Point of view

The rights of man and animal experimentation

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Author's abstract

Since emotions give contradictory signals about animal experimentation in medical science, man's relationship to animals must be based upon reason. Thomas Aquinas argues that man is essentially different from animals because man's intellectual processes show evidence of an abstract mechanism not possessed by animals. Man's rights arise in association with this essential difference. The consequence is that only man possesses true rights by Aquinas's definition; animals have them only by analogy. However, cruelty to animals is illicit and they should be protected, principally not because they have rights, but because he who is cruel to animals is more likely to be cruel to his fellowman. If there is a need for animal experimentation in science for the good of man, this approach gives philosophical justification for experimentation, since man's well-being must come before that of animals because of his unique possession of rights. However, those experiments should be carried out in the kindest way possible, to promote kindness towards man. To see man as solely part of a biological continuum in competition for rights with those beings close to him biologically, detracts from man's dignity.

My feelings towards animals are diverse. The lamb gives me joy as if it were a child yet I eat its flesh with delight. I am fascinated by the beauty of the biology of the rat in the laboratory, yet I will kill the black rat in the kitchen with disgust. Riding a horse enhances my humanity, yet I achieve its control by threat and punishment.

My emotions therefore give me contradictory signals about my relationship to animals. The relationship must be based upon reason. Is it important that I should understand my relationship to animals? When I find a range of animals from the mosquito to the chimpanzee, some of which I kill with impunity some of which I would defend physically, I must know which stand with me and which against me. 'Every man's death diminishes me', but is there an animal like

man, am I to be diminished by a fly? In a world where Englishmen have shot-out the Aborigines of Tasmania like vermin, and Englishmen treat dogs like kings, I must know where the line is to be drawn and why. That line is not to be based upon my contradictory emotions.

Thomas Aquinas stood at a fulcrum of philosophical history. He is equidistant between Aristotle and us and interprets the original Greek observation of nature in a manner relevant to our Roman-Christian-Newtonian tradition, of which modern science is a part. As is frequently the case he had considered the problem and arrived at a solution based upon reason, from which the contradiction of emotion had been excluded. 'Animal non habet jus' he declares: 'Animals do not have rights' (1). The assertion is shocking to late 20th century Northern European society, but it is based upon a rational analysis of the relationship between man and animals.

Aquinas sees man as the centre of the universe. He is not a collection of biochemistry that is better organised than the rest of nature. He is essentially different; that which makes him what he is is different from anything else in the observed universe. He bases his argument on man's ability to form abstract concepts, to put two together in his mind and produce a third. If the concepts are abstract (like love and patriotism) then, he argues, the machinery for producing a third (like peace) must itself be abstract. This non-physical mechanism is what makes man essentially different.

This view of the nature of man allows man to be placed in relation to the rest of the universe. Although there is little difference between the DNA of other primates and man, Aquinas sees the monkey as being closer to the mosquito than to man in terms of that which makes man what he is: the presence of an abstract principle.

What are 'rights'? If I have the right not to be killed at will yet a fly has no right not to be swatted then my rights must arise from something in me that is different from the fly.

If the purpose of rights is to preserve the individual, his constructive personal and social activities and the structure of society, then because man is different from the rest of nature and more valuable in Aquinas's terms, then his rights must be different from those of the rest of nature. In fact, if man is qualitatively

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different (by possessing an abstract principle) then his rights should be qualitatively different. In fact, Aquinas goes further, he says that only man has true rights, the animal kingdom has them by analogy. There is no disregard for the care of animals in this proposal. The philosophy of Aquinas was part of the cultural development that led to the close relationship of Francis of Assisi to the animal kingdom. The view that only man has rights in the absolute sense does not detract from the preciousness and beauty of the rest of nature, but it enhances man. In an age when man's rights are being questioned because of race or religion, enhancement of his position in nature must be beneficial.

In practice Aquinas's philosophy means that cruelty to animals must not be allowed by society and that caring for animals is to be encouraged. Not however, because animals have rights as man has rights, but because he who is cruel to animals will tend to be cruel to his fellowman: animals have to be protected so that man is protected.

Where then is the difference between this philosophical approach and the modern emotional donation of rights to animals? In practice man is expected to behave to animals in the same way in applying both approaches. However, there is a clear difference if there is conflict between the welfare of man and animals. Modern society finds some difficulty in allowing experimentation on animals in order to gain medical knowledge. Aquinas's approach creates no

such problem. Because of the clear distinction drawn between the nature of man and animals, if there is conflict between the well-being of one and the other then man's well-being must automatically come first. The application of such a philosophical approach to the problem of animal experimentation for medical need is helpful in a situation where emotions again give us opposing signals: a desire to cure human disease and a desire not to harm animals. The Aquinas approach clearly justifies the pain of animals in the service of relieving the pain of man. However, it would require that animal experimentation was done in the kindest way possible to help promote kindness towards man in the world.

A philosophical distinction between the rights of man and the rights of animals allows a rational justification for medical experimentation. The solution is essentially optimistic, seeing man as having an intrinsic value not related to his race, religion or social status. To see man as solely part of a biological continuum, in competition for rights with those beings close to him biologically, detracts from man's dignity.

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References

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News and notes

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