PRINCIPLES OF ANIMAL RESEARCH ETHICS

Tom L. Beauchamp and David DeGrazia.

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In *Principles of Animal Research Ethics,* Tom Beauchamp and David DeGrazia (hereafter B&D) aim to replace the well-known “3Rs”—*Replacing* animal research with non-animal methods, *Reducing* the numbers of animals, and *Refining* experiments to reduce harms and improve welfare—as the guiding principles regulating animal research.

They propose six principles. The first are “Principles of Social Benefit,” where these benefits are medical and health-related (pp. 6-7):

(1) *The Principle of No Alternative Method*

(2) *The Principle of Expected Net Benefit* [to Human Beings]

(3) *The Principle of Sufficient Value to Justify Harm* [to Animals]

These principles require that animal research be done *only when* there’s no alternative to using animals. Additionally, since animal research sometimes misleads in many ways, resulting in harms to humans (p. 8), the research must be expected to sufficiently benefit human beings. Moreover, these benefits must be significant enough to justify harming animals.

The next principles are “Principles of Animal Welfare” (p. 12):

(1) *The Principle of No Unnecessary Harm*

(2) *The Principle of Basic Needs* [of Animals Must Be Met]

(3) *The Principle of Upper Limits to Harm*

These principles require that any harms to animals be “necessary” for the scientific purpose, andthat animals’ basic food, housing and medical needs are met, and that there be upper limits on harm. (They also present freedom from pain and suffering as a “basic need,” but don’t say whether “freedom from premature death” is a basic need or address whether premature death is a harm [p. 15].)

 In three final sub-sections, B&D conclude by discussing the need for ethics review committees to more rigorously evaluate animal experiments, observe that scientific results never solely *by themselves* ethically justify animal experimentation, and review how their principles improve upon the 3Rs.

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B&D’s principles do improve upon the 3Rs which don’t mention the need for benefits from animal experimentation, the need to compare these benefits to animal harms, and provide no hard limits on experimentation.

However, B&D present their principles as “useful” for people engaged in animal research and as a “philosophically sound” (p. 4) framework for a new ethic for animal research. Regrettably, I have doubts about both these overall claims and so am pessimistic about the book.

 The book is 164 pages in total, but the section in which B&D state and develop their principles is just 23 pages, including a Preamble, and is followed by 18 pages of endnotes. Most of the book then consists of commentaries on this section by seven experts on various aspects of animal research, only one of whom is a philosopher. B&D do notrespond to these commentaries.

My main concern is that there doesn’t seem to be much of an attempt in B&D’s contribution at providing the hard details that are needed to really understand the principles so they might be used to help determine whether some animal experimentation is morally justified or not.

So, e.g., two of the “Social Benefit” principles involve comparing animal harms to human benefits and judging whether some animal research sufficiently promotes benefits for humans, compared to anything else that could be done to promote human benefits. B&D don’t say much, if anything, on how to do this: they mostly only say it needs to be done. True, but *how*, especially in harder cases? Thus, the principles are philosophically underdeveloped.

The principles also do not critique common unhelpful ways of conceptualizing the issues: e.g., that there is “no alternative” to doing some action, or it’s “necessary,” to bring about even a good result usually does not entail that the action is permissible. The language of B&D’s principles might not help people more deeply engage the issues.

B&D suggest that both advocates *and* critics of animal experimentation can accept these principles. Some critics might *tentatively* accept them but respond that we just aren’t given enough theoretical details here to really see how these principles would work: which experiments would be condemned and permitted by these principles?

This question also can’t be answered since these principles are presented as *necessary conditions* for permissible animal experimentation, not *sufficient conditions* (p. 6): any animal experimentation *must* meet these conditions to be permissible but meeting these conditions might not mean that it is permissible. B&D don’t say what else would be needed to justify animal research (if anything could) and critics of animal research would want to know more about that.

The more one (reasonably) believes that animal research is wrong, the more one will be (reasonably) puzzled about the point of these principles. By (a provocative) analogy, suppose someone developed some principles (different from B&D’s, of course) that offer, in their view, necessary conditions for “ethical dogfighting,” to make it more “humane.” Critics of dogfighting might agree that any dogfighting that meets these principles is less bad and so, in a sense, accept them as good principles to follow to make something wrong less bad, but still overall reject those principles, or the project of developing them, since dogfighting is wrong. So it’s unclear really which critics of animal experimentation would accept B&D’s principles, or how they would accept them.

Some critics would outright reject them, arguing that many animals have rights to their bodies and lives, or have interests deserving serious consideration, or that animal research is simply unfair and unjust, and so animal research is wrong. Perhaps B&D think that these philosophically respectable positions just won’t ever be persuasive (since, honestly, they haven’t, for most people) and so it’s better to focus on what’s more agreeable to animal researchers.

This might be the strategy since I suspect most advocates of animal researchers would respond to B&D’s offer of these principles with this: *we already accept these principles*! They frequently claim that they want “alternatives” but that animal research is regrettably “necessary” to promote human benefits which outweigh harms to animals *but* that animals used in research are well-cared for and aren’t caused any “unnecessary” pain or suffering. Resistance to “upper limits” on harm is likely due to worries about slippery slopes, not any inherent rejection of limits.

So, at least in practice and common ways of engaging the issues, B&D’s principles are likely already widely accepted by animal research advocates. Yet animal research continues, without much profound ethical critique. But without the philosophical details of B&D’s principles, they can *neither* be the basis for much serious critique *nor* can they be used to provide the “rigorous evidence and argument” that they report that *critics* of animal research seek (p. 2).

Both *too much* philosophical critique and details and *too little* present different challenges, but I am doubtful that B&D have found the right balance and an ideal mode of “public philosophy” to change the ethical culture surrounding animal research, at least with this book. They do have an article-length presentation of their principles (“Beyond the 3 Rs to a More Comprehensive Framework of Principles for Animal Research Ethics,” *ILAR Journal*, forthcoming), but I wonder if B&D’ revising their presentation of their principles and discussion for broader audiences and making that available in booklet and online format would have an even greater impact.

3.

To conclude, many of the main themes of the commentators are presented above: e.g., that these principles are not quite novel and that hard details are needed to put them into practice. The observations from practitioners from within animal research culture about how that culture engages ethical issues are informative and interesting. Many of the commentators focus on the need to make animal ethics committees (IACUCs) both more ethically and scientifically rigorous and informed: this is vital since these committees would be who put B&D’s principles into practice.

Since this is a more philosophical forum, I will only comment on philosopher Julian Savulescu’s contribution. He discusses the challenges in interpreting and applying B&D’s principles and offers some detailed proposals for how some of the harder questions about them might be answered.

However, I found his concluding paragraph most interesting: there he observes that, around forty years ago, Beauchamp and James Childress, in the 1978 *Belmont Report* and their 1979 *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* (Oxford University Press, now 2019 8th edition),developed the four principles of biomedical ethics—*respect for autonomy*, *beneficence*, *nonmaleficence*,and *justice*—and suggests that the six principles from this book are the “animal research equivalent” (p. 144).

The question is why the original four principles, modified and extended a bit, aren’t adequate for engaging animal research ethics. Concerns about nonmaleficence and beneficence clearly apply to animals, it’s increasingly argued that our relations to animals are a matter of justice, and many animals arguably have some kind of autonomy: at least, they have preferences that can be respected or not. Before reading this book, I expected that it was going to be an extension of the well-confirmed basic principles of biomedical ethics to animal issues.

Yet B&D state that they decided against including “values or principles such as *respect for animals* and *justice as fairness*” in their framework because they only included values that “every reasonable individual can be expected to endorse” (p. 3). This omission, however, does raise doubts about whether their framework is, as they put it, “philosophically sound” and acceptable to thoughtful critics of animal experimentation. Indeed, it seems like perhaps only animal research advocates might embrace the book’s principles, which is likely not a good result for animal research ethics.

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