getting this to a clinical trial”. This recent success has shown that human testing is possible and could be safe without using animal testing first.

Besides the COVID-19 vaccine testing on humans, there have been many instances in history when humans were used for experiments, though not ethically. However, our responses to these human experiments can be drastically different from how we see animal testing because fundamentally, many humans place themselves superior to any other species. Unit 731, a biological and chemical research unit developed by Japan during WWII, specialized in developing biological weapons and many other human experiments. These experiments include cruel tests like, infecting the humans with virus then dissecting them alive with no pain drugs in case that affects the accuracy (Kristof), freezing the human limbs and strike them with a short stick, providing no water, and record the symptoms until death, etc. Most people will be distributed and disagree with what they do. This is obviously inhumane and cruel to us for that unit 731’s experiments created excruciating pain and fear for these tested people without any

consent. On the contrary, vivisections, infecting with a virus, and many other experiments that people may consider monstrous on humans are something that happens to lab animals. Why do many people find it acceptable? Speciesism is one of the reasons. Speciesism is when we place our own species as the most important and superior one compared to other species. We place human value before non-human animal value. Many people believe that humans have greater value than all other non-human animals, so it is inevitably more unethical when cruel testing is done on humans (D. Thomas 199). Speciesism is the excuse for cruelty on animals without equal consideration. Just like racism or sexism, speciesism places one group over the others based on arbitrary traits that are morally irrelevant. It enforces and justifies the use of other animal lives.

All three factors contribute to why many people think animal testing is acceptable, but the fundamental issue is speciesism. Humans are interested in benefiting themselves. Unless there is a reason not to, we prefer to choose the option that will optimize the outcome. As history once again repeats itself, speciesism is identical to sexism and racism in a way that we optimize one group's benefits while ignoring the others. Without knowing the danger of sexism and racism, women and people of color have been suffering tremendously in history. With the knowledge and criticism on sexism and racism, society is starting to allow women and people of color to thrive and create a more diverse and healthier world. We are now facing the same challenge to consider for other groups that are not of our own.

Philosophy Lens

Why don't people care about species that are not humans? Thomas Hobbes might have an answer. According to Hobbes, the state of nature is the state of war. We as humans are self-interested animals with the rights to do anything to survive given by the right of nature. To avoid a "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" life, Hobbes suggests that we need social contract

where we give up some rights that can hurt other people in exchange for a society where we can thrive. We respect each other because that is the way to maximize our individual benefits. As we advance in technology, humans have the absolute power to physically dominate many other species if they want, be it to kill them for fur, be it to eliminate them for decoration, be it to experiment on them for drug safety. It is in our best interest to breed and use animals for research experiments. It allows us to know more about how the body functions, whether a drug is safe to some degree, etc. It would be a lot more effective if humans were to do experiments on other humans because the results would be a lot more accurate without the major physical differences from other animals, despite how cruel these experiments can be. But we have the best interest to avoid being used for cruel testing. This is when we turn ourselves to the animals because experiments on animals won't bring any negative outcome to humans as a species.

Hobbes' contractarianism can explain why we might feel compelled to do animal testing, but is it ethical? What makes something morally relevant? Peter Singer suggests that we cannot ignore anyone's interest to avoid pain. It is not about the appearances, the intelligence, or whether we like them or not. Many animals can feel pain and have the best interest to avoid pain and pursue what they would enjoy. With the power that humans possess, a lot of our decisions will impact the animals' ability to avoid pain. It is unethical to not consider their suffering when we make a decision. Animal testing can perform cruel experiments on animals that conflict with their interest to avoid pain. Most to all tested animals get euthanized at some point at the research facilities. These tested animals have the best interest to not be killed by being put in a gas chamber and experience the painful lack of oxygen to their brain. Even if they are euthanized by sedation without pain, animal testing still takes away their ability to pursue their natural life

outside of laboratories. It is unethical to ignore their will to avoid pain and live their natural lives.

Solutions

The possible solutions to animal testing can have two approaches: to educate people on the issue and to discover new alternatives to animal testing.

Education through school and digital media is fundamental to inform the public of the current situation of animal testing. It is vital to help people realize the need to respect species other than humans. As referenced in the analysis section, it is in human nature that we prefer animals that have certain traits and neglect the well-being of animals that we don't favor. Digital media can help us feel closer to the marginalized animals, for example, a movie involving rats being the main character could help us connect more to the species and start to be aware of the marginalized animals.

No animal testing does not indicate we have no means to develop drugs or other products for humans. There are alternative testing options like 3D bioprinting and human testing. 3D bioprinting mostly aims to create a body tissue or organ for testing. There are more and more companies like French company Poietis that produces human tissues by 3D bioprinting, or ones like Swiss Sun Bioscience that produces mini-organs or organoids (Smith). Although research on bioprinting human body parts is still in the early stages, it provides a more ethical, affordable, and effective solution compared to animal testing (Smith). It is true that testing on single parts like organs or tissues can be different from a whole-body system (Smith), but its ethical value is the ultimate reason why we should keep researching their possibilities.

Conclusion

Animal testing has been historically used to help develop human products, but it is unethical to not consider the animal suffering involved and to ignore their best interest to avoid pain. Humans have preferences over animals based on their appearance and familiarity. These preferences can even create biased laws that result in unequal consideration among animals. Humans magnify the idea that we must do animal testing to ensure safety and drug efficiency, yet lots of people are not aware of the possibilities to test on humans and bioprinted human parts. Many people have the tendency and instinct to make humans superior to other species. It is important that we keep educating people through school and digital media that human as a species is not higher than other animals. For future research, we should devote more time and money to bioprinting or other technologies to replace animal testing. As an individual, although currently, it is difficult to avoid buying drugs without animal testing, we should avoid buying products that use animal testing when possible and spread the awareness of the animal testing situation on marginalized animals to people around us.

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