



Explain how Bentham's utilitarianism could be applied to animal experimentation (20)

Utilitarianism is a relative and teleological ethical theory devised by Jeremy Bentham in the 18th Century. It is a secular approach which states that what is good, is what creates the most amount of happiness for the most amount of people.

Throughout the history of medicine, humans have tested on animals in order to further research and make breakthrough discoveries. Animal testing largely involves vivisection (performing operations on live animals) and dissection (analysing the bodies of dead animals) and both are still prevalent in the medical industry today. Animal testing is a complicated and complex issue, often debated within the medical field. Laws on the use of animals are very specific, and whilst some argue for the abolition of animal testing altogether, others regard it as okay if they are certain to bring about medical results.

Jeremy Bentham devised 'act' utilitarianism which asks us to look at the usefulness of each individual action when it comes to ethical decision making. This means that, in each ethical decision, the agent should figure out what action will bring about the most pleasure or happiness to the most amount of people. An action is therefore good if it pursues pleasure and avoids pain. With regards to animal testing, Bentham himself was an advocate of animal rights and also believed that their happiness/pleasure should be considered in ethics. However, if testing an animal is useful in the sense that the results of such a test could lead to significant scientific progress, then Bentham would see that as moral as it is bringing a lot of people a lot of happiness. For example, the results of tests done on mice in aid of cancer research can be used to try and eliminate cancer, a disease which leads to significant deaths in the UK. Therefore, utilitarianism would condone the usefulness of animal testing, if the benefits are widespread.

Another feature of act utilitarianism is the hedonic calculus; a way of measuring the happiness produced in each given situation. Based on the Greek concept of hedonism, Bentham suggested that an agent considers the following seven elements of pleasure in ethics; intensity (how strong is the pleasure), duration (how long will the pleasure last?), certainty (how sure are we of the pleasure), extent (how many people will experience the pleasure), propinquity (how near is the pleasure), richness (how much more pleasure will be created) and purity (how little pain is involved). When applied to animal testing Bentham believed that animals' pleasure should also be considered in the hedonic calculus. However, it is clear that animal testing could well be condoned using the hedonic calculus. Although a mouse, for instance, may experience instant pain and even death, the benefits of any experimentation on the mouse could serve a vast population of people. Understanding Animal Research (UAR) state that there have been many breakthroughs using animal testing i.e. development of the Anti-Retro Viral drug used against HIV positive patients. The richness and extent of pleasure for humans using anti-retro viral drugs, arguably outweighs the lack of pleasure experienced by the mouse.