Statement of a Proud Agnostic

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A recent embryology course (ABC, Val d'Isère, January 2003) helped concentrate my mind on wider issues. One of the speakers explained how he had, for ethical reasons, stopped experimenting with monkeys and dogs and continued with the rabbit, mouse and rat. Asked to clarify what he meant by ethical reasons, he pleaded practicality and economics, brushing aside my question with a few light-hearted quips on the inferior suffering capacity of rabbits and rats.

I have worked with practically all laboratory animals (frogs, chicken and mouse embryos, mice, rats, guinea pigs, rabbits, sheep, pigs, donkeys and monkeys), with the exception of the dog. I gave up pathology and took up neuroradiology because I could no longer bear to witness their suffering. The two years I worked with rats proved to me beyond doubt that they are intelligent and capable of immense suffering and courage. Every rat in the laboratory recognised my voice and footsteps, and hated me.

I believe animal experiments are right and that it is right to choose the most suitable species for the project in hand. I also believe we need a research protocol or guidelines to ensure against unnecessary and repeated suffering. I do not, however, subscribe to the hier-

archy of sensitivity whereby primates - our presumed ancestors - are more capable of suffering than the lowly rat (an aggressive, dangerous species in open competition with man). It is a mindset deriving from man's own self-centred view of the world as the species elect, the only living creature able to think, communicate, speak etc.

Every living animal loves, suffers, communicates and relates, albeit in totally different ways to man, ways that are incomprehensible to us. However, we apply the same human-centred yardstick to everything, embryology included: genes, homeoboxes, chemical transmitters all function by conditioned reflex. I can induce development at will: shift a homeobox and my fruit fly will have four wings instead of two. And so on.

But what if this construction were flawed? Are we sure that genes are only codifiers and not part of an actively communicating system? Could it not be that cells react with each other through those myriad chemical mediators with impossible acronyms as part of an immense project that goes into creating life?

If I give irregular building specifications to a builder, the result will be a house with two kitchens, no lift, etc. to no real fault of the builder. Or is our superiority as human beings

anything to do with the fact that a good builder should be able to go back and check with the architect whether he really intended two kitchens?

Mine may well be the ranting of an old man, but I am fascinated by the fact that despite all the notions and information we have piled up, we are unable to fathom their underlying mechanism. In my view, “chemical” embryology is not tinkering with life. It is closer to Frankenstein than real life. Scientific study enables us to predict accurately what note will be emitted on striking a given piano key with a given force etc. But we still do not know why Mozart became Mozart.

I have no conclusions. I refuse the explanations of the creation offered by my evolutionist or religious colleagues, whatever their creed. I simply do not know. I do not have sufficient information on the one hand while on the other, I refuse the delusion of a faith I cannot believe in. I shall stick to being a proud agnostic.

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