

Author's Commentary on "Changing the Subject"

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A poster on the door of a biologist's office reads, "You wouldn't be here to protest animal experimentation, if it weren't for animal experimentation." Whether or not that statement is true, we all enjoy the benefits of animal experimentation. The drugs we take were tested first on animals. Many medical advances that guide physicians and prolong our lives owe their discovery to the animal "models" chosen by the researchers. But is that right?

A philosopher friend of mine described a thought experiment he conducted to answer the question. Suppose you were in a room with fifty puppies. In the next room were all of the members of your family being held hostage by terrorists. You could foresee the future (important since terrorists are not to be trusted), and you knew that the terrorists would turn themselves over to the authorities and release your family unharmed, if you submitted to their demand to break the necks of all fifty puppies. He said that he would do it. He argued that this situation was analogous to animal experimentation and clarified the value of human life.

But what if the puppies were human babies? There is a strong tendency to want to preserve human life over animal life and to preserve familiar lives preferentially. But should feelings and beliefs be our ethical guides? I would like cold, hard reason to guide these sorts of decisions. In the case of the puppies, it is clear that losing one's entire family would be a greater personal loss for most people than losing fifty cute but unfamiliar dogs. I'm sure one could get over the trauma of killing the dogs with the help of family. From a personal perspective, the best decision is to kill the dogs.

That seems to be the level at which almost all moral reasoning occurs: the personal level. One usually chooses the answer first and then seeks to justify it using argument. If one steps back a little from the personal and looks at moral scenarios as an outsider, then the apparent clarity of moral problems begins to disappear. If

one were not human, what would be the correct answer in the puppy problem? Is it right to kill fifty members of Species A to serve ten members of Species B?

There is a genuine lack of objective criteria for the ethical treatment of living beings. What exactly is it that makes it acceptable to perform experiments on certain animals, but not on people? Biologists have found many similarities among animals. We all have cells. Many of our main tissue types are nearly identical across family lines. There are also many differences, of course. But which of these differences are important in determining which types of experiments (if any) are acceptable if performed on a given animal? Unfortunately, animal experimentation may be necessary to provide the information that will enable us to answer these sorts of ethical questions.

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