Title: Frances Power Cobbe and the Philosophy of Anti-Vivisection

Author: Alison Stone

Affiliation: Professor of Philosophy, Department of Politics, Philosophy and Religion, Lancaster University

Abstract: Frances Power Cobbe led the Victorian movement against vivisection. Cobbe is often remembered for her animal welfare campaigning, but it is rarely recognized that she approached animal welfare as a moral philosopher. In this article I examine the philosophical basis of Cobbe's anti-vivisectionism. I concentrate on her 1875 article 'The Moral Aspects of Vivisection', in which Cobbe first locates vivisection within the historical movement of Western civilization and the tendency for science to supersede religion, and then endeavors to refute the defenses of vivisection one-by-one. I emphasize these philosophical considerations that led Cobbe to oppose animal experimentation on a reasoned basis.

Key Words: animal experimentation, Frances Power Cobbe, science, sympathy, vivisection

Frances Power Cobbe and the Philosophy of Anti-Vivisection

Frances Power Cobbe (1822-1904) was the leader of the anti-vivisection movement in nineteenth-century Britain and an inspiration for animal welfare campaigners around the world.[1] She began to be concerned about vivisection in the early 1860s, after reading press reports about the routine use of animal experiments without anesthetics in European medicine and science.[2] Vivisection was becoming more mainstream in British science at the time, and so Cobbe started to campaign and influence public opinion in favor of regulatory legislation. She was the central driving force behind the introduction of the 1876 Cruelty to Animals Act, the first-ever set of laws regulating the scientific use of live animals, which remained the basis of British legislation right up until 1986. While one might think this an impressive achievement on Cobbe's part, she herself judged the 1876 Act in its final form to be watered-down to the point of uselessness. Despairing of any possibility of effective regulation, she started to advocate that vivisection must be abolished outright.[3]

Cobbe is commemorated by the two anti-vivisection organizations she founded – the National Anti-Vivisection Society (originally called the Victoria Street Society), and Cruelty Free International (originally called the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection) – and she is often remembered in histories of animal welfare and anti-vivisection activism.[4] It has been recognized much less often that Cobbe argued against vivisection and other forms of cruelty to animals on a philosophical basis.[5] She came to issues of animal welfare having already developed her moral theory in her 1855-57 *Essay on Intuitive Morals*. Although Cobbe approached animal welfare as a moral philosopher, it remains surprisingly rare for animal ethicists, even feminist animal ethicists, to remember Cobbe's pioneering work in this domain.

My goal in this article is to help restore Cobbe, and the philosophical basis of her anti-vivisectionism, to our collective memory. This is important not only for historical accuracy and to capture women's contributions in the history of animal ethics, but also because Cobbe's work is a mine of ideas, formulations, and insights regarding animals and ethics into which contemporary scholars could tap.[6] Moreover, her work offers a window onto the wider world of Victorian public debate about animal ethics, which was rich and heated, and of which she was at the center.

Since Cobbe wrote extensively on animal ethics over forty years, and since her thinking underwent some significant shifts, I cannot encompass all her thought on animal ethics in one paper.[7] Instead I shall focus on her essay 'The Moral Aspects of Vivisection', published in the *New Quarterly* in 1875 and subsequently repeatedly reissued as a pamphlet (Cobbe, 1875). This article provides a good way in to Cobbe's wider thought because it tackles vivisection from two angles: in the first half Cobbe locates vivisection within the whole historical direction of European civilization, and in the second she endeavors to refute the 'argumentative defences' of vivisection one-by-one. Because she draws on arguments and interpretations put forward in her other works, this article is something of a synthesis. I shall present Cobbe's arguments in the article, bringing out the reasoned and philosophical basis of her anti-vivisectionism and pulling in other works of hers where they provide further support. I concentrate on exposition more than evaluation. This is because Cobbe, like almost all women philosophers, has been excluded from the canon of 'great philosophers' and from our narratives about the history of philosophy, so that her standpoint is unfamiliar to us today. Our primary need is therefore to approach Cobbe's work with sympathetic understanding; criticism can mostly wait until later.[8]

Beginning 'The Moral Aspects of Vivisection' with her historical analysis, Cobbe maintains that, across world history, a gradual progression has taken place in which humanity

has become ever more sympathetic and compassionate (pp. 222-23). The ever-deepening and widening extension of our sympathies – not the growth of the intellect, knowledge, science, or technology – is the central measure of progress.[9] However, the line of progress is not even, and 'counter-currents' – anti-sympathetic forces – threaten to pull us in a retrograde historical direction. This is where Cobbe places vivisection. Though it may appear to be a 'comparatively insignificant' part of human life, it is actually central, because it condenses and discloses these counter-sympathetic forces and tendencies (p. 223).

What is the source of these counter-sympathetic forces? Vivisection of course arises out of science, which Cobbe defines simply as the 'pursuit of physical Knowledge' (p. 223). Previously, truth was treated as just one value alongside such others as goodness, beauty, and faith; and physical knowledge was regarded as just one kind of knowledge alongside the moral, aesthetic, and religious. But now, increasingly, science is driving all other values and kinds of knowledge out of the field (Cobbe, 1888, 4).

Even so, Cobbe remarks, one might have expected science to weigh in against vivisection. For scientists have learnt a great deal about the bodily bases of feelings of pain and suffering (1875, p. 226). In addition, in Darwin's wake, scientists see humans as having evolved out of other animals, thereby recognizing greater continuity between humans and other animals than ever before (pp. 226-27). On both counts, one might have expected scientists to abjure or feel cautious about vivisection, but on the contrary most scientists support it. In historical fact the bulk of scientists in Cobbe's time did favor vivisection, and Darwin and his supporter Thomas Henry Huxley were amongst the chief opponents of the tighter version of the Cruelty to Animals Act which Cobbe and her allies had sought to introduce.[10] 'That the disciples of Darwin should themselves be the teachers [of vivisection] is … a portent of strange and threatening augury', Cobbe concludes (p. 227).

What this portent augurs, for Cobbe, is as follows. Our evolutionary history has given us instincts to be competitive, aggressive, and trample the weak underfoot (Cobbe, 1872, 18). This is because evolutionary pressures have favored the 'survival of the fittest', in Herbert Spencer's phrase. Darwin argued otherwise in *The Descent of Man* (1871), maintaining that, because we are group animals, selection pressures have favored our social and co-operative instincts. But Cobbe, in her lengthy critique of *Descent*, is unconvinced, thinking that Darwin projects the cultured mores of the bourgeois gentleman back onto primitive hominids (Cobbe, 1872, 20-23). She sees the pessimistic 'survival of the fittest' analysis as more accurate. The only ethics that evolutionary theory can really supply or underpin, then, is one of 'might makes right' – no real ethics at all. Those scientists who follow Darwin and believe that evolutionary theory *can* supply an ethics will only end up acting on 'might makes right' and believing themselves vindicated in doing so. They have 'adopted a moral theory of boundless application – namely, that the weak have absolutely no claims at all against the strong, but may be tortured *ad infinitum* even on the chance of discovering something interesting to the lordlier race' (Cobbe, 1875, p. 227). This is put into practice in vivisection.[11]

Vivisection, then, is the inevitable outcome of science's rise to ascendancy and its displacement of the moral and religious values that previously underpinned everyday ethics. In their place, scientists look to evolution to ground ethics, but for Cobbe the only 'ethics' this grounds is one where the strong trample on the weak and feel legitimated in doing so. And so we get vivisection, in which the strong (scientists) dominate the weak (animals) to advance the interests of the stronger party.

To relate this back to Cobbe's account of the historical progression of sympathy, she claims that the various world religions, especially Christianity, have been crucial in educating and cultivating us in sympathy (Cobbe, 1874). These religious influences counteract our instincts towards aggression, domination, and cruelty. By ousting religion, science is

undermining its power to instill sympathetic feelings in us, which gives our cruel instincts room to push forward, threatening us to drag us down below the level of civilization we have reached. By no coincidence, vivisection is one of the main outlets for this newly-resurgent cruelty, because vivisection is practised by scientists and scientists have led the way in jettisoning religion with its softening influence (1875, pp. 227-28).

For Cobbe, then, vivisection is not a marginal issue but one that reveals a fault-line in the historical process, where we stand at a dangerous fork in the road – with religion, sympathy, love, and respect for the sacredness of life in one direction; and science, cruelty, heteropathy, and the survival of the fittest in the other.[12] Cobbe's interlocutor Vernon Lee conveys Cobbe's perspective well in her dialogue on vivisection, in which Lee's spokesperson, 'Baldwin', converses with 'Michael', who represents Cobbe:

> modem civilization has a sort of mark of the beast – a something hideous and Moloch-like, even where it is most obviously subservient to our comfort and welfare. The angel of progress makes a sound with his wings, and has a sulphurousness in his breath which is oddly suggestive of hell. Vivisection somehow seems to fit very neatly into it. (Lee, 1886, p. 180)[13]

Cobbe's view of the world-historical significance of vivisection shows part of why she sees it as being of great moral concern. Some of her further reasons for thinking so emerge when she argues against the defenses of vivisection. Unleashing an arsenal of rejoinders to these defenses, she anticipates many criticisms and concerns that would be raised about animal experimentation over the twentieth century and that remain widely shared by the British public.[14]

Cobbe begins with what she calls the '*tu quoque*' defenses, which appeal to 'our bad conscience as regards various kinds of cruelty' (Cobbe, 1875, p. 229). Why single out vivisection from other forms of human mistreatment of animals, such as hunting and

everyday acts of cruelty? Cobbe replies that these other practices are also wrong, and 'One offence does not exculpate another' (p. 229). That said, she continues, vivisection does deserve special condemnation because (i) often those who, e.g., whip their horses or kick their dogs, or go hunting, are ignorant of how much pain they cause – whereas the same cannot be said of scientists (p. 229); (ii) vivisectors are from the social elite and so carry a special responsibility, for where they lead others will follow (p. 224), and neither can their actions be excused on the grounds they were afflicted by overwork, poverty, hunger, etc. (p. 229); (iii) whereas the other forms of cruelty to animals have been with us for centuries, vivisection is new (p. 230). It is a typical product of modernity, distilling the competing tendencies of modern civilization as age-old customs like grouse-shooting (wrong as they are) do not.

But what about meat-eating? Surely if vivisection is bad, meat-eating, which is much more widespread, must be as bad or worse? Cobbe responds that, again, if meat-eating were an offence, this still would not make vivisection right. But in any case, she claims, meat-eating is not actually wrong so long as the animals we raise and kill for meat are treated and killed humanely. This is the most we can do here, she claims, because meat-eating is an unavoidable necessity for humans (p. 229). Of course, we may object to Cobbe that meat-eating is not unavoidable necessary – an objection that Anna Kingsford was already pressing in Cobbe's time. Kingsford argued that a meat diet is neither necessary nor healthy for human beings, and that meat-eating and vivisection are alike in that both are harmful, unnecessary, and should cease.[15] But even though Cobbe is on weak ground in differentiating vivisection (unnecessary) from meat-eating (necessary), the obvious inference – as Kingsford saw – is not that vivisection is unproblematic but that meat-eating should be abandoned or reduced as well.

We now come to what Cobbe regards as the central defence of vivisection, which is utilitarian: that vivisection yields knowledge of the living body, and medical applications, which enable us to reduce human suffering, so that even though animals suffer in vivisection the practice reduces the net amount of suffering in the world. Cobbe ventures some doubts that scientists are genuinely motivated by concern for humankind (p. 231). Still, she remarks, 'the motives which actually influence living vivisectors do not … determine the ethical lawfulness of the practice' (p. 232). For the practice to be ethically lawful, the end (reducing human suffering) would have to justify the means; and for this three conditions must be met: (i) the end must be 'reasonably sure of attainment', (ii) it must be impossible to reach any other way, and (iii) the infliction of suffering must be kept to the minimum (p. 233). Cobbe questions whether vivisection ever satisfies these conditions. Its end is only hypothetical, possible, abstract, future, and long-term; but no utilitarian should prioritize merely hypothetical future reduction in suffering over present, definite, actual, concrete increases in suffering. The vivisector 'is enthusiastically anxious to relieve the sufferings of unseen, and perhaps unborn, men and women, but … cares in comparison nothing at all for those agonies which are endured immediately under his eye' (p. 231). Plus, the promised medical benefits are often a mirage, she believes (1882); many medical treatments are either unnecessary – being promoted only out of profit and career motives or due to *idées fixes* on physicians' parts – or are positively harmful – not least in contributing to the cult of physical health instead of spiritual well-being, which she called 'hygeiolatry'.

However, Cobbe continues, vivisection's advocates weight the utilitarian scales in its favor by claiming that human pain and suffering count for more than those of animals (1875, p. 233). Huxley, for example, had written to Cobbe that he would gladly sacrifice any number of dogs to save even one human. For Cobbe utilitarianism should, in any case, be rejected as a moral theory, for reasons on which I will touch below (and see Cobbe, 1855, p. 68-70, 148-

49). But operating on utilitarian terms, Cobbe argues, a right action is one that reduces net suffering and/or increases net happiness. Suffering and happiness, equated with pain and pleasure, are the sole rubrics here. But all sentient beings feel pain and pleasure, so there are no grounds to privilege the pain or pleasure of human beings. To do so is merely a new form of '*Race Selfishness'* (1875, p. 233). Cobbe uses this phrase deliberately, for she believes that there had been a long historical struggle for white people to overcome the 'barrier of race' and extend their sympathies to black people, an extension embodied in the abolition of slavery (1874, pp. 199-200). Now she sees 'Race Selfishness' reappearing in a new form, as an arbitrary privileging of the human species and its pains and pleasures. Cobbe thus anticipates Richard Ryder's critique of speciesism by a hundred years.[16]

Some of Cobbe's pro-vivisection adversaries, notably James Paget, countered that animal pain counts for less because animals do not feel pain as acutely as humans.[17] On this view, there is a difference (either of degree or kind) between the pains and pleasures of humans and animals, which gives us grounds to privilege the former. In her 1882 essay 'Vivisection: Four Replies', Cobbe observes that the testimony concerning animal pain behaviors and reactions given by many scientists, including Paget himself, contradicts this claim. Furthermore, vivisectionists use species of animal that are similar to humans in structure and function – otherwise their findings would have little bearing on the reduction of human suffering. By the same token, the animals being used must feel pain and pleasure very much as humans do; if they did not, there would be little point in using these animals for research. The very practice of vivisection tells against the claim that animals feel pain in a qualitatively different or diminished way compared to humans (Cobbe, 2004, p. 190).

What about John Stuart Mill's idea of higher pleasures? Perhaps these pleasures are uniquely human and should count for more than animal pleasures, so that humans weigh more heavily in the scales overall? Cobbe considers and rejects this argument, too, in her

essay ‘The Higher Expediency’, included in her collection *The Modern Rack: Papers on Vivisection* (1889, esp. p. 32). For us to experience the higher pleasures of doing good, and acting with kindness and compassion, we must shun vivisection – neither participating in it directly nor being complicit with it indirectly. Otherwise we are caught up in cruelty and wrongdoing and cannot experience the higher pleasures of virtuous action (Cobbe, 1889, pp. 32-34). This is not, for Cobbe, actually the right reason for opposing vivisection – she sees it as putting anti-vivisection on a basis of concern for *our* moral welfare as humans, whereas it should be based on concern for *animal* welfare (Cobbe, 1865, p. 241) – but still, for her one cannot appeal to higher pleasures to vindicate vivisection.

The upshot of ‘The Moral Aspects of Vivisection’, then, is that although the central defenses of vivisection are utilitarian, when properly understood utilitarianism tells against vivisection in several ways: because actual present suffering trumps hypothetical future suffering; because the vaunted medical benefits are often doubtful; because human ‘Race Selfishness’ is unwarranted; and lastly because higher pleasures fail to shore up the case for vivisection. The fact that vivisectionists still insist on counting human pleasures for more than animal ones shows that they are not really acting from a utilitarian calculation at all, Cobbe infers (1875, p. 234). They are acting from the creed that might makes right and merely invoking utilitarianism to give themselves a veneer of legitimacy. Here Cobbe joins up the two halves of her essay, concluding that: ‘As the main work of civilization has been the vindication of the rights of the weak, … the practice of vivisection … is a retrograde step in the progress of our race, a backwater in the onward flowing stream of justice and mercy’ (p. 234).

We may yet wonder on what positive basis Cobbe herself considers vivisection wrong, if not a utilitarian one. The answer is that, for Cobbe, we have a fundamental duty of benevolence: to minimize the suffering and increase the happiness of all sentient beings,

animals as well as humans. She makes this case in her 1863 essay 'The Rights of Man and the Claims of Brutes'. Cobbe regards the duty of benevolence as basic and intuitive; we cannot go any deeper than it, but it is bedrock and our other duties flow out of it. While this duty sounds rather like the utilitarian imperative to increase the general happiness, utilitarians in Cobbe's time generally argued for that imperative on empirical grounds, whereas for Cobbe the duty of benevolence is known intuitively and not derived from any prior empirical facts.

Clearly, though, many of Cobbe's pro-vivisection adversaries did not find the duty to treat animals with benevolence or kindness to be intuitive. To accommodate such cases Cobbe distinguishes between the ground of the *obligation* to act with benevolence and the ground of our *motivation* to act with benevolence (1874, p. lxxiii). The obligation is, ultimately, legislated by God, as are all moral laws; moral laws presuppose a moral legislator, and that legislator must be God. It cannot be we ourselves, as Kant thought, for then moral laws would not bind us absolutely (Cobbe, 1855, pp. 10-11). If we are motivated to act with benevolence, though, this must be from the emotion of sympathy; sympathy is the immediate motivating source of all benevolent moral action (Cobbe, 1874, p. 154). For Cobbe, then, it is the lack of sympathetic feeling for animals that leads vivisectionists to fail to act on the duty of benevolence to which, nonetheless, they remain subject. And, as we saw earlier, Cobbe believes that science and its erosion of religion are undermining sympathetic feelings for animals and giving our contrary instincts of cruelty and aggression a new outlet. The various strands of her moral thought thus interlock and support one another.

Cobbe does not make explicit whether she intends the arguments of 'The Moral Aspects of Vivisection' to tell for the abolition of vivisection or only for stringent regulation. But in 1875, when the essay appeared, she was involved in intense political and parliamentary struggles over the Cruelty to Animals Act, so presumably she still favored

stringent regulation. In that case, her essay can be read as suggesting that while vivisection is wrong, its wrongness can be reduced to the point where some limited use of it is permissible, if certain conditions are strictly adhered to – i.e. with some ‘higher’ animals absolutely protected from experimental use, with experiments always performed under anesthesia, only performed at all when the medical benefits are certain and immediate, and with tightly enforced controls upon any exceptions to anesthesia. These were some of the conditions stipulated in her proposed more restrictive legislation. When the more permissive 1876 Act was passed, Cobbe was so disappointed that she inferred that vivisectionists would never accept any restrictions on or ethical scrutiny of their activities. The only solution, she concluded, was abolition. From this perspective her arguments in ‘The Moral Aspects of Vivisection’ could be repurposed to suggest that, because vivisection is wrong, its abolition is required.

Either way, Cobbe was clearly not the hysterical sentimentalist that her adversaries, such as Cyon (1883), made out. She had a considered and closely argued position that was embedded in a comprehensive and far-reaching account of Western civilization and drew on her duty-based and intuitionist moral theory (although I have only briefly touched on this latter element here). Many of her points, such as her opposition to human ‘Race Selfishness’ – or speciesism – have become important in animal ethics in the later twentieth century, although it has seldom been acknowledged that Cobbe got there first. We may not accept all Cobbe’s arguments. But the first step is to acknowledge that she made them, and on reasoned philosophical grounds. As I hope I have begun to show, Cobbe deserves to be taken seriously, not only as a formidable activist, but also as a significant and historically influential philosopher of animal welfare.

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[1] The practice that Cobbe and her contemporaries called 'vivisection' is now more often called 'animal experimentation'. 'Animal experimentation' is more morally neutral – Cobbe's critics complained that 'vivisection' was a loaded term (see, e.g., Davis 1885, p. 203) – while 'vivisection', if taken literally as 'dissection of living beings', is too narrow to cover all forms of animal experimentation (see, again, Davis 1885, p. 204). Nonetheless, Cobbe used the word more broadly, and I retain her usage to capture her views and the language employed in her time.

[2] So Cobbe relates in her autobiography; see Cobbe (1894, vol. 2, pp. 246-47).

[3] For excellent accounts of Cobbe's anti-vivisection and animal welfare campaigning, her role in the 1876 Act and the political and parliamentary struggles around the latter, see Hampson (1981), Hamilton (2004), (2013), and Donald (2019).

[4] See, for just a few examples, Simpson (2017), Traïni (2016), and Vyvyan (1969); also Cruelty Free International (n.d.) and National Anti-Vivisection Society (2012).

[5] Donald (2019), however, emphasises Cobbe's philosophical background.

[6] For instance, Cobbe's focus on sympathy anticipates the animal care ethics of Josephine Donovan (e.g. Donovan 2007), while many of Cobbe's arguments against vivisection reappear in more recent critical analyses such as that of LaFollette and Shanks (1995).

[7] On the development of Cobbe's philosophical thought, see Mitchell (2004), Hamilton (2006), Peacock (2002), Williamson (2004), Stone (2022a), (2022b).

[8] However, I cannot refrain from pointing out the problems of Cobbe's anti-vegetarianism, as they are so striking.

[9] Cobbe argues for this view of history in her long essay 'Heteropathy, aversion, sympathy', included in her 1874 book *The hopes of the human race* (Cobbe, 1874).

[10] To be fair, Darwin and Huxley did support regulation, but under a system less stringent than Cobbe wanted. On the contestive relations between Cobbe and Darwin, see Carvalho

and Waizbort (2010), Feller (2009), and Harvey (2009). See also Boddice (2016) on how professional men of science re-invented themselves to circumvent accusations of cruelty.

[11] Cobbe satirically remarks that for scientists: ‘Nature is extremely cruel, but we cannot do better than follow nature; and the law of the Survival of the Fittest, applied to human agency, implies the absolute right of the Strong (i.e., those who can prove themselves “Fittest”) to sacrifice the Weak and Unfit’ (Cobbe, 1889, 66). For discussion, see Gates (1998).

[12] On the sacredness of all life, which Cobbe counterposes to evolutionism and the eugenicism of Francis Galton, see Cobbe (1874, p. lxxiv).

[13] Lee opposes vivisection but argues, *contra* Cobbe, that evolutionism tells against vivisection. For Lee, the evolutionary process has given us impulses towards nobility and humaneness to which vivisection does violence.

[14] See YouGov (2021): British people oppose animal testing of completed medicines (by 41%), ingredients (44%), and cosmetic products (73%). This compares to just 37% who support animal testing of even completed medicines.

[15] See Kingsford (1882), (1883), and (1912).

[16] Cobbe’s critique of ‘Race Selfishness’ may indirectly have influenced Ryder in formulating the concept of speciesism, through the legacy of her arguments in the National Anti-Vivisection Society, to which Ryder belonged. For instance, Ryder conceives of speciesism by analogy with racism, as Cobbe did. He discusses Cobbe in *Victims of Science* (1975), but as an activist more than a theorist.

[17] Nietzsche makes the same claim, picking up and reversing the link Cobbe made with racial slavery: Pains ‘that would drive the European … to distraction … do *not* do that to Negroes. … I do not doubt that in comparison with one night of pain endured by a single, hysterical blue stocking, the total suffering of all the animals … interrogated by the knife in scientific research is as nothing’ (2006, p. 44). Nietzsche’s remarks place him amongst the most sexist,

racist, and reactionary of Cobbe's opponents; yet it is far more common for animal philosophers today to draw on Nietzsche's work than that of Cobbe (see, for instance, Acampora and Acampora, 2004, Calarco, 2021, Lemm, 2009, and Oliver, 2009).