

# 9b

## **Comments on Düwell: Research as a challenge for ethical reflection**

*Akke van der Zijpp*<sup>#</sup>

The ethical question addressed in this paper concerns the moral responsibility of the researcher. This question is directly connected with the task of different actors in society to reflect on the moral dimensions of research and their interrelationships in terms of moral obligations and concerns. This aspect is not discussed in the paper.

When the physicians accepted the rights of the patient to informed consent, the ethos of autonomy and self-determination of the patient or individual human being became central in our thinking. The central position of autonomy is not, in Düwell's opinion, challenged by the four principles of Beauchamp and Childress. They include autonomy, beneficence, maleficence and justice, but when challenged the remaining and dominant position is human autonomy and self-determination.

### **The case of Herman, the first bull genetically engineered for production of (human) lactoferrin in cow's milk as human medicine and baby food**

In 1990 the Advisory Committee on Ethics and Biotechnology in Animals of the Dutch minister of Agriculture, Nature Conservation and Fisheries designed a model for ethical evaluation. The model was based on the four principles of Beauchamp and Childress and added the principles of redress (precaution) and verification (democratic control). The Committee came to this evaluation accepting a zoocentric approach, inspired by philosophical concepts of Singer, Regan and Rollin. This report speaks about welfare and health of animals in particular as practical indicators for the four principles of Beauchamp and Childress. A few years later new animal-welfare laws in The Netherlands were more explicit in accepting integrity and intrinsic value of animals as basic concepts. Obviously animals cannot speak for themselves, but humans have the moral obligation to speak for them.

The ethical evaluation itself then takes the form of reviewing factual data, assessment of consequences for nature, the intrinsic value of animals, human health and welfare and of the environment, and weighing of values in terms of threat and violation of interests. For the above case of Herman the result was initially a conditional yes, with reporting about health and welfare being a central focus in the ongoing experiment regarding both transgenic and normal offspring of Herman. Later the decision was made to castrate the bull Herman to prevent more offspring from being born. This of course led to questions about the integrity of the animal Herman versus the other interests and to questions about other types of control to prevent new

---

<sup>#</sup> Animal Production Systems Group, Department Animal Sciences, Wageningen University, P.O.Box 338, 6700 AH Wageningen, The Netherlands. E-mail: Akke.vanderZijpp@wur.nl

offspring. The case also shows that application of the utility concept in practice is complicated.

This framework for evaluation has been adapted over time; it shows an ethical concept of human–animal relationships in biotechnological research that goes beyond the minimalist concept of human autonomy and self-determination. A holistic concept for valuation was designed in which also the position of animals versus human interests is valued, as are the interests of the environment and nature.

Next, Düwell combines the idea of the contractualist perspective of the world with human rights and autonomy. Together this will most likely lead to a minimal consensus in a world with plural moral convictions. This minimalist approach leads to questions about social ethics; what are the legitimization and the content of the moral rights of the individual, based on autonomy and self-determination? Regarding execution of research the methods can easily be discussed and the rights of the proband can easily be respected. More difficult is the insecure and unknown outcome of the research. The liberal position means that full access to information has to be fulfilled and the final outcome of research can be refused. The advantage of this approach is that it can reconcile different worldviews and works for different actors. The above case of Herman illustrates how the perspective changed over time depending on the outcome of research results and finally led to the decision to castrate the transgenic bull Herman.

But there appears to be some uneasiness with this liberal position, both in terms of the room for making decisions predetermined by the scientific community and in terms of ethical attitudes like virtue, perfectionism and care. Somehow the rights and obligations humans have towards others (humans and animals and nature for example) come back into Düwell's perspective. And the right to be part of the process to organize potentially different outcomes of research in a participatory process with scientists is essential.

The above framework of evaluation of animal biotech research appears to be much closer to the rights of autonomy and self-determination in a social perspective, viz., where the relationship between humans and animals has been defined in the context of nature and environment and the role of humans in the democratic process regarding research design.

### **Another case: Workshop on Foot and mouth disease in 2002**

The outbreak of FMD in 2001 in The Netherlands caused country-wide protests against killing healthy, but usually vaccinated animals. The outbreak involved about 1000 commercial farmers and 1800 hobby farmers. It involved values like utilitarianism, stewardship and integrity/intrinsic value of animals. The Workshop was organized beginning with a stakeholders meeting, resulting in research priorities, followed by an interdisciplinary meeting of scientists. Gaps appeared in knowledge of social science, public administration, communication and crisis management. The result has been an agenda for future research and some policy suggestions.

Characteristics of the meetings: High consciousness of own autonomy, lack of basic knowledge of veterinary epidemiology, value pluralism both regarding animals and human interactions, high (emotional) interest in sharing experiences and capability to discuss a joint approach to research, need for quality facilitation. This Workshop also showed that the concepts of autonomy and self-determination are highly developed, yet the need for sharing experiences and participatory development of future scenarios was equally important and highly valued by the participants.

## Conclusion

My conclusion: To resolve complex problems in our society the liberal approach based on autonomy and self-determination rights is not sufficient. We have to define our position regarding our fellow human beings and animals, nature and the environment. See also the outcomes of the '*Waardenvolle Landbouw*' Workshop (Values in Agriculture, in Van Eck and Oosting 2001) and our research programme for sustainable animal-production systems. They appeal to a holistic approach in science, which requires social interaction for decisions about trade-offs between unequal issues regarding planet, profit and people.

## References

Van Eck, W. and Oosting, I. (eds.), 2001. *Naar een waardeNvolle landbouw*. Taskforce Waardevolle Landbouw, Wageningen UR, Wageningen. [<http://www.wau.nl/pers/01/taskforce-rap01.doc>]