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Getting Darwin on your side

Professor Colin Blakemore the nation's apologist in chief for animal experimentation has written an article for the Times on the 200th anniversary of Darwin's birth (a strange anniversary date to pick; usually these celebrations are based on the anniversary of death, when we remember the great man).

That Darwin supported animal research is a curiously unscientific argument for the chief 'scientific' proponent of animal research to put forward. Darwin worked over 100 years ago when scientific research was in a very different state to that of today. It is also misleading of Professor Blakemore to cite it in his defence. The letter to the Times from Darwin which he cites argues for experiments on animals to further physiology. Yet now our knowledge of physiology is much more complete than it was at the time this letter was written. The kinds of experiments done today in British laboratories are often about treatments, including drug treatments for human disorders; they are not about furthering scientific knowledge, which is what motivated Darwin and his contemporaries. Drug technologies produced by commercial companies, however beneficial to human beings, and scientific knowledge are not the same thing. It is intellectually dishonest of Professor Blakemore to indiscriminately bring Darwin to his defence.

The argument which Professor Blakemore seems to be making that Darwin recognized that animals are sentient beings but still supported experimentation, is perhaps a claim by Professor Blakemore that you can be a vivisectionist and care for animals at the same time. Possibly; but the argument is not that Darwin or Professor Blakemore is 'cruel', it is about whether experimenting on animals is right or wrong.

Professor Blakemore quotes Joseph Lister, the English surgeon, who introduced the use phenol to sterilize wounds and surgical instruments :

There are people who have nothing against eating a lamb cutlet, people who do not even stop at shooting a pheasant despite the great risk of its... having to die in severe pain - people who still insist that is monstrous to inject a few microbes under the skin of a guinea pig in order to study their effects. These seem to me singularly inconsistent points of view..

But this argument is intellectually childish. Firstly; while some animal experiments may be about 'injecting a few microbes into a guinea pig' some are about deliberately inducing massive damage in higher animals such as cats and primates, causing far more prolonged pain and suffering than a bloody death on the hunting field. Secondly; there are substantive ethical differences which go beyond the argument from mere utility. People who are opposed to animal experimentation react against the way that experimenting on animals seems against the natural order, whileas killing an animal for food does not. It is an ethical argument about the kind of relationship which should persist between animals and humans. It is also an argument about what science is. If science is about objective knowledge should we be treating animals as objects? Or are animals more than objects? If animals are more than objects while not being subjects in the way that our fellow humans are, perhaps killing them for food is one thing (after all some animals if hungry enough would eat a human) but experimenting on them is another? These are the kinds of arguments which Blakemore's argument, via Lister, from utility misses.

Blakemore cites the RSPCA and a group called 'Fund for the Replacement of Animals in Experiments' (FRAME) as examples of good practice in 'working with and within the scientific community'. Let's just pause briefly and look at the Trustees for FRAME:

Professor David Morton is a 'laboratory animal veterinarian' according to the web site of another

group he is involved with.

Dr Jack Ferguson has worked in 'cosmetic product development for over 20 years' according to an industry magazine. (1)

Professor Michael Balls CBE MA DPHIL FIBiol is a professor of Medical Cell Biology at Nottingham University

Dr Richard Clothier is a reader in cellular toxicology, also at Nottingham

Professor David Kendall is a Professor of Cellular Pharmacology, also at the University of Nottingham

Professor Ian Kimber is Professor and Chair of Toxicology at the University of Manchester. In 2000 he won the SmithKline Beecham Laboratory Animal Welfare Prize.

It is not to attempt to take anything away from any of these accomplished scientists to note that as a group they are hardly likely to be critical of animal experimentation. It would appear that the only opposition Blakemore can tolerate is this call for a shift in emphasis from his academic peers. Indeed this is not really opposition at all. It seems to reflect an insular attitude to attempt to protect his position by casting a net of scientific justification around it. The eminent men (and it may or may not be relevant that they are all men) who comprise FRAME are professional scientists, not ethical philosophers. If Blakemore is really only prepared to listen to criticism from scientists then he is in effect shutting out the questions which are raised by animal experimentation, which are ethical in nature. The danger is that if Professor Blakemore has his way scientists may be left making decisions on the basis of perceived utility without the moderating influence of ethics.

Links

[The Times](#)

Notes

1. <http://www.in-cosmetics.com/page.cfm/action=ConfSpeaker/SpeakerID=5>