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I Protest Against Bad Arguments – Do You?

An Oxford philosophy tutor

Old habits die hard, as Merleau-Ponty famously observed (though in many more words, and in French, of course). When I see an essay written (if only in part) by PPE students, past and present, students who by that very fact will have studied logic for their prelims, the red pen irresistibly wriggles out and corrects the logic of their arguments<1>. These comments on their essays must seem terribly dull, and the mistakes pointed out terribly obvious; the dullness perhaps I cannot help, but as for the obviousness, I comfort myself with the thought that if the mistakes were that obvious then they would not keep re-appearing, not just in essays but in published works (e.g., the recent article 'I am Pro-Test: are you?', OM Fourth Week Trinity Term 2006 p. 15)<2> and in public meetings (e.g., Pro-Test's Open Meeting at the Town Hall on 21st May) – though should one assume that people do not knowingly put forward bad arguments?

1. What does Pro-Test stand for? The name seems to suggest that they are simply in favour of animal testing. Yet according to the article the 'professors, lecturers, [and] graduate and undergraduate students' who form the Pro-Test committee 'agreed that it was important to take a stand in solidarity with Oxford researchers and in defence of academic freedom, science in general and vivisection in particular'. This sounds like four aims, not one, only the last of which is signalled in the name of the group, and they are separable.<3>

The 'stand of solidarity' seems to be understood as a stand against the tactics of a tiny minority of extremists. We are explicitly asked to lie, as the slaves lied for Spartacus, in support of this aim, whence the title of their article, but leave that aside. Leave aside too the somewhat question-begging identification of Oxford researchers with the oppressed slaves. (Opponents of animal testing might be more apt to place the laboratory animals in this role.) The point is that it is surely possible to object to threats and intimidation directed against said researchers without being in favour of vivisection.

The reference to academic freedom is clearly a red herring. No-one thinks that there should be no ethical limits on academic freedom. E.g., no-one would, I take it, defend medical experimentation on prisoners without their informed consent, or on impoverished inhabitants of the Third World paid for their participation, on the grounds of academic freedom. The issue is not whether one is for or against academic freedom but what the ethical limits on such freedom should be.

The reference to 'science in general' is also a red herring. Quite apart from the fact that researchers in the physical sciences and many of those in the life sciences have nothing to do with vivisection in their work, there is clearly scope for debate even among life scientists about the scientific merits of vivisection for the development of drugs to be used on humans. After all, there appear to be scientists on both sides of the vivisection debate.

Of course there is nothing wrong with an organisation's having multiple aims, as long as everyone is clear that to be in favour of the organisation is to support all four aims and that to be against it is not necessarily to be against all four aims. There is a serious risk of confusion, however: though I would like to think that none of my colleagues is vulnerable to such a confusion, some conversations have led me to suspect that there were people who went on the original Pro-Test march not because they were in favour of animal research but because they objected to the tactics of some of the animal rights 'extremists'. And there is a live danger that people within the University who distance themselves from Pro-Test because they reject the aim implied by its title will be understood as being in favour of intimidatory tactics directed against our beleaguered colleagues, against academic freedom, and anti-science. Cynics may ask: did Pro-Test deliberately invite this confusion by including this diverse set of aims under its umbrella?

2. Inconsistencies regarding ends and means. 'We know that without animal research, medicine as we know it today wouldn't exist' (OM article). (Bizarrely, the literature handed out at the Open Meeting included the example of the eradication of smallpox as one of the triumphs of animal research.) No anti-vivisectionist would dream of disputing the fact that animal research was one of the means by which modern drugs were developed; but even if one accepts the worthiness of the end – which, I take it, is not itself incontestable – most of us, whether pro- or anti-vivisection, reject the principle that the end justifies the means. That most people reject this principle does

not make it false; but to presuppose it at one moment and reject it at another does entail logical inconsistency. And Pro-Testers are quite prepared to decry the apparent reliance on this principle by their 'extremist' opponents. Of course it could be argued that if the end is good enough, it justifies the means; but here we suddenly find that what was masquerading as a dispute about a general principle or about its consistent application has mutated into a dispute about ends, which logic of course has no means of resolving.

3.The numbers game (1). At the Open Meeting, the Regius Professor of Medicine stressed once again that less than 5% of the animals to be used for research at the Animal House will be primates.<4> A colleague recently told a story at lunch about a committed vegetarian friend of hers who asked for a vegetarian meal in a restaurant in France; she was brought a quiche Lorraine. When she objected that there was bacon in it, she was told, 'Oui, madame, but the pieces of bacon are very small'. If something is wrong, then it is wrong, even in very small pieces.

4.The numbers game (2). It was suggested during the discussion at the Open Meeting that if the animal activists 'really cared' about animal welfare, they would be advocating vegetarianism, protesting against hunting, opposing factory farming and combatting the inhumane treatment of dogs in the Philippines rather than trying to stop animal experimentation, where the numbers are much smaller. Leave aside the fact that many opponents of vivisection undoubtedly do these things as well; the numbers game can be played by both sides. It could equally be argued that if the medical researchers 'really cared' about human welfare, they could boost human health on a far greater scale worldwide by attempting to combat poverty, malnutrition and poor education in the Third World and elsewhere rather than developing new drugs.

5.Problems of scientific method. We are told that animal testing 'saves lives'. (Presumably human lives?) Part of the argument is that human beings would be more likely to receive ineffective or unsafe drugs if these were not tested on non-human animals first. Perhaps someone will correct me on this, but demonstrating comparisons such as 'more likely' would seem to require having both sides of the comparison; hence on the face of it, this claim could only be demonstrated if drugs which were shown to be effective on and safe for animals were more likely to be effective on and safe for humans than either drugs not tested on animals at all or drugs tested on animals and shown to be ineffective or unsafe. Yet we have no such demonstration: drugs not tested on animals, or tested on animals and found to be ineffective or unsafe, are never tested on humans. Hence we lack one side of the comparison. I will await the scientists' explanations as to why such a direct comparison is unnecessary.

6.Using propaganda while condemning propaganda. The Pro-Test committee refers to 'the sight of big-eyed kittens with electrodes in their heads', i.e. the sorts of images that some animal activists use in their literature, as 'propaganda'; I take it that they mean something like 'appeals to the heart rather than to the head', together with a condemnation of such emotive tactics. But if such tactics are to be condemned, then the Pro-Testers ought in consistency to refrain from such tactics. Yet one of the speakers at the Pro-Test Open Meeting was the mother of a child with a rare form of muscular dystrophy offering her 'personal perspective', expressing the hope that through animal testing, one day a cure would be found for his condition. However much we might sympathise, such stories are no less 'propaganda' than the pictures of electrode-ridden kittens. That such appeals are not wholly directed 'to the head' is demonstrated by the testimony in the recent Channel 4 Dispatches programme on the animal rights movement ('Mad about animals', 15 May 2006) from a woman whose extremely painful condition moved her to empathise with the suffering of laboratory animals and hence to speak out against vivisection. Thus comparable human tragedies can lead the sufferers in opposite directions vis-à-vis animal research. (It is noteworthy in this connection that pro-vivisectionists never seem to use pictures of 'big-eyed kittens with electrodes in their heads' in support of their cause.)

The really important issues here are ones which logic has no power to resolve. This seems not a good reason for giving up the use of logic altogether when discussing them.

<1> It goes without saying that should any philosophy student, past or present, who therefore studied logic in their first year, put forward equally bad arguments on the other side, it would be equally disturbing to a philosophy tutor.

<2> An almost identical version of this article, minus the Spartacus analogy, appeared in the Summer

2006 edition of RDS [Research Defence Society] News.

<3> The so-called People's Petition (www.thepeoplespetition.org.uk), recently famously signed by Tony Blair, invites the same confusion: to sign it is simultaneously to commit oneself to three things: that medical research requires some studies that use animals, that researchers should continue to use animal testing where there is no alternative available, and that people in medical research using animals have the right to live and work without fear of intimidation or attack.

<4> Note that this argument only works against those anti-vivisectionists who suppose that vivisectioning primates is worse than vivisectioning other animals. Colin Blakemore, the chief executive of the Medical Research Council, has been in the news recently for suggesting that there might be circumstances in which the current blanket ban on the use of great apes in medical research might properly be lifted (Guardian, 3 June 2006). BUAV (British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection) has responded by calling for the blanket ban to be extended to all primates.