

Thoughts on the February 16, 2010 UCLA-sponsored panel discussion

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On Tuesday night, February 16, 2010 at the UCLA campus I, along with five others and a moderator, will participate in a panel discussion on the topic *Perspectives on the Science and Ethics of Animals Used in Research*. This is the first time, in my recollection, that experts in their fields opposed, to varying degrees, to using animals in research and experts in favor of such use have sat down at the same forum and presented their views. As such, the event is very controversial and unfortunately more heat than light has been generated. It is the source of some of this heat that I would like to address in the essay.

First some background.

I am the cofounder and president of the not for profit organization [Americans For Medical Advancement](#) (AFMA). This organization exists to find common ground in the controversy surrounding the use of animals in science and particularly biomedical research. Our board is composed of vegans (me) and meat eaters. Our *issue* is the scientific validity of how animals are used. We do not address the ethics of such use, just the science. Our thinking is that regardless of what your view is on the ethics of using animals, if the scientific purpose of such use is not tenable then the practice should be abandoned. Likewise, even if you oppose using animals on ethical grounds if the particular use is scientifically viable then you should admit it and base your opposition on philosophical grounds only. Provided both sides are acting with adequate scientific knowledge and honest intent, I see nothing controversial in this position. We also condemn the use violence and violent tactics in democratic societies governed by the rule of law.

In April of 2009, I asked Dr David Jentsch to participate in a debate with me. This was supported by various animal activists in the Los Angeles (LA) area but did not transpire for various reasons. In my opinion this, *along with other factors*, indirectly led to the series of events planned by Bruins for Animals (BFA) and Pro-Test at UCLA. This series of events includes the panel discussion of February 16 and a later debate between myself and, I assume, Dr Jentsch but possibly another scientist. More events are possible but to the best of my knowledge these two are the only ones currently on the schedule.

AFMA and I use numerous media in an effort to communicate our message. Niall Shanks and I had [two books](#) published in 2009, AFMA has a [web site](#), we participate in radio and television interviews and so forth. But one of the most productive, in my opinion, things we do is debate the issue in public forums. There are two sides to every story and society realizes this. While our books are the most comprehensive and scholarly presentation of our views, a debate that is web cast will reach far more people in part because society sees it as being balanced hence worth their time. The most recent example of this was the 2007 debate in Madison, WI between Dr Eric Sandgren and myself organized by Rick Bogle and Alliance for Animals. The Internet viewings have far exceeded the number of people who viewed the debate in person and this, in my opinion, is the real reason to engage in debates; more people are exposed to the position and can judge for themselves. The number of people who actual attend is of secondary consideration to the number of people who watch it on the Internet. I will gladly debate the topic of prediction and animal models in a closed room with only my opponent if the

video makes it to the Internet. (For video and transcripts of various debates see <http://curedisease.com/video.html>.)

Historically, the problem has been finding scientists who will participate in these debates. I have been very vocal in my willingness to engage the opposition but they have routinely refused. (I leave it to the reader to elucidate their reasons.) But I stand by my position that debates are a time-honored way to expose differences to the light of day. Hubert Humphrey said: "Freedom is hammered out on the anvil of discussion, dissent, and debate." Exposing a position, be it a scientific position or political position to the public scrutiny has historically been an outstanding method for weeding out bad ideas and nonsense.

Now is a fitting time to clarify what the February 16, 2010 panel discussion is and what it is not. It is a panel discussion; a venue for people with opposing positions to air their views. It is not a debate; a venue for ideas to be challenged and refuted. A panel discussion is by its very nature a friendly event. A debate, while the participants should act in a civilized fashion, is all about challenging differences and pressing the opponent to acknowledge weaknesses in his position. The February 16, 2010 event is not a debate. The followup event is.

Some people do not like panel discussions because they feel truth cannot be as easily arrived at as in a debate. I am one of these people. However, in my opinion *any* public discussion, provided experts are the participants, has a place. Furthermore, in light of the fact that the panel discussion will be followed at a later date by a debate, I do not understand the opposition to this event. More pointedly, I do not understand the opposition coming from animal rightists. The antivivisection (AV) and animal rights (AR) movements have historically been unable, except in rare instances, to get the scientific community to discuss any aspect of this controversy in a public forum. That reticence has justifiably been condemned in countless essays and speeches (including many by me). But this event is the first in a series of events where the AR and AV communities are getting what they have wanted and yet I am reading what can only be described as vitriol and not well-informed vitriol at that.

As an example (and this is merely one example from numerous essays and press releases and so forth) here is a quote from Greg Kelly, animal rights activist and co-founder of the group Band Of Mercy in Los Angeles: "This event has the potential to be catastrophic and activists in LA are pissed right now they cant [sic] even go to make sure it's "fair".) (His essay can be found in its entirety at <http://negotiationisover.com/2010/02/07/pro-torture-uninvited-us-all-of-this-attention-we-i-give-them-and-this-is-gratitude/>) I do not know Greg Kelly but I am going to assume he is a nice and honest person and is expressing his view sincerely. My problem with his statement is as follows. First to believe that this event could be *catastrophic* places far too much importance on it. I strongly support this event and the future ones to follow. Public discussion works! But in the final analysis the panel discussion is but one event and regardless of how well or poorly it goes for either side, society will not change as result of this one event! To suggest it has the capacity to cause *catastrophe*, or contra salvation, is unhelpful hyperbole. Such misleading and inaccurate allegations inhibit the education of society about the facts we are trying to communicate.

Secondly, I am perplexed as to how the presence of activists at the event can force fairness on either side. The event is structured such that questions from the audience will

not be allowed except in writing and there will be a strong law enforcement component that will not allow outbursts. I agree with the *questions only in writing* rule as when I do these events I am frequently interrupted by people who disagree with me. They attempt to use the venue to express in detail their own views as opposed to merely asking a question. I also agree with the presence of law enforcement as I usually receive death threats surrounding these events and am positively happy to see law enforcement scattered throughout the venue.

A panel discussion is not the place for activists of either stripe to rowdily express their views; written questions are the norm. Neither is it a venue that needs anyone except a competent moderator to keep both sides in line and honest. Further, even if the event becomes one-sided because of a bad moderator or strong-arm tactics by whomever, such tactics, when exposed for what they are in the ultimate public forum—the Internet—will speak for themselves and result in far more harm to the side engaging in them than any rhetoric. I am very much in favor of letting the event unfold as it will. Let society decide what was and was not fair. Historically, when society has been informed on the issues, they have eventually weighed in on the right side.

Mr Kelly then states:

The event is put on by both groups 50/50 [by BFA and Pro-Test] and Bruins for Animals is desperate to put the event on. At first certain activists were banned yet no one on there [sic] side has been. BFA is taking the demands of Pro-shit just to have the event!

There are several problems with this description. Yes, both groups—BFA and Pro-Test—are involved in planning the event. I see no issue with that. It is unrealistic to think such an event will be put on wholly by one side or the other. I would even go so far as to say that BFA is very proud to be involved in this and in my opinion rightly so. Many campus animal groups have tried to hold an event like this only to fail. I see Mr Kelly's issue as being twofold: 1. No one from research community has been banned while the event has been closed to the public secondary to fears that the LA area animal rightist community will disrupt the event or that they present certain security concerns; and 2. BFA is unjustly in charge of representing the animal rights community in negotiating this event. I reject both these charges for the following reasons.

Number 1. In a civilized democracy, laws exist. We may not agree with those laws and in fact as members of such a society we can work to change them but for the time being the law is the law regardless of how unjust. If certain segments of society have shown a blatant disregard, or even merely a lack of respect for certain laws then it should come as no surprise that society will enact consequences for those actions. This has been true for a long time. It is not unique to the animal rights community of greater LA. That does not make such actions *right* but it does make such actions unsurprising. If some in the animal rights community consistently condone violence and act in what could reasonably be interpreted as a threatening fashion, they should not be surprised when they are excluded from events designed to be more in keeping with the norms society accepts for making changes.

Regardless of how one feels about vivisection, it is legal and regardless of how one feels about direct action (and regardless of how society will view it one hundred years

from now) currently it is *not* legal. So the fact remains that researchers who use animals are not, in the eyes of society, acting inappropriately while some activists are. This will have consequences regarding who is invited to attend specific functions. It always has. If activists wish to engage in direct action, promote direct action, condone violence in the pursuit of certain outcomes and so forth, so be it. (Now is not the time and this is not the forum for a debate about the ethics of such actions and positions.) But it is disingenuous to simultaneously act in the ways described above and then feign surprise and offense when society does not take seriously their request to participate in an event that functions in the confines of the norms of society. You cannot have it both ways.

Number 2. I am in a position to knowledgeably comment regarding BFA's involvement in the organization of this event as I have worked with them in this endeavour. I find headlines like the following from *See You In The Streets List Serve* very distasteful:

UCLA BRUINS FOR ANIMALS TEAMS UP WITH THE PRO-VIVISECTION GROUP 'PRO-TEST' TO SPONSOR PANEL DISCUSSION ON VIVISECTION. (Original in all caps.)

The phrase TEAMS UP WITH is at best misleading and a worst disingenuousness as it is plainly wrong. There is no *team* for this event. There are two sides with very different positions that are working together to affect what each believes will be an outcome that justifies its position. BFA has negotiated with UCLA and Pro-Test very effectively and has received as many important concessions as it had made. This is the nature of negotiation in civilized society. If animal rights activists disagree with the nature of such events then they can oppose them. But such activists cannot simultaneously call for discussions and debates then criticize the opposition because they refuse to agree to all of their demands. Real life does not work that way. At demonstrations and protests the activists may engage in whatever behavior they wish and make whatever demands they wish. When one nation in war sues another for peace, the victor may make any and all demand it wishes. But when one party (us) asks the more powerful party (UCLA) to engage in a series of events designed around the concept of civilized discussion then concessions must be made. UCLA does not have to do this! And for the record, the last time I checked, over 150 years of protests has resulted only in more animals being used in research and being used in more heinous ways. Einstein said the definition of insanity was doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result.

And this I think gets us to the crux of this issue. The [above quoted missive](#) sent out under the name *See You In The Streets List Serve* states that:

On the right is the panel of three who will be speaking AGAINST vivisection. Out of ALL the panelists, ONLY Ray Greek is a medical physician. He is the ONLY one out of the six who has ever taken care of a sick patient and made them well. He knows that vivisection is SCIENTIFIC FRAUD and will explain why during the forum.

To begin with, to the best of my recollection I have never made the statement that vivisection is scientific fraud. Indeed in our books and on the web site I go to great

lengths in order to communicate the message that some uses of animals in science are scientifically tenable. This does not make such uses ethical but they are scientifically reasonable. Such hyperbole only impedes mutual understanding and the ability of society to judge the issue. I have said and will say many more times that justifying the use of animals in research by saying that they are *predictive* for humans is fraud. There is a vast difference between those two statements. “Vivisection is SCIENTIFIC FRAUD” is the position of many with pretensions to sophistication but who in fact do not understand the fundamentals of science. The missive continues:

Dr. Jerry W. Vlasak, a surgeon who spends his life saving human lives, who speaks out not only AGAINST vivisection on scientific grounds, but also speaks out on the IMMORALITY and EVIL of vivisection, was purposefully NOT asked to participate as one of the panelists (most likely because he's also a medical doctor and the pro-vivisection group 'Pro-Test' didn't want their side to lose even MORE credibility.)

With this statement we are once again back to vituperative hyperbole impeding understanding. (Before going further let me state that I do not in any way believe Dr Vlasak had any part in writing the above or what follows.) Yes, Dr Vlasak is a board certified surgeon who routinely saves human lives (a fact that is ignored by many who are fond of quoting certain statements he has made). He is a trauma surgeon and if I am ever in need of one I sincerely hope the surgeon is as competent as Dr Vlasak. But to suggest that he is being passed over for the panel because the vivisectionists are responsible for picking our side of the panel is ludicrous. His name never came up as a potential member of the panel and his name was certainly never discussed for such a position with Pro-Test. The two panel members representing the science of animal use are Niall Shanks and myself. With all due respect to all other physicians, veterinarians, and scientists who align themselves with the antivivisection and animal rights movement, no one knows *more* about the science of these issues than the two of us. I do not mean to be offensive, but these are simply the facts. No one has the experience or education we have and in addition we focus all our efforts on the science of using animals in research. Nothing else. Specialization has its benefits, as any physician will tell you.

The other member of the panel is a Stanford-trained philosopher and ethicist. Dr Robert Jones earned a PhD in philosophy and as such is an expert in the field. Again, with all due respect to the writer of the missive and to Dr Vlasak and his expertise in other areas, he is not a PhD in Philosophy and therefore is not considered by society to be an expert in this field. That is *not* to say he is incapable of explaining the AR position. But in a public forum such as this, expertise counts and expertise is seen by society as coming from formal training. Dr Vlasak is an expert in trauma surgery because of training, not because of informal study. The missive continues:

Vlasak has done vivisection during his surgical residency and knows the SCIENTIFIC INVALIDITY of animal experimentation as well as the gruesome facts about how animals are tortured and then killed in laboratories for profit. None of the THREE PRO-VIVISECTIONISTS WILL DEBATE DR. JERRY VLASAK (they KNOW they can't win both the scientific arguments AGAINST

using animals in experimentation and the integrity arguments as to why using animals in vivisection is immoral, unethical and evil.)

I find this portion of the missive offensive but regardless of that I think we are now examining the crux of the issue. Is the writer implying that because the vivisection community will debate Shanks and me that we are in some way inferior in our knowledge of the facts surrounding this issue or unable to communicate those facts? Both Dr Shanks and myself have also participated in experiments on animals. We have written books and published in the scientific literature on the topic. I routinely debate this issue in formal debates and so forth. I fail to see why the writer believes the opposition is possibly happy we are on the panel but would not engage were Dr Vlasak to be on it because they fear his knowledge. Such an attitude reveals a ludicrous detachment from antecedent events. Dr Vlasak has a history in the LA area (and in the US and other parts of the world for that matter) and that history has more to do with the opposition's opinion of him than any knowledge he has on the topic or his skills in presenting that knowledge.

Let me again state that Dr Vlasak is very intelligent and a skillful surgeon and I would gladly have him as my surgeon should the need ever arise. I have even consulted Dr Vlasak in personal medical matters. His views on violence and direct action notwithstanding, he is a competent doctor and a likable individual! But in light of his position on violence and direct action and his affiliations with those who feel similarly, it is unrealistic to think those who value the norms of society will sit down with him in a panel discussion or debate when by doing so they implicitly give credence to his positions. Once again, this attitude is not unique to the LA area animal rights groups or Dr Vlasak. *Nations* refuse to acknowledge the *existence* of other nations much less sit down to talks with them because one nation believes the other's actions are so heinous that sitting down with them would be an immoral act. Such examples could be multiplied.

The reason I think this is the crux of the problem is that many have noticed a disturbing tendency in social movements in general and the animal rights movement in particular; namely the propensity for certain groups to think *they* have all the answers and that others not only have none of the answers but are actually working with the enemy. "We love animals more than anyone else therefore no one but us is qualified to do...." This attitude is demonstrated in the following quote from the same missive:

We don't think a 'forum' will dissuade ANY vivisector from continuing to torture animals, since they are making so much MONEY from doing so. But UCLA Bruins for Animals seems to think a "discussion" will help these poor, abused, imprisoned animals and we guess it takes every spoke in the wheel for change to occur.

From my perspective, the above is demeaning the entire notion of forums and dialogue.

The purpose of the panel and subsequent debate is *not* for anyone to change the minds of people with a vested interest in the process (this is a straw man set up by the writer) but rather to air the various positions in a forum so *society* can be exposed to them and thus make a decision about the validity of the views expressed. The accusation that BFA thinks this discussion will help individual animals currently at UCLA (and the way I read the missive the implication that such help will be immediate) is condescending in

addition to being wrong. Any discussion or debate will in all likelihood result in no changes whatsoever in the immediate future. That is not the purpose. But while we are on the topic, when was the last time a protest, especially home demos (a tactic favoured by some of those expressing vitriol over the February 16 event), resulted in immediate change? If individuals in the AR and AV movements are serious about having the scientific facts on their side and wanting a forum to have those facts presented to society in general, they might consider the old medical adage: first do no harm. Continuing home demos after a researcher has agreed to a panel discussion and subsequent debate is not helpful. The researcher is under no pressure from society to participate in the process. Society already agrees with him that vivisection is a *necessary evil*. If the researcher is going to continue to be exposed to threats and harassment irrespective of his actions, then why bother? Furthermore, if the animal rightists do not think we are competent to present the scientific facts then why call for such events (knowing that only those of us that conform to the norms of society will be involved) and perhaps more importantly why do they call *us* when confronted with arguments from scientists using animals?

If certain animal rights groups think they have all answers and can do a better job than the expert in the expert's area of expertise then I do not have enough in common with them to have a discussion. Such an unrealistic attitude and lack of appreciation for education in general is not beneficial for helping animals in any respect.

This essay has been long and I appreciate all who have read it. But topics as complex as this are not conducive to explanation by sound bite. The essays from which the selections above are quoted are more sound bite than sound reasoning and I urge the writers and groups they represent to reconsider their positions.