



Duties to Animals in Frances Power Cobbe (1822–1904)

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Animal experimentation, or vivisection, became standard practice in British science over the nineteenth century. In 'The Rights of Man and the Claims of Brutes' (1863) Cobbe sought to determine limits to the legitimate practice of vivisection based on her intuitionist ethical theory. For Cobbe it is intuitive that we have a duty to reduce the sufferings of others wherever possible, including non-human animals. Nonetheless vivisection is permissible under certain limitations. Because we as human beings are rational agents, our principal duties are to other rational agents, so animals can be made to suffer if this is necessary either to satisfy basic human needs or to advance higher human purposes such as truth-seeking. But this must be strictly necessary, not gratuitous, and with anaesthetics used as extensively as possible.

Having led the campaign for legal regulation of vivisection in the 1870s, Cobbe changed her philosophical position because she thought that the new regulations passed in 1876 effectively served not to protect animals but to provide vivisectionists with legitimacy. In 'Zoophily' (1882) she argued that vivisection was wrong absolutely because it violates our duty to cultivate feelings of sympathy and compassion for suffering others. This was part of a turn in Cobbe's thought to put less emphasis on rational agency and more on a Christian ethics of sympathy and compassion. God was now primarily the God of love, whom we must love partly by loving our neighbours, including animal neighbours. Science, on the other hand, Cobbe now saw as encouraging a spirit of cruelty and valorising the 'survival of the fittest' (Herbert Spencer's phrase), whereas her Christian ethics of compassion centred on compassion for the weak and those in need, animal as well as human.

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Keywords:

animals, animal rights, duty, vivisection, sympathy, science