

Dissection Debate

Dear Editor:

I continue to be disappointed by the level of discussion in the Association on the ethics surrounding dissection. By now (at least) it should be clear that we are addressing a controversy that does not admit of a technical (biological) solution, nor of an easy consensus—even in the general population. It is time we reconsidered instead the ethics of education itself.

In cases of public debate, it is fundamentally important for us to recognize that *students are autonomous agents* and should decide for themselves the role of dissection in their own education. Teachers and schools should neither require dissections of individuals who are ethically opposed to them, nor deny them to those who find value in them. No uniform institutional position, for or against dissection, can honor student autonomy.

Each student has both a right and a responsibility to make an informed, principled decision. *Educators, likewise, have an additional ethical responsibility in guiding students through those decisions.* We need to provide students with both the relevant information and the structure to evaluate it ethically. As a policy, we might expect that each student present his or her own case for or against dissection—as an integral part of his or her general science education. Students' principled decisions (though not their mere "opinions") ought to be respected. Conversely, students who cannot articulate their positions might well be best served *educationally* by being asked to pursue the alternative—whatever that may be. That is,

those who object to dissection for "weak" reasons ("it makes me squeamish" or "it reminds me of my cat") may be asked to engage in a dissection as a learning exercise. Many of us are familiar, for example, with students who found dissections far more fascinating or worthwhile than they suspected. At the same time, those who regard dissection irresponsibly (though favorably—for example, "guts are cool") might be informed that they have not earned the "privilege"—and may be asked to sit on the "sidelines" to reflect on the value of life. That, too, can be a valuable lesson.

Yes, many may argue that there are effective alternatives to dissection, and yes, many may be convinced that anything short of observing veterinary surgery is not a complete substitute. (And I might ask: Why don't we address the colonialization/enslaving/exploitation of pets or animals in zoos and aquariums?) But in terms of policy, student autonomy—not the value of dissection itself—is the central ethical issue.

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Dear Editor:

Joseph McNerney evokes the old image of "nature red in tooth and claw" to defend destructive uses of animals in biology education (*The American Biology Teacher*, May 1993), and implies that "the carnage that pervades the natural world" somehow gives us license to perpetuate that car-

nage in teaching biology to American youth. The fundamental difference, however, between nature's violence and that played out in the dissection lab is that the former is necessary while the latter is not.

I quite agree with McNerney that dissection alternatives do not allow students to study animal anatomy "exactly as if they were performing a dissection." But dissection is only one of a number of pedagogically effective methods, each with its attendant advantages and disadvantages, by which to teach/learn animal form and function. The fatal (and I don't use that word lightly) flaw of dissection is that it typically involves the destruction of an animal's life. (Most animals used in dissection today are killed for that purpose; they are not, as is commonly supposed, by products of some other putatively benign industry.)

The resulting ethical problems extend beyond animal welfare to include the psychological effects on students. There are widespread, legitimate concerns among educators, psychologists and others that harmful uses of animals in the classroom tend to alienate sensitive students from the field of biology, and to further harden those less sensitive. Neither is a desirable outcome, especially in a day when compassion and stewardship are required of humanity if we are to curb current trends of increasing societal violence and environmental abuse.

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