
OPINION

Locating the Middle Ground

Matthew Simpson

A ‘middle ground’ exists, where the advocates and the opponents of vivisection can usefully negotiate, but where exactly is it?

In editorials for *ATLA*, and in his recent pieces for *PiLAS*, Michael Balls has sometimes spoken about the ‘middle ground’ which exists “between the extremes and biases of the most trenchant anti-vivisection or pro-vivisection positions”.¹ This middle ground, he has argued, is where useful negotiation takes place, as indeed he and others demonstrated in the case of the *Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986*.² But Professor Balls is not the only person to use this terminology, and like any busy metaphor (and one needs reminding that it is a metaphor), it requires periodical re-definition, if it is to remain helpful. I propose to offer such a re-definition here.

We might start with the ‘extremes’ – i.e. the far limits which fix the middle ground. For ease of visualisation, I shall speak of ‘left’ and ‘right’, though without any party-political meaning. On the left, then, there is abolitionism, and it must be remembered that this is an ‘extreme’ only in so far as, morally or intellectually, there is nowhere further leftwards to go. For we are talking here about ideas, not persons, a most important but often blurred distinction. The term for the person, i.e. ‘extremist’, can be used to mean someone dissatisfied with compromise (as indeed an abolitionist is), but it is almost always used to mean someone who *goes* to extremes. So this word has somewhat discredited the other, which is why it is necessary to reclaim the strictly positive or geometrical sense of ‘extreme’: the sense which makes, for instance, a claim for equality in human rights extreme, because that is the utmost that can be achieved in that direction, rather than because it is an unreasonable claim in itself.

So we know where we are on the left. To clarify the right extreme, I quote the philosopher, R.G. Frey, writing in *The Oxford Handbook of Practical Ethics*: “To many people, of course, there has to be a middle ground between the abolitionist and anything goes positions.”³ This is surely a misrepresentation – although since it appears thus in an authoritative survey, it is probably a widely-accepted one. The view that “anything goes” was in fact taken off the

map in 1986, if not in 1876. Put into practice, it would be illegal, at least in the UK. As an opinion with no practical counterpart, then, it has ceased to play a useful part. And that brings us back to the point that the extremes control the location of the middle ground. That was indeed where the 1986 Act was negotiated, but the Act’s crucial achievement was to pull the right extreme inwards, and to shift the middle ground leftwards accordingly.

UK institutions which use animals in experiments, often seem to overlook this change. They will express pride, for instance, in their ethical pre-assessment of experiments, in their efforts to minimise animal suffering, and in their preference for alternatives to animals. Reassurances of this kind appear in their collective ‘Declaration on Openness on Animal Research’ of 2012.⁴ But to claim all of that is not to make any concessions leftwards; it is simply to confirm that these institutions are obeying the law. The practices which they describe actually position them on what is now the ‘extreme’ right.

This is not logic-chopping; it affects how people think and decide about animal research and its future. Because Frey retains the now-obsolete right in his picture – the “anything goes” right – he can view the ideology which is actually a part of the present UK law as constituting the fair-minded middle ground. He accordingly places FRAME itself on the abolitionist left. And since he concludes that this “middle ground, adequately defended, constitutes ... a moral justification of animal experimentation”, he effectively freezes the scene in the form in which he pictures it.³

This last point is perhaps the most important reason for keeping the territorial metaphor well-watched. It must be felt and allowed to be unstable or dynamic, so that the progressive character of the 1986 Act is kept clearly in mind. The Act itself should, if properly observed, be steadily easing the middle ground leftwards. As Professor Balls has said, many scientists are themselves committed to such progressive change.² But the annual Home Office statistics

regularly record that this change is not happening – partly, no doubt, because the Act is not being carried through with sufficient determination, partly because new reasons, sound or otherwise, for using animals in research are coming in to more-than-fill the space made by any previous successful ‘replacements’.

This is where the left extreme becomes so serviceable. True, it represents a distinct cast of thought, and not just a variation on rightwards thinking, in so far as it is essentially and even exclusively ethical, as opposed to science-with-ethics. But then the ambition to satisfy some ethic or other absolutely, however difficult or even impossible that may seem (and abolition is not impossible), provides the necessary improvement-motive in every area of moral life. It certainly did so in the earlier history of vivisection in the UK, and now that the desired progress seems to have stalled, that motive, which the abolitionist left supplies, needs renewing and re-incorporating.

I say this with some personal experience in mind. Oxford University’s ethical review committee rejected co-operation with the University-based pressure group to which I belong, on the grounds that our commitment to abolition meant we could not contribute anything useful. But let’s review our metaphor. This isn’t a tug-of-war between left and right, with only the strained rope and a referee in the middle. The middle is, or ought to be, hospitable ground to all who wish to help medical science move toward what the relevant EU Directive calls its “final

goal”, i.e. animal-free medical research.⁵ We all supposedly hope to end up at the far left. Meanwhile, let’s know where the middle ground really is, and make good use of it, whichever direction we come from!

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- ³ Frey, R.G. (2003). Animals. In *The Oxford Handbook of Practical Ethics* (ed. H. LaFollette), pp. 161-187. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- ⁴ Various (2012). *Declaration on Openness 2012*, 1pp. London, UK: Medical Research Council. Available at: www.mrc.ac.uk/Utilities/Documentrecord/index.htm?d=MRC008900 (Accessed 29.04.14).
- ⁵ Anon. (2010). *Directive 2010/63/EU* of the European Parliament and of the Council of 22 September 2010 on the protection of animals used for scientific purposes. *Official Journal of the European Union L276*, 20.10.2010, 33-79.