

# Normalising the Unthinkable:

## The Ethics of Using Animals in Research Executive Summary



A Report by the  
Working Group of the Oxford  
Centre for Animal Ethics

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**Examining the evidence, and thinking outside the box, has not been an easy experience, and we deeply wish we could have published a more emollient and less controversial report.**

This paper is a brief summary of a report by the working group of the Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics, which offers a new assessment of whether animal experiments can be justified morally.

The Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics was founded in 2006 to pioneer ethical perspectives on animals through academic teaching, research, and publication. The centre is independent, and is not under the aegis, control, or sanction of the University of Oxford. The centre comprises an international fellowship of more than ninety academics drawn from the sciences and the humanities, and more than one hundred academic advisers.

In 2013, the centre was commissioned by the BUAV to produce an independent review of the ethics of using animals in research. The BUAV is not a neutral bystander in the debate about animal testing, but it was prepared to commission independent academic research on this topic.

The report has been written by a working group consisting of twenty academics from six countries, all but one of whom are fellows of the centre. The report is one of the very few to focus on the ethical dimension and to do so from a variety of disciplines, including philosophy, science, history, theology, law, critical animal studies, and sociology.

**But we have felt constrained to follow the evidence as it has led us, and most of all, to be faithful to where we believe the weight of moral argument resides.**

1. *The deliberate and routine abuse of innocent, sentient animals involving harm, pain, suffering, stressful confinement, manipulation, trade, and death should be unthinkable. Yet animal experimentation is just that: the 'normalisation of the unthinkable'* (Peattie, 1984). It is estimated that 115.3 million animals are used in experiments worldwide per annum (2.5–2.8). In terms of harm, pain, suffering, and death, this constitutes one of the major moral issues of our time.

**Since these experiments cause not only physical and/or psychological harm but also death, it follows that they require strong moral justification.**

2. *This normalisation flies in the face of what is now known about the extent and range of how animals can be harmed.* The issue of the complexity of animal awareness, especially animal sentience (defined as the capacity to experience pain and pleasure), cannot be ignored. Unlike our forebears, we now know, as reasonably as we can know of humans, that animals (notably, mammals, birds, and reptiles) experience not only pain but also shock, fear, foreboding, trauma, anxiety, stress, distress, anticipation, and terror to a greater or lesser extent than humans do. This is the conclusion of many scientific books and scientific papers in peer-reviewed scientific journals (3.5–3.7).

**The old debate's characterisation of animals in such terms as 'beasts', 'brutes', and 'sub-humans' relies on pre-scientific depictions that no longer do justice to our understanding of animals.**

3. *This normalisation is buttressed by an overconfidence in animal experiments as a scientific technique.* The current debate has been given new impetus by the new scientific critiques, especially in relation to the unreliability of animal experiments (4.2–4.7); the unpredictability of laboratory environments (4.8–4.10); the discordance between human diseases and 'animal models' of disease (4.11–4.13); interspecies differences in physiology and genetic function (4.14–4.22); and the development of more predictive human-based testing (4.23–4.28). The upshot is that it is no longer accurate or reasonable (if it ever was) to say that the only moral choice is between experimenting on animals and giving up on scientific progress (4.29).

**It is no longer accurate or reasonable (if it ever was) to say that the only moral choice is between experimenting on animals and giving up on medical progress. This is a false dilemma.**

4. *This normalisation is based on the discredited idea that animals are just tools for human use, means to human ends, fungible items, and commodities that can be treated and dispensed with as humans think fit.* During the last forty years, there has been considerable growth in intellectual work on the ethical status of animals. This new work has challenged the ideas that (i) humans should always have absolute priority in our moral thinking (moral anthropocentrism) (5.4–5.10); (ii) animals exist for human beings, to serve their interests and wants (instrumentalism) (5.11–5.20); and (iii) humans should be distinguished and separated from other animals in terms of a binary ‘them’ and ‘us’ (dualism), in which animals are inevitably denigrated (5.21–5.28).

**By ‘instrumentalism’, we mean the assumption that animals exist for human beings, to serve their interests and wants ... The notion that we ‘own’ animals has been a direct result of this assumption and has been codified in almost all legislation worldwide.**

5. *This normalisation is challenged by new moral thinking which centres around three positions:* (i) individual animals have worth in themselves. Sentient beings (beings capable of pleasure and pain) are not just things, objects, machines, or tools; they have their own interior life that deserves respect. This view extends to sentients as individuals not just as collectivities or as part of a community. (ii) Given the

conceding of sentience, there can be no rational grounds for not taking animals’ sentience into account or for excluding individual animals from the same basic moral consideration that we extend to individual human beings. And (iii) it follows that causing harm to individual sentient beings (except when it is for their own good – for example, in a veterinary operation), if not absolutely wrong, minimally requires strong moral justification. Indeed, some would argue that such acts of harming innocent (i.e., morally blameless) sentients is absolutely wrong (5.29).

**Strictly speaking (because they are not moral agents), animals cannot merit or deserve suffering, and they cannot be morally improved by it. This means that all the usual justifications for inflicting suffering simply do not apply in the case of animals.**

6. *This normalisation is belied by rational factors that should commend animals as subjects of special moral solicitude:*

- i. Animals cannot give or withhold their consent (5.31–5.45).
- ii. They cannot represent or vocalise their own interests (5.46–5.47).
- iii. They cannot understand or rationalise their suffering (5.48–5.52).
- iv. They are morally innocent or blameless (5.53–5.54).
- v. They are vulnerable and relatively defenceless (5.55–5.57).

These considerations make justifying harm to animals (like harm to human infants) especially difficult.

**It is inconsistent to suppose that species alone can justify the maltreatment of animals while opposing maltreatment of humans.**

7. *This normalisation is based on flawed moral arguments. We have examined three authoritative reports:*

i. The UK government's Animal Procedures Committee (APC) (2003) argues that even if inflicting suffering is an 'intrinsic' wrong, it may not be an 'absolute' wrong if it can 'be shown to be the lesser of two wrongs that we have to choose between' (6.3–6.15). But that argument supposes what is in need of justification – namely, that there is a direct or immediate choice to be made, which is what the APC (elsewhere) acknowledges is extremely rare: 'in animal research we are rarely, if ever, presented with the stark situation in which we can save the life of a child by taking the life of an animal' (6.9).

**In fact, in the entire history of experimentation on both humans and animals, there is not one direct choice of the kind supposed. It is not a question of 'if ever' but one simply of 'never'. As argued by early anti-vivisectionists, who were equally concerned about experimentation on human subjects, 'It is NOT a question of Your Dog or Your Baby, but one of Your Dog AND Your Baby' (Lederer, 1995, p. 101, capitals in original).**

ii. The House of Lords Select Committee (2002) argues, inter alia, that humans are 'unique' and that 'therefore' they can utilise animals in experiments. But this is a non sequitur. What has to be shown is how humans are unique and how that justifies inferior moral treatment of animals (6.17–6.39).

**Many pro-animal research documents speak freely of animal use being necessary, but they seldom offer any definition of the term.**

iii. The Weatherall Committee (2006) argues, inter alia, that we are justified in experimenting on animals because, in the case of a hospital fire, we would 'intuitively' choose to save the human patients. But the conclusion does not follow. All that follows (if the results are to be believed) is that humans will in the given situation respond in that way. The scenario is by definition a limited crisis situation in which one has to make a direct choice. But to philosophise from that one situation, in which most people may choose to save fellow human beings, to a supposed duty to choose human beings in a wide range of normative situations, where there is no direct choice to be made, is logically fallacious (6.40–6.49).

**It is the special pleading, reliance on selected crisis situations, and the lack of cogent argumentation that makes the Weatherall report unpersuasive as a moral defence of experiments on animals.**

8. *This normalisation is reinforced by the massive institutionalisation of animal experiments through (i) legislation (7.6–7.7); (ii) institutional and establishment thinking (7.8–7.11); (iii) public and private funding (7.12–7.13); (iv) the partiality of the media (7.14–7.15); and (v) the language of*

*experimentation, which obscures, justifies, exonerates, and minimises what actually takes place in laboratories (7.16–7.35). The result of these factors is, inter alia, moral stagnation and resistance to change. We cannot avoid the conclusion that animal experimentation represents the institutionalisation of a pre-ethical view of animals.*

**This focus on the institutionalisation of animal experiments reveals how values, norms, and institutions are so closely intertwined that speciesist attitudes are tolerated and developed because, ideologically, they are seen as a given in spite of the fact of their arbitrary nature.**

9. *This normalisation is augmented by a range of regulations and controls, which in reality do very little to protect animals and indeed often do the reverse. We have shown how inspection is flawed (8.2–8.12), how licensing creates a false sense of legitimacy (8.13–8.23), how supervised self-regulation in the EU is inadequate (8.24–8.35), how the Three Rs are not enforced (8.36–8.43), and how care and ethics committees do not provide a rigorous evaluation of proposals from an ethical perspective and are fundamentally flawed in not addressing the basic ethical*

issue (8.44–8.55). The Three Rs, which are endorsed by the EU and to which lip service is paid by governments (and which might have provided some impetus to change), are in practice massively underfunded, so that alternatives are the Cinderella of scientific research. Even where controls exist, we find them wanting (8.56). This is confirmed by disturbing evidence provided by undercover investigations (9.1–9.46).

**We have discussed the principal forms of control, where controls exist, and have found them wanting.**

10. This normalisation is justified by the off-repeated assertion that human interest requires such experiments, but it has to be questioned whether humans are ever benefited by the abuse of animals. Humans can be harmed, for example, by desensitisation, loss of empathy, habituation, and denial. We now know that there is a strong link between animal abuse and violence to human beings (3.7–3.9). Also, the new scientific evidence must make us challenge the claim of utility, since we now know that many experiments have provided misleading or erroneous results (4.1–4.29). In addition, the very logic that would justify experiments on animals also justifies the practice in relation to humans, and of course, *inter alia*, prisoners of war, people of colour, Jewish people, and children have been made subject to experimentation (5.34–5.45; 6.27–6.29; 6.34–6.39).

**We can no longer assume that abuse of animals in any context is socially cost free.**

11. This normalising of the unthinkable needs to be de-normalised and de-institutionalised. Ethical research techniques need to be fully institutionalised, and there should be a massive switch of funding to non-animal replacement techniques as a matter of urgency.

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*Normalising the unthinkable the ethics of using animals in research is a ground-breaking new intellectual assessment of whether animal experiments can be justified morally. It is written by the Working Group of the Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics, edited by Andrew Linzey and Clair Linzey, and commissioned by the BUAV and Cruelty Free International.*

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