



On Animal Research

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What ethical guidelines should inform animal research, in your view? The problem seems very hard to me. I take the problem of animal suffering seriously — so seriously that ten years ago, after reading Matthew Scully’s beautiful and disturbing book **Dominion**, I stopped eating meat. I read the book with a purring kitten in my lap; midway through, I realized that I was unable to refute his arguments. I couldn’t see that any pleasure I took in eating animals outweighed the suffering imposed upon them.

If you haven’t read *Dominion*, I highly recommend it. It’s one of the few books on the subject written from a conservative point of view — although concern about these issues is, in fact, widespread among conservatives, as **Scully notes in this interview**:

Madison, Wis.: Have you experienced much ridicule or hostility from your fellow conservatives regarding your views on animal cruelty and factory farming? Have you been able to persuade any of them to take this issue seriously?

Matthew Scully: Thanks, Madison. Conservatives of a more libertarian stripe haven’t shown much interest in the book — a pleasant exception being one fellow at the Cato Institute in DC who had some kind and thoughtful things to say in his review. On the other hand you have conservatives like Fred Barnes, Father Richard John Neuhaus in *National Review*, another reviewer for the *Weekly Standard*, my friend Andrew Ferguson in a column for *Bloomberg News*, G. Gordon Liddy, Chuck Colson, Paul Harvey and various others who in their treatment of *Dominion* took the whole subject quite seriously. I was especially struck by Fred Barnes’s review in *The Wall Street Journal*, which called factory farming an issue of great moral urgency (I don’t recall his exact words). That was worth a lot to me, especially because I respect Fred so much as a person and as a writer. When a prominent conservative like him calls factory farming a morally important issue, in the pages of the business newspaper of the world, that’s something.

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Sacramento, Calif.: Do you think the day will ever come when people will be against killing animals for food, and most people will choose a plant-based diet?

Matthew Scully: Yes, I do. And what will bring this great change about are the very cruelties so common today. Factory farming, like comparable evils throughout history, depends for its existence upon concealment. It depends on people either not noticing or willfully averting their

gaze. But that cannot go on forever, because by far most people are kind and just, and I believe that over time, one conscience at a time, humanity will turn against factory farming. Even when men and women decide, as most will at first, to give up factory-farmed meat in favor of meat from smaller and more humane enterprises, there is a certain logic in that decision – a moral logic instead of blind consumerism – that will lead many one day to give up animal products altogether.

Your question reminds me of a passage I came across some years ago in a book by the conservative Catholic writer Paul Johnson – a spiritual memoir called “The Quest for God.” It was one of those moments that first got me to thinking about writing my own book. Johnson is a much better authority than I am in historical trends, and since I have the book handy let me share his own prediction. “God allowed us to live off the beasts of the fields and forest because there was no other way,” he writes, but today we have an abundance of perfectly good substitutes. “Gradually this realization will take hold of us. The rise of factory farming, whereby food producers cannot remain competitive except by subjecting animals to life-cycles of unspeakable deprivation, has hastened this process. The human spirit revolts at what we have been doing.” The case against factory farming seems overwhelming to me. There is no good reason to do it, and many good reasons not to. My position is shot through with inconsistencies, though: I don’t eat meat, but my household probably consumes more meat than average, because I have seven cats. Cats, unlike humans, are obligate carnivores. They can’t survive on a vegetarian diet. I feed them meat three times a day. To deprive them of the flesh of other animals would starve them, and this would be a gross cruelty.

Nature doesn’t make it easy to be consistent about these things. As everyone knows, or should know, there’s no way for humans to feed themselves that doesn’t involve harm to animals. Even grain farming results in habitats for animals destroyed; rabbits and other small animals are killed in threshers. I draw the line where I do mostly because it seems important to me to draw *some* line, to recognize that animals are living creatures, that they suffer, that we should not be cruel to them, and that we should place limits on the way we exploit them.

The question of medical research seems especially difficult to me. The position that it should never be done — the argument of this editorial today in **The New York Times** — seems to me absurd. Inside my father’s chest is an aortic valve fashioned of bovine tissue. Without it, the odds were high that he would not have lived much longer. It would be impossible to convince me that my father’s survival was an immoral outcome.

But it does seem to me that the specific experiments the author describes were indeed wrong:

One of my areas of study focused on the effects of early social deprivation on the intellectual abilities of rhesus monkeys. We kept young, intelligent monkeys separated from their families and others of their kind for many months in soundproof cages that remained lit 24 hours a day, then measured how their potential for complex social and intellectual lives unraveled.

Is there anything we so badly need to know about rhesus monkeys that such an experiment would be moral? I doubt it.

What guidelines for research would comport with our intuitions — or mine, anyway — that we should respect animal’s lives and avoid causing harm or suffering to them, even as we affirm that animal lives are not equal in import to human lives?

Is it possible to describe a coherent set of guidelines for animal research?