

Arguments about using animals to test medicines - looking for assumptions

Introduction

This short activity is one of a set written to improve Science in Society students' argument skills. It extends the basic model to encourage them to look for unspoken assumptions that may also need to be evaluated when criticising an argument.

The Activity

Students can discuss the arguments in pairs and attempt to answer the questions. Follow this with a general class discussion of each argument.

The points made below illustrate some of the ways in which these arguments might be criticised. Your students may well see others.

Suggested Answers

A. We should not use animals to test human medicines. (It is cruel.)

An assumption that cruelty to animals is wrong and overrides all other possible reasons.

B. We should not use animals to test human medicines. (Animals can feel pain and suffer.)

A much better version of A but includes same assumption. Would need further reason to be a good argument.

C. (To ensure that medicines are safe for humans) it is essential that we test them in animals.

D. We must test medicines in animals because (the law requires that we do so.)

An assumption that obeying the law overrides other considerations. Some activists clearly do not accept this.

E. It is right to test medicines in animals, even though it causes suffering because (the suffering of humans would be even greater if we did not ensure that they are safe.)

This is a better version of C but it still can be criticised on the basis of the assumption that human suffering is more important than that of animals.

G. (In some cases animals react to drugs in a different way from humans.) Therefore there is no point in testing medicines on animals. The results will be worthless.

The assumption is that the fact that 'in some cases animals react to drugs in a different way ...' can be generalised to all tests.

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The following are all arguments. The minimum requirement for an argument is that there should be a conclusion and some evidence or reason to give us grounds to accept the conclusion. Because a text can be described as an argument does not mean that we should accept the conclusion. We may not believe that the evidence is true.

There will usually also be an assumption linking the reason and the conclusion. This assumption is often unspoken. It can still give us reasons for criticising the argument. For example in C there is an assumption that human needs take precedence over animals' needs. If we do not accept this then we do not accept the argument.

Questions

- For each argument
 - Underline the conclusion with a solid line
 - Enclose the reasons which support the conclusion with brackets.
- For each argument, decide whether there is a hidden assumption that is crucial to the link between reason and conclusion.
- Evaluate each argument. Remember to consider both the reason for the conclusion and the assumptions.
 - We should not use animals to test human medicines. It is cruel.
 - We should not use animals to test human medicines. Animals can feel pain and suffer.
 - To ensure that medicines are safe for humans it is essential that we test them in animals.
 - We must test medicines in animals because the law requires that we do so.
 - It is right to test medicines in animals, even though it causes suffering because the suffering of humans would be even greater if we did not ensure that they are safe.
 - In some cases animals react to drugs in a different way from humans. Therefore there is no point in testing medicines on animals. The results will be worthless.