

# Taking Animals Seriously

Darwin's genius is appreciated by nearly all scientists of any stature. However, this appreciation is conveniently selective as it largely ignores Darwin's emphasis on the continuity of emotional experience between humans and non-humans. Darwin was first to provide scientific reasons for ethical concern about animals in his book *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, and he revealed his compassion with animals in a 1863 note on Trapping Agony, a Heart-felt Plea Against Steel-jaw Traps. All present knowledge demonstrates that Darwin was right once again. A new edition of *The Expression...* was prepared by Paul Ekman, a premier emotion psychologist, whose research confirmed that basic human emotions are innate and inherited from our last common ancestor with the apes. Brain and behavioral research shows that mammals, birds, and probably other vertebrates experience the good and the bad, and thus can be deliberately harmed or benefited by humans who act as moral agents. The most intelligent mammals and birds are self-aware, some mammals including cetaceans, elephants, and primates may act as empathic agents, and some non-human hominids act as moral agents. It is, therefore, egregiously anachronistic to maintain the primary and paramount ethical divide between humans and all other animals, and thus to discount a priori non-human life and suffering.

The power of science-based philosophical arguments brought about attempts to grant special treatment to at least the great apes. Prominent philosophers and scientists, including Richard and Jared Diamond, launched in 1993 The Great Ape Project which advocates giving the apes many of the human rights, and several nations (the Netherlands, New Zealand, Sweden, UK) banned experimenting on them. The US government granted retirement to experimental chimps and thus set a precedent for the principle of imposed moral contract whereby subjects are used and harmed but obtain something substantial in exchange for the harm. The ethics of imposed moral contract is a minimum acceptable compromise that guarantees respecting animals as subjects while harming them at the same time but only to the extent to which the harm can be compensated, which rules out inflicting extreme suffering.

The ethics of imposed moral contract is the highest form of controlled speciesism, which puts human benefits first but with qualifications. In the present practice of animal research, the control of speciesism is limited to the minimization of animal suffering by the 3Rs: replacing, reducing, and refining experiments. Although a sign of progress compared to no

restraint whatsoever in the recent past, the approval system based on "minimizing suffering as far as possible" remains in principle unacceptable because both key terms "minimizing" and "possible" are relative, making it permissive to anything, even immeasurable suffering, if practical or even pure scientific justification is deemed sufficient.

In Poland, the 3Rs are implemented by 18 local ethics committees and the National Ethics Committee for Animal Experimentation, which made a good start but then limited its activity to a minimum and fails to convey widely recommended humane experimental standards to local committees. While a handful of most proactive members attended a training session organized by the UK's Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, some training remains necessary for most committee members as their knowledge of one research area and a received notion of ethics are simply not good enough. There is a major problem with understanding that ethical review as applied to animal research hinges upon weighing harms against benefits, and that this requires an assessment of the scientific or practical significance of a project.

Whatever its quality, the project review works, at least at a basic level. In contrast, the regulation of

the oversight of treatment of animals in research institutions is a travesty. It condones sham supervision by individuals who may lack any concept of animal welfare: all that is required to supervise others' experimentation is a doctorate, 4 years of performing any animal experiments, and in-house training (commonly another sham). As a result, careless experimenters can be appointed as supervisors and thus avoid being supervised themselves.

Some nations provide much better care to animals in research but the problem of poorly controlled speciesism affects the whole of Western civilization. I anticipate, however, that our poorly controlled speciesism will evolve towards the ethics of imposed moral contract as a result of the emerging secular, science-informed and thus universal Western ethics of respect for individuals. Such ethics is crucial to survival of the Western world in its growing confrontation with aggressive religions and other dogmatic ideologies, but cannot be made consistent without taking animals seriously.



**Polish law ensures ethical review of projects but no control of how animals are treated**

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