In Response

Rats

W. Frank Epling
The University of Alberta

I am an animal researcher and I work with rats. Now, for most people, the rat is an animal that does not elicit great sympathy. In fact, most people would hit a rat with a shovel if it dared to run across their kitchen floor. Of course, in Alberta, rats do not run across kitchen floors because the province is "rat free" and proud of it. This is not, however, exactly true, because some rats manage to sneak in from British Columbia and Saskatchewan, and I have some in my laboratory. Nonetheless, the Alberta rat patrol does an excellent job and only very sneaky rats survive the border crossing. Since most of these are new arrivals and don't have a home, the Alberta winter usually gets what the rat patrol misses.

There are good rats and there are bad rats.¹ I know this sounds absurd, but stick with me and I will explain. Some time ago I was preparing a 12-page written document that was an ethics justification for some proposed research with rats. I had to make certain that my rats got the very best food, shelter, and medical care. I also had to convince the local committees that I had the overall welfare of my rats foremost in my mind. This proposal took several days to write. The reason for all this is that I have good rats. Good rats live in laboratory cages.

Following the second day of work on my ethics proposal, I went home, opened a beer, put up my feet, and flipped on the

tube. The *Fifth Estate* or *W5* was on, I don't remember which. Also, I can't recall the first news item, but I certainly can the second—it was about the Alberta rat patrol. On this show the dedicated people of the rat patrol were keeping the cities, fields, and houses of Alberta rat-free. This was not a fun time for those creatures who tried to invade the province.

The documentary focused on the Alberta/Saskatchewan border. There are lots of rats in Saskatchewan. Well, let me tell you, the members of the rat patrol were shooting, hitting, and poisoning rats; these were bad rats. Bad rats do not live in laboratory cages. Rats that escape from their cages are not protected by ethics proposals. As soon as their feet hit the laboratory floor, they become pests and are subject to traps, poison, and so on. Shotguns are not used because of damage to walls, noise, and the possibility of shooting a student or researcher. Believe me though, these rats are not held in high esteem. This is particularly true in Alberta, because they could get out of the building and infest our rat-free province. There are other ways to be a bad rat.

Another way that rats lose their good status is to be food. There are research subjects, like some very large snakes, that will not eat unless their prey items are alive. In order to keep these animals, researchers must feed them. Rats that are food are not protected by ethics committees.

All of this makes me wonder why I am spending a significant amount of time writing ethics proposals for rats, rather than doing research with them. Don't misunderstand me. I happen to like rats and I do not advocate mistreating them. I am against the use of these animals for testing cosmetics and for repeating re-

Reprint requests may be sent to W. Frank Epling, Department of Psychology, The University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta T6G 2E9, Canada. Reprinted by permission from "Commentary," *Alberta, Studies in the Arts and Sciences*, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 77-83, published by the University of Alberta Press, June 1989.

¹ This analysis of good and bad rats was inspired by Herzog (1988) who commented on the moral status of good and bad mice.

search where the findings are well established and rats are made to suffer. I am, however, convinced that research with rats (and other animals) can lead to findings that promote human welfare, and I am in favor of doing that research. In order to understand why I am spending a fair amount of time writing ethics proposals for my rat research, it is necessary to consider the animal rights movement.

Over the past 15 years, this movement has steadily grown in number of members, and it has received increasing attention from the press. So-called animal activists belong to a variety of organizations, and they range from moderate to extreme in their views. I think it is fair to say, though, that all animal activists think that cute furry animals are nice animals—even when they are pests or food. Rats have two strikes against them, bad press and a long hairless tail. Also, the black plague did not help their case. This prejudice for some animals and against others is curious. Not very many people are concerned about the live lobsters found at supermarkets. I think this is because the lobster is very tasty and looks vaguely like a large underwater insect. On the other hand, baby seals look cute, warm, cuddly, and helpless. Thus, the seal but not the lobster gets sympathy. Returning to my point, the animal rights movement has created a public concern for the welfare of animals and some of this has reached hysterical and absurd proportions.

A few of the more extreme views include stopping all medical research with animals, replacing animal subjects with humans, including animals in the U.S.A. Bill of Rights, recognizing speciesism as a prejudice similar to racism, and so on. I don't know about you, but I can't imagine a rat, a lobster, or even a seal with the rights of free speech, assembly, and the pursuit of happiness. How would they know they had these rights? Also, what happens when one animal, say a lion, infringes on a deer's right to life? All in all, these views seem a bit whacky to me, but they are taken seriously by some people.

One tactic of the more extreme animal activists has been overt violence and in-

timidation. Some individuals have joined paramilitary animal rights movements. This is an odd development, since it is the only revolutionary movement I know of where none of the members are the creatures whose rights are being fought for. Nonetheless, these people are serious and they have bombed the houses of animal researchers, released laboratory animals, vandalized labs, threatened to inject meat products with poison, organized and promoted letter writing campaigns to stop legitimate research, and harassed reputable scientists with threatening letters and phone calls.

I don't know how many of my fellow citizens are members of, or in sympathy with, the animal rights movement; but I suspect not very many. This speculation is based on the number of steaks on display at my local grocery and the notable lack of concern for pit bull dogs in Edmonton. So, why all the fuss?

A few years ago, the *Edmonton Sun* called and wanted to interview me and several other animal researchers. We were encouraged to participate in this interview in order to "promote the benefits of animal research." Anyway, we had one of the best run and closely supervised facilities in Canada. The reporter and a photographer showed up and asked questions about my projects, photographed my rats, thanked me for giving them time, and left. I looked forward to local fame.

A week or so later, the *Sunday Sun* carried the article. I was not famous. They had so garbled my name that you could not tell whose research they were talking about. This was very fortunate (or perhaps intentional to prevent a civil suit). The first page of the Sunday supplement had a full page picture of a monkey sitting in a restraining chair looking like it had just had a tooth pulled by a student dentist. None of the people interviewed by the *Sun* worked with monkeys, and I recognized the picture. The photograph was a famous one that has appeared in anti-vivisectionist magazines and advertising campaigns for "save the animals." I don't know why the same picture is used over and over, but it is.

Articles like this portray animal re-

searchers as modern-day versions of Dr. Mengele. It would seem that we can't wait to torture animals in order to arrive at conclusions everybody knows already. We have not received good press. I could present a case for doing animal research, but I would digress from the point I am trying to make. Writing ethics proposals that defend research with animals that are arbitrarily defined as good is bizarre.

As I have said, there are good and bad rats. At least in Alberta, it appears there are going to be bad rats for some time to come. Being a bad rat seems to depend on "the luck of the draw." Since bad rats are not considered worthy of ethics protection, I could use them in my research. There is, however, a problem. I could ask for bad rats but they would automatically become good when they were placed in cages in my laboratory. To appreciate this, it is necessary to understand a few things about universities and public relations.

The people who run universities tend to place great value on positive press and negative press is very much discouraged. This makes sense; the public supports universities and if they don't like what is going on they may withdraw their support. Animal activists would like to stop all animal experiments, and they search

for an opportunity to provide unfavorable press. Forcing scientists to justify the ethics of their animal research helps protect the university from this publicity. There are, however, unfortunate side effects. Large sums of money are spent on animal care staff who police laboratories. Time is wasted on writing ethics proposals, sitting on ethics committees, and waiting for ethics approval. This and more for an animal most citizens would stomp on if given the chance.

I am probably more concerned about the welfare of rats than most people. I have known many rats over the years and I have liked more than a few. I am in favor of kind treatment for rats and other animals that are used in scientific research. I do, however, think that a consideration of good and bad rats, and lobsters and seals, points to a confusion of ethics. So what can I do? Not much; write an article like this and then put in my two days writing ethics proposals. Rats!

REFERENCES

- Herzog, H. A. (1988). The moral status of mice. *American Psychologist*, 43, 473-474.