In the name of Science?
How members of animal ethics committees talk about ethics.

Abstract: What becomes an ethical issue in animal ethics committees? And what does not become an ethical issue in the same context?

There are seven animal ethics committees in Sweden. Each committee consists of six experts and six laypersons. In interviews with members different views on what “ethics” really mean have become articulated. For one member the difficult ethical dilemma of animal experimentation is the lack of enriched cages for mice. For another the ethical problem lies in regulations restraining research. A third member talks about animals’ right to not be used for human interests.

These different views on “ethics” intersect once a month in the animal ethics committees. There is no consensus on what the ethical problem, that the members should be discussing, is. Therefore personal views - and hierarchies among the committee members - on what “ethics” means, and how it should be used, characterize the meetings. In this paper I intend to discuss how “ethics” become situated (cf. Benhabib 1992) and what implication that might have on the committees decisions.

This case study is included in an ongoing study, Dilemmas with transgenic animals, in which notions of culture and nature, risk and safety, innovation and organism, science and technology, are investigated in the scientific production and use of transgenic animals.

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Introduction

Research including animal experimentation is an arena where the distinction between nature-culture blurs in many ways. Biology is interfered with technology, the mouse is a model for human beings, and concerns of human health and scientific progress meet concerns of the animal’s wellbeing and natural behaviour. In Sweden seven local animal ethics committees are powerful biopolitical actors in this field. These animal ethics committees have a gatekeeping function when it comes to animal experimental research. They are supposed to approve or reject the applications. They are obligated – and therefore also have the power to – decide over life and death for hundreds of thousands of animals every year. They are not just advisory, as in many other countries, they actually have the power to stop animal experimentation or put on conditions of the procedure of the experiment. Therefore it is interesting to look into what they really are discussing in the committee meetings. What becomes an ethical issue in animal ethics committees? And what does not become an ethical issue in the same context?

In Sweden, all regulation concerning animal experimentation is since July 2007 handled by the Swedish board of Agriculture. Seven local animal ethics committees are set out to examine applications for all animal experiments. Each of the seven committees consists of a chairman (a judge), a secretary and twelve committee members – six scientific experts and six laypersons. The scientific experts represent different disciplines – all scientific - and drug companies. This category also includes animal technicians and veterinaries. The laypersons represent local political parties or animal welfare organizations. In the committees you can find everything from future Nobel Prize candidates to retired pensioners who have never been to a research laboratory. There are actors with dissimilar agendas and different backgrounds and one could imagine that the composition should invite to lively discussions and conflict situations at the meetings – and maybe also rejections of applications. Despite that, in 2003, 1733 cases were handled, and 99 percent of all applications got approved – sometimes with requested modifications (Hagelin et al. 2002). Only 22 cases where rejected.

Why?

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1 Text in process for article.
2 This paper is an outcome from the project Dilemmas with transgenic animals. The project is funded by the Swedish Research Council, and aims to analyze cultural dilemmas with animal experimentation, particularly with transgenic animals. The interest is to investigate in depth how different dilemmas emerge, get represented and are handled in two different institutional settings: animal research laboratories and ethics committees. Both case studies are built on interviews and field studies.
3 For further discussion on the committees compositions, see Forsman 1992, 1993.
4 There is a great variance between different committees; some don’t reject a single application, while others have a rejection rate of 10 % (Nordgren & Röcklingsberg 2004).
To understand how the members of the committees are doing ethics in a specific context this paper focuses on individual interpretations of the assignment of the animal ethics committees. What do the committee members refer to when they talk about ethics? Do they agree on what kind of questions they are supposed to discuss in the committee? And what are they actually discussing in the committee meetings? Finally I will discuss what impact these different views on ethics have on the committees’ work and how ethics becomes situated in the context of the committee meeting (cf. Benhabib 1992).

The frame

“At the inquiry of an item the committee shall consider the experiments significance against the suffering of the animal” (Swedish Animal Welfare Law: SFS nr: 1988:534, 21 §).\(^5\)

Almost all the interviewed members express, in one way or another that ethics is about a cost-benefit evaluation. The animals’ suffering has to be seen in the light of the purpose of the research. This is an interpretation of the ethical task that unites scientific experts and lay persons and which is in accordance with Swedish animal welfare law. Following quotations are from two members in the same committee:

“I think it is important to be objective when you are a member of a committee, you can not only trust your emotions. You have to weigh suffering against what results you get. A kind of cost-benefit-issue. Maybe you have to accept some suffering for these animals, because you can gain so much from the results. In all research we attempt to get new knowledge on a basic level, but also to get knowledge to improve life quality for severely ill people. It is also a matter for the society – diseases and severe handicaps lead to big economical costs for our society. So it is a benefit for both life quality and the society’s economy” (Marianne, scientific expert)\(^6\).

“I try to focus on the purpose – if the suffering is disproportionately to the purpose – as I see it – or if the purpose seems so totally worthless, that even if the suffering isn’t so hard it seems meaningless” (Petra, political elected lay person).

The evaluation of the purpose in relation to the suffering of the animals seems to be the critical point, according to the interviews. But when the committee members get to develop

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\(^5\) All translations of quotations are mine. All interviews are made in Swedish.

\(^6\) The empirical material for this project consists of 20 interviews with lay persons and scientific experts of six different committees and observations from 12 committee meetings in six different cities. One of the committees has not allowed me to attend to the meeting or to get in contact with the committee members.

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this question, different views on what this statement really mean appear. On a discursive level they agree on what the assignment is, but inside this frame individual interpretations on what this cost-benefit evaluation refers to are set out.

**Individual interpretations**

Among the scientists’ and lay person’s definitions of the ethical question that the committee is supposed to discuss I will present three different categories. The different views are categorized from whose point of view the committee members talk about ethics. Who is going to be benefit from the ethical evaluation? In whose name is the ethical evaluation done?

- Ethics in the name of science.
- Ethics in the name of patients.
- Ethics in the name of animals\(^7\).

Ethics in the name of science is expressed by two prominent researchers who are members of two different committees. For them it is important to be a part of the committee, since then they have possibilities to empower scientific research. For example, Peter says:

> “You could be good at accentuate research matters in the committee-work. So that important research does not get stuck there because there is some animal-rights-person who does not like the experiments. That can easily happen” (Peter, scientific expert).

Anders expresses a similar opinion when answering a question on why he started to work with the ethics committee:

> “We have to be there (at the meetings) to make it easier for science. If we don’t work actively with these questions, they never get the right input from us. Then it is only the opposition that is get heard” (Anders, scientific expert).

The ethics concerns science possibilities to evolve. It becomes unethical to *not* use animal experimentation in research\(^8\). Both these men define themselves as basic researchers. They are

\(^7\) These different ethical views can probably be related on a theoretical level to different philosophical theories on animal welfare and animal rights (c.f. Forsman 1992, Gluck & DiPasquale 2002, Armstrong & Botzler 2003). The aim of the paper is, however, not to examine if the committee members are utilitarians or speciesists. The purpose is to look into different private views and analyze their impact – or lack of impact – on the committee meetings.

\(^8\) Both these scientists formulate a problem in the composition of the ethical committee. They see the representatives from the animal welfare organizations as their opponents and Anders would like to include
not implementing the research themselves on patients; their primary concern is the science itself. This is ethics in the name of science, a view that is only represented in the interviews with scientists.

Marianne has worked as a doctor. She talks a lot of different costs of not using animal experimentation – “for the individual patient, families, society. Everything” (Marianne, scientific expert). Her main concern is the patients. The ethic evaluation is for the sake of future patients. It is unethical to not use animals, because of the patients. This view is also represented by some laypersons. Birgit, recently elected for a committee, says that “I don’t care about the animals at all, I just care for humans” (Birgit, political elected lay person). Birgit’s main concern is the purpose, she returns to the discussion about the purpose several times during the interview. She is very upset over an application that had been approved at the last committee meeting, an application for a project that Birgit found “silly” and “ridiculous”, since it didn’t have a purpose that should lead to medical treatment for human beings. “I want to know WHY – more than about the experiment. Why and for whose benefit” (Birgit, political elected lay person). Any medical aim is almost always seen as a good enough purpose. The hope for human health legitimizes the research, and the animal suffering lifts out of the discussion.

In the interviews there are very few examples on how members question medical purposes. Marianne, for example, talks a lot of about the importance of scrutinizing the purpose of the research. But when I ask her if there are purposes that researchers question, she hesitates:

“It can happen... I have no example, but it does not happen often. Often those projects have been stopped before the application for ethical evaluation has reached us. If a project has a strange purpose it has been stopped by supervisors and others. It is not easy to get projects funded nowadays. The applications that reach us are from already reviewed projects” (Marianne scientific expert).

No purpose is a bad enough to be rejected. The idea that the purpose shall be evaluated in relation to the suffering is something that very seldom gets practiced. The scientific experts agree on that research is (almost) always necessary – in the name of science or in the name of the patients. The rhetoric varies, but the content is the same. It is not unethical to use animals in research. It is unethical not to do it.

representatives from patient-organizations – lay people who would appreciate research instead of trying to stop it in the name of animals.
There is one example of a lay person who uses to question the purpose in the meetings. When Marianne seems to think that almost every purpose is a good purpose, Petra is of a totally different opinion. She has a strong pathos against, what she calls “worthless purposes”. In this she includes, for example research on alcoholism, diabetes, spinal injuries and other harms that she means that humans have caused themselves. “Do we have the right to use other living animals to solve problems we have caused humanity ourselves?” (Petra, political elected lay person). Petra doesn’t think that scientific and medical research is always the right way to go; the society has to change in other way. It has to be less liberal against alcohol, there should be less smoking to prevent sudden infant death, to mention some examples. She tells me that she even has a resistance against HIV/AIDS-research:

“When I protested against HIV-experiments the last time I wrote in my reservation that HIV is mostly increasing among women and a big contributory cause is women’s subordination. Women don’t have the power over their own sexuality. There are raping and forced marriages and that kind of things. And then I also think, do we have the right to use apes if it is the patriarchy that represses women and the result is an increasing spreading of HIV/AIDS. Do we have the right to use apes instead of fighting the patriarchy?” (Petra, political elected lay person).⁹

Among those members I have interviewed is Petra’s ethical view – with the society in focus - unusual. Most of the informants represents the third ethical view; “ethics in the name of the animal”. Both scientific experts and lay persons have their main concern in animal welfare. John, one of many silent pensioners among the lay persons, summarizes ethics as “It is to make sure the laboratory animals have a fair existence” (John, political elected lay person). Pia, animal technician at a drug company, means that the ethical questions that should be discussed are about the animal’s well-being. She mentions end-points, housing and handling – practical questions. Also Maria, scientific expert, talks about the social environment for the animals. These people focus the animal in their ethical evaluation; they imply that this is what shall be discussed at the committee meetings. Sofia, spokesperson for Animal Rights, does also focus on the animals.

⁹ Birgitta Forsman has pointed out this category of arguments as typical political left, which also is the party that Petra represents (Forsman 1992, p 204). The society’s responsibility is a line of argument that is rare in the discussions on animal experimentation.
“My basic opinion is that animals have rights, and one of these rights is to not suffer. And almost every animal experimentation cause some suffering, and it is not to benefit for… it is just for our – the human beings –benefit that all animal experiments are done. I have the opinion that we do not have the right to use other individuals – animals or people – for our own sake. Principally I am against all animal experimentation, no matter how they are done, and use of animals for our purposes. So what I do in the committee is just fixing the surface and improving the animal’s existence” (Sofia, lay person for Animal rights.).

John, Maria and Pia talk about ethics in the name of the animal on a very practical level. So does also Sofia, but she also want to raise questions on a theoretical level – do human beings have the right to use animals for their own wellbeing? Ethics in the name of animal can – like ethics in the name of the patient – be articulated in different ways.

**Problem or possibility?**

The concept that the animal ethics committee shall be evaluating the relation between suffering and benefit can include a lot of different views on what this really means. It can focus research climate as well as discussions on what is necessary research, future patients benefit, animal rights or what kind of enrichment rats need in their cages. The definition on what the assignment of the committee is varies in a high degree. What implications does this variation get? Is it a problem or a possibility? From my point of view I would suggest that it is a problem and a possibility. On the one hand it is a problem since there is no common sense about what aspects of animal experimentation they are going to evaluate. Therefore it is a risk, as I will show later, that just one view gets expressed in the meetings. On the other hand it could be a fantastic possibility; the committee members can point out different ethical aspects at the meeting and contribute to an important discussion about costs and benefits. This is the thought behind the committees’ compositions (cf. Forsman 1992). But how does the discussion come out in the meetings? Whose ethical view gets represented? Are there any multi-sited cost-benefit evaluations?

“No, no, no… not at all. It is just me who is asking questions about it (the purpose)” (Birgit, political elected lay person).

“We are only discussing questions about details. /---/ I would like to discuss more of the purpose of the experiment” (Sofia, lay person representing Animal Rights).
“A lot of what we are discussing – someone has even claimed that 99% of what we are discussing isn’t ethics, it is something else” (Anders, scientific expert).

Most of the people I interviewed agree that the animal ethic committees are discussing wrong questions. They all know that they are supposed to do cost-benefit evaluations, but they are discussing experiment methodology. What is a “humane end-point” in this particular research? What kind of injection-needle is the best for a mouse? Shall DNA be typed through cutting the tail or the ear? How can the company or the department enrich the cages? They are almost exclusively talking about technical questions about handling and housing of animals. How does that come?

Situated ethics

To understand this process it is necessary to look at the context of the committee meeting. “Ethics” can be conceptualised in different ways. Instead of viewing it as a static guiding principle, my perspective is that ethics is something that is negotiated contextually and situationally. Seyla Benhabib (1992) names it “situated ethics”. In different contexts and environments unspoken strategies are created to make ethical dilemmas easier to handle. The Swedish ethnologist Susanne Lundin (2004) has, for example, showed how foetus-cells lose their humanity and experiment animals become instruments. Karin Knorr-Cetina (1999) names this process “the power of the lab”. Similar processes are probably developed at the negotiating-table of the ethical committees; perhaps we can talk about “the power of the committee meeting” which leads to that 99 percent of the applications are approved. Which are the “unspoken strategies” that characterize these meetings? Why does the context of the committee meeting invite to discussions on technical questions but not on cost-benefit evaluation? I will suggest a few reasons.

One reason for why technical issues are on the committees’ agenda might be who has priority of interpretation in this context. Since the committee consists of scientific experts – all working with research including animal experimentation – and lay persons there is no “ethical expert” who could raise complex questions about ethical dilemmas. After my fieldwork in the committee meetings I would say that the priority of interpretation belongs – exclusively - to the scientific experts. The vocabulary that is used in the discussions is scientific and the “ethical” issues which are discussed are related to the experiment itself. Representatives for the animal welfare organizations have often adopted this discourse, and talk about minimizing animals suffering from a scientific point of view. They have often read
scientific journals, are updated of new – more “humane” - technical solutions and talk about animal experimentation on science conditions (Fieldnotes). When they try to raise questions about animal rights, they are considered as radical activists (interviews with Peter and Anders). There is no space for ethical questions about purposes and suffering in this context, and this becomes an unspoken ethical question – even if the members on a discursive level agree on that this is their assignment.

Another reason to why it is only technical problems that are discussed may be that this is issues where the members can reach a consensus. The American bioethicist Jonathan Moreno (1995) shows the importance of consensus in the culture of bioethics. Voting is, according to Moreno, an inappropriate behaviour. The members have to agree – come to consensus. And, as we have seen, it might be hard for the members to reach consensus if the purpose is – or is not - good enough to cause suffering. The cost-benefit evaluation gets too complex in a context where consensus is supposed to be reached – and therefore it becomes a non-question in the committee. But a theme all the members can agree on is how to minimize the suffering of animals. Practical solutions can be found on the most technical aspects, and at least they can agree on a “humane endpoint”, when the animal will be destroyed. In this all the different views on the ethical assignment can come together. Better technical solutions benefit the scientific research as well as the animals. Probably it also benefits the patients. Decreasing of suffering can be made in the name of science, the name of patients and in the name of animals. The ethics get situated in this specific context with specific actors. Discussions of purpose are on the other hand only benefiting the animals. For science or for patients – even if they sometimes are few – the experiment is always valuable. Neither are there any official directions for “what is a not good enough purpose”. At the same time as there are concrete solutions on better experimentation method, the question of the purpose is subjective – and therefore harder to agree on.

That leads us to the last suggested reason. The leading public discourse about biotechnology is - at least in Sweden – that biotechnology, including for example transgenic animals and embryonic stem cell research, is the modern salvation, the hope for humanity (Ideland 2002, 2004). Medical reason is always a good enough reason to use animals as well as embryos for health purposes. Nature - in the shape of animals – does not matter in these discussions. The hope for the biotechnological salvation shadows the concerns of the animals. And who want to be an obstacle for scientific progress that can – maybe, sometime in the future, cure terrible diseases and treat harmful injuries. Who wants to stop that scientific evolution in the name of animals?
References:


*SFS nr 1988:534*