

Reports

Conference on Medicine, Animals and Man

A Conference on Medicine, Animals and Man was held at the University of Illinois Medical Center on May 21, 1980. Organized by the University's Humanistic Studies Program, the conference brought together researchers and scholars from various fields ranging from philosophy to psychiatry and physiology and attracted an audience of approximately 75 persons. Three sequential sessions featured discussions of "Animals and Society," "Animals in Science" and "Humanistic Perspectives on Animals and Man."

In the first, Michael J. McCulloch of Northwest Psychiatric Associates, Portland, Oregon, spoke on the novel uses of pets in therapeutic settings. This approach, used effectively in dealing with depression in terminal illness and with mentally disturbed children, was most dramatically illustrated by a film made at Ohio's Lima State Hospital for the criminally insane. Interviews with inmates and staff indicated that the cautious introduction of companion animals into this institution has had a profound impact in the following areas: morale, reduced violence, improved communications, companionship, sense of purpose, responsibility, self-control, meaningful and purposeful activity. Aaron H. Katcher (Psychiatry, University of Pennsylvania) considered the bond between people and animals in urban society, offering some original and suggestive observations on this relationship's psychological undercurrents. (These topics were pursued in a special after-dinner workshop conducted the previous evening by Jules Cass of the Veterans Administration.) Finally, Alan M. Beck (Veterinary Medicine, University of Pennsylvania) detailed the health problems generated by urban pets, concentrating on the social costs of dog-caused diseases and injuries.

The second session dealt with the problem of decision-making in scientific experimentation utilizing animals. Robert A. Kleps (Research Resources, UIMC) outlined the many variables that have to be taken into account in designing an experiment which is both scientifically acceptable and observes reasonable humane precepts. An especially valuable talk by F. Barbara Orlans (National Institutes of Health) offered a defense of biomedical research and went into considerably more detail, suggesting that experiments be assessed in terms of whether the "ethical costs" incurred are outweighed by the benefits to man (or animals) likely to result. To this end, she also sketched a classification of degrees of invasiveness and a hierarchy of living organisms with respect to their capacity to suffer that might facilitate decision-making.

In the remaining session, four papers were presented covering very diverse topics: "Animal Rights" (Richard Fern, Philosophy, University of Illinois, Urbana), "Darwin's Instinct Model of the Evolution of Moral Behavior" (Robert Richards, History, University of Chicago), "History of the Humane Movement and Prospects for the 1980s" (Robert Brown,

Chicago Anti-Cruelty Society), and "Images of Cruelty in Dostoevsky's Novels" (Marianna R. Burt, UIMC). Fern investigated the vexing question of how conflicting interests of humans and animals should be weighed, attempting to construct an arrangement and ranking of the interests of each as basic, serious or peripheral. Brown summarized the challenges that will face both researchers and animal welfarists in coming years.

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