

Introduction

This Element introduces the philosophy of Frances Power Cobbe (1822–1904). Cobbe was a very well-known and highly regarded moral theorist, advocate of animal welfare and women’s rights, and critic of Darwinism and atheism in the Victorian era. After placing Cobbe’s life and achievements in the context of nineteenth-century British culture, this Element examines her duty-based moral theory of the 1850s. Cobbe treated religion and morality as inseparably connected, on the grounds that duty presupposes a moral law, which presupposes a divine legislator. Over the 1860s, Cobbe proceeded to set out a philosophical account of human duties to animals, a form of difference feminism, and a dualist but non-Cartesian view of mind which gave a central place to unconscious thought. From the 1870s onwards, partly in critical response to Darwin’s evolutionary ethics, Cobbe’s views changed. She now stressed the moral role of the emotions, particularly sympathy. She argued that Christianity cultivates sympathy and reduces our natural disposition to feel ‘heteropathy’, i.e., pleasure at other people’s pain and pain at other people’s pleasure. Cobbe now criticised atheism, agnosticism, and secularism for undermining morality and the whole of meaningful life, and she emphasised women’s duties to develop and practise virtues of character across the nested circles of social life. Regarding animal welfare, she now argued that we should, above all treat animals in ways that express sentiments of sympathy and compassion for them.

This Element shows how these philosophical arguments of Cobbe’s were interwoven with her practical campaigns for women’s rights and against vivisection. It brings in some of the many responses to Cobbe from her interlocutors and contemporaries, including Annie Besant, Richard Holt Hutton, Charles Darwin, Henry Sidgwick, Arabella Buckley, Vernon Lee, Mrs Humphry Ward, and Anna Kingsford. The Element also puts forward an explanation for why Cobbe became left out of the history of philosophy, and demonstrates the lasting importance of her work.

1 Cobbe’s Life, Writings, and Context

1.1 Cobbe’s Life and Career

Frances Power Cobbe was born in 1822, the fifth child and only daughter of Charles Cobbe and Frances Conway. The Cobbes were a landed family who lived at Newbridge near Dublin. They were part of the ruling Protestant elite in Ireland during the period when the country was incorporated into the United Kingdom. But although Cobbe was part of the ruling elite, she had to watch her older brothers go to boarding school, destined for university and the

professions, while she remained at home, educated by governesses with a view to making her an ‘Ornament of Society’, as she put it (Cobbe 1894: vol. 1: 56). She disparaged her education, particularly its closing chapter at a finishing school in Brighton. Since the curriculum covered English, French, German, Italian, music, dancing, and Bible study, it was not as desultory as Cobbe made out. Certainly it left her a voracious reader and writer. On returning to the family home in Ireland, Cobbe took the continuation of her studies into her own hands. Supplementing her family’s extensive holdings in religion and theology with subscriptions to several libraries, she taught herself history, classical and modern literature, ancient philosophy, architecture, astronomy, and – with lessons from a local parson – Greek and geometry. She also read as much non-Western religion and philosophy as was then available in translation.

Charles Cobbe was an evangelical Christian who emphasised sin and eternal punishment and maintained a strict religious atmosphere. Cobbe was uncomfortable with this, and her religious doubts escalated over her teenage years. By the age of twenty, she was suffering from a crisis of faith. But she refused to give up on God or write Him off as unknowable. She investigated deism, natural theology, German biblical criticism, Unitarianism, and the humane and optimistic theology of the American Transcendentalist Theodore Parker. Parker’s work was decisive for her; she went on to correspond with him and edit his collected works. Parker’s views inspired her ‘system of Theism’ (Cobbe 1864: 157) which, contrary to Charles Cobbe, stressed love and forgiveness, universal salvation, and the compatibility of reason and conscience.

This period of intensive religious study and reflection on Cobbe’s part coincided with the Irish potato famine, which began in 1845 and was a formative experience for her (see O’Connor 2017). The famine reinforced her determination to find a meaning and religious framework for making sense of suffering, as well as her sense that she must be useful to others. It was another great blow when her adored mother died in 1847 but, again, Cobbe responded with a determination to devise a philosophical and religious system that made room for personal immortality and, therefore, for the possibility and hope of reunion with loved ones after we die. Her developing views enraged her father. He expelled her from the family home, although she used the ensuing period at her brother’s farm in Donegal productively, writing a long ‘Essay on True Religion’ in 1849. Shortly afterwards, her father recalled her to manage the house at Newbridge. Cobbe still found time amidst her many household duties to rewrite the ‘Essay on True Religion’ as her first book, the *Essay on Intuitive Morals* of 1855–7.

Just after *Intuitive Morals* Volume Two came out, Charles Cobbe died. Cobbe used her new-found freedom to travel, unaccompanied, around Europe and the

Near East. But she continued to feel that she must be useful and took a position in Bristol helping the pioneering educational reformer Mary Carpenter, who ran a ragged school for poor and destitute girls. Carpenter's rather spartan lifestyle did not suit Cobbe, though; devout as Cobbe was, she was never one for stinting on life's pleasures. She left Carpenter's establishment and focussed on writing. Initially, she drew on her experiences with Carpenter to address welfare reform, effectively advocating an early form of the welfare state. Then Cobbe followed up in the early 1860s with a string of powerful journal articles on women's and animal rights and the book *Broken Lights* on theology and philosophy of religion. These acclaimed writings propelled her rapidly to the centre of intellectual life in Britain. By the mid-1860s, she could support herself financially by writing, and she settled in London with the sculptor Mary Lloyd, with whom she would live for the next thirty years. Cobbe and Lloyd were tacitly acknowledged as a couple, being invited together to dinner parties and social events, and hosting many of their own. Everyone sought Cobbe's company, and she got to know countless leading intellectual lights – Josephine Butler, Darwin, Thomas Henry Huxley, John Stuart Mill, Mary Somerville, and Herbert Spencer, to mention just a few.

Cobbe became drawn into the gathering wave of agitation for women's rights. For example, she was one of the women who collected signatures for a petition for women's suffrage which Mill presented to parliament – to no avail – in 1866. But suffrage by no means exhausted Cobbe's concerns or those of other first-wave feminists. Cobbe campaigned for women's education and rights to hold professional jobs, and for married women's property rights and protection against domestic violence – in a context where women had none of these things. Incidentally, it is to Cobbe that we owe the image of the 'first wave'; she wrote:

An immense wave is lifting up women all over the world; and, if we 'survey womankind from China to Peru', we shall find in almost every country of the globe . . . a new demand for education, for domestic freedom, and for civil and political rights, made by women on behalf of their sex. (Cobbe 1881a: 22)

But there was another political issue that was even dearer to Cobbe's heart: anti-vivisection. She led the British campaign first to regulate the practice and then, finding the regulatory legislation that was passed in 1876 unacceptably weak, to abolish vivisection outright. She founded two anti-vivisection organisations – first the Victoria Street Society in 1875 and then, when she thought it had become too conciliatory with the status quo, the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection in 1898. Both still exist as the National Anti-Vivisection Society and Cruelty Free International. It was Cobbe, more than

anyone else, who put the moral status of animals and the legitimacy of animal experimentation on the social and political agenda.

Throughout this whirl of activity, Cobbe remained remarkably prolific. She published dozens of articles in most of the leading heavyweight journals of the time as well as several books. Especially given the highly patriarchal context, what she achieved is astonishing. She continued writing well into the 1890s, by which time she and Lloyd had moved to Lloyd's native Wales – Lloyd had never been happy in the metropolis. After Lloyd died in 1896 Cobbe remained in Wales for her last years – she died in 1904 – while continuing to try to steer the now immense, and increasingly faction-riven, anti-vivisection struggle.¹

Throughout Cobbe's life, her writing was always in demand and many of her journal essays were gathered into books: *Essays on the Pursuits of Women* (Cobbe 1863); *Studies New and Old of Ethical and Social Subjects* (Cobbe 1865); *Darwinism in Morals, and Other Essays* (Cobbe 1872a); *The Hopes of the Human Race, Hereafter and Here* (Cobbe 1874b); *The Peak in Darien, with some other Inquiries Touching Concerns of the Soul and the Body* (Cobbe 1882b); *The Scientific Spirit of the Age* (Cobbe 1888c); and *The Modern Rack: Papers on Vivisection* (Cobbe 1889). She published an autobiography (Cobbe 1894), a second book on theology called *Dawning Lights* (Cobbe 1868a), the lecture series *The Duties of Women* (Cobbe 1881a), travel writing, and a large volume of news reporting. As this indicates, not all her writing was philosophical: for instance, from 1868 to 1875 she wrote the leaders for the high-circulation newspaper *The Echo*. She still wove some philosophy into her columns, as when wondering whether a conjoined twin would ever experience themselves as an 'I' or whether the other twin could ever 'form for [them], as the Germans say, a part of the "Nicht-Ich", the "Not-I"' (Cobbe 1876: 245). Even when Cobbe addressed topical and current affairs, then, she tended to bring a philosophical underpinning.

Her philosophical standpoint evolved over time, as I will trace in this Element. A major change occurred in the 1870s. In the 1850s and 1860s, Cobbe sought to reconcile reason and faith, science and conscience; she intended to 'harmonise the Intellect and the Religious Sentiment' (Cobbe 1864: 157). Over the 1870s she ceased to believe that harmonisation was possible. This change of mind was bound up with her political involvement on two fronts – one successful, for legislation to protect women from domestic violence; the other less successful, for the restriction then abolition of

¹ For more detail on Cobbe's life, see the biographies by Mitchell (2004) and Williamson (2005). Two other excellent books on Cobbe are Peacock (2002), on her ethical and religious thought, and Hamilton (2006), on her feminism and her career in writing for the periodical press. An indicative guide to further reading on Cobbe is Stone (2022b).

vivisection. Her research into ‘wife-torture’ and ‘animal-torture’ brought her face to face with some horrendous and gratuitous cruelty and made her much more pessimistic about human beings, convinced that our evolutionary heritage has left us with savage and cruel passions. She stressed the need for the joint forces of religion and law to educate and soften our emotions and instil in us love, sympathy, and compassion for the weak and those in need – a spirit of selfless love that she related to the Christian idea of agape.

Cobbe now saw atheism as fatally weakening religion’s educative powers, and science, especially evolutionary theory, as championing the ‘survival of the fittest’ (in Herbert Spencer’s phrase) and the rights of the strong over the weak. To Cobbe, evolutionism was the theory and vivisection was the practice. She satirised the ‘morals of evolution’ thus:

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)

She said this, we should recall, at a time when eugenics was on the rise. In contrast, Cobbe was adamant that we have duties to care for the weak, the infirm, and the needy even if this goes against nature and laws of natural selection. We can do better than follow nature; we can follow the moral law instead. On that key point she never wavered.

1.2 Print Culture in Nineteenth-Century Britain

To understand the character of Cobbe’s philosophical writing, we need to contextualise it in the print culture of nineteenth-century Britain – the scale of which was vast. ‘The sheer volume and diversity of printed matter was unprecedented’ (Taunton 2014). In terms of books, by 1900 about 7,000 new titles were being published each year. But even more important than books were periodicals, which reached larger audiences because they were cheaper. At least 125,000 journals, magazines, and newspapers came and went over the nineteenth century. Of these, the heavyweight periodicals were central in shaping informed public opinion. Early in the century, these periodicals were headed by the triad of the liberal *Edinburgh Review*, the conservative *Quarterly Review*, and the radical *Westminster Review*. In mid-century, these were displaced by *Fraser’s*, *Macmillan’s*, and *Cornhill Magazines*, and later in the century *The Nineteenth Century* and *Contemporary Review* came to the fore. Cobbe published very regularly in *Fraser’s*, *Macmillan’s*, the *Contemporary*, and many other journals, besides founding two journals herself to disseminate anti-vivisection ideas, *The Zoophilist* (1881–96) and *The Abolitionist* (1899–1949).

Nineteenth-century periodical culture in Britain was very different from that of modern specialist academic journals. First, it was *generalist*. Writers from what we now regard as different disciplines all intervened on issues together (e.g., on the mind and its relations to the brain), debating one another in a common language. These authors tackled issues in a non-technical, wide-ranging, and opinionated way, and they treated religious concerns as integral to every topic, for Victorian culture was highly devout.² The wide-ranging and generalist character of these debates meant that philosophical questions about basic principles and assumptions were never far away. Second, the journals operated on the model of ‘*debate in serial form*’ (Hamilton 2012: 37; my emphasis). For example, Cobbe wrote the ironically titled ‘What Shall We Do with Our Old Maids?’ in response to William Rathbone Greg’s ‘Why Are Women Redundant?’, and she wrote ‘Agnostic Morality’ in response to Vernon Lee’s ‘Responsibilities of Unbelief’, to which Lee replied in turn with ‘The Consolations of Belief’. Third, these journal debates shaded seamlessly into *wider public debates*. This was because journals shaded into magazines and magazines into newspapers, while journals were widely read in the first place because they were non-specialist.

These features of periodical culture meant that Cobbe could use her preferred medium, the journal essay, to do philosophy in a public setting. Her philosophising was thus generalist. She was not a professional specialist but did philosophy – like her contemporaries, Mill for instance – in a way that continually overlapped with questions of religion, culture, politics, and society. After all, philosophy as a specialist profession had not yet formed. The academic disciplines as we know them today, with their specialist organs and institutions, only began to be established in Britain from the 1870s onwards. This is important for it meant that, although women could not hold academic posts or even go to university for much of the century, this did not automatically cut women out of philosophical discussion, since the latter went on in a generalist setting anyway.

But, one might ask, how could women participate in debates in the periodicals, given patriarchal assumptions about women not being up to the life of the mind? Here another key feature of periodical culture came into play: anonymity. Early in the century, the convention was for all journal articles to be anonymous. The principle for articles to be signed only came in gradually over the century, and in the teeth of considerable resistance. The editors of the first volume of *The Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals* estimate that, up until 1870, around

² As the century went on, ever more varieties of belief and unbelief proliferated (see Hetherington and Stainthorp 2020). But these often inherited the spiritual intensity and zeal of older religious outlooks – secularism and alternative religions thus remained indebted to Christianity even while criticising it.

97 per cent of articles were anonymous (see *Wellesley Index* 2006–21). Anonymity enabled women to publish without being censured for doing so. Once signatures began to come in, women continued to protect themselves as best they could; they sometimes remained anonymous anyway, or used initials (e.g., ‘A. B.’ for Arabella Buckley), or pseudonyms (e.g., ‘George Eliot’, ‘Vernon Lee’), or first initials in place of given names (e.g., ‘H. P. Blavatsky’, ‘V. Welby’).³

Crucial as anonymity was in allowing women to take part in intellectual life, Cobbe herself was an outlier since, apart from her first book *Intuitive Morals*, virtually everything she published was signed with her full female name. This tells us, first, about ‘the position Miss Cobbe [held] in Intellect and Thought’ (as her defender Charles Adams put it to her critic Richard Owen; see Mitchell 2004: 284). Cobbe had a level of authority usually reserved for men. She was almost always listed – alongside Mary Somerville, Harriet Martineau, and George Eliot – as one of the great intellectual women of the age. Take, for instance, Annie Besant’s objection to opponents of women’s rights:

If this natural mental inferiority of women be a fact, . . . [then] Mary Somerville, Mrs Lewis [*sic*] (better known as George Eliot), Frances Power Cobbe, Harriet Martineau, were made, I suppose, when nature was asleep.
 (Besant 1885b: 333)

Second, Cobbe’s use of her signature, exceptional in this period, tells us that – despite the male reviewers who repeatedly praised her ‘masculine penetration of mind’ (Réville 1875: 56) – she was proud to write as a woman. One of her favourite expressions was ‘I am a *woman*. Nothing concerning the interests of women is alien to me’, adapting the famous adage of Terence ‘I am a man – nothing human is alien to me’ (Mitchell 2004: 333). When Cobbe’s critics put to her that she only defended animals because she was a sentimental woman, she answered:

I do not in the smallest degree object to finding my appeals . . . treated as womanly. I claim, as a woman . . . the better right to be heard in such a cause than a man. . . . If my sex has a ‘mission’ of any kind, it is surely to soften this hard world. (Cobbe 1895: 497)

Let us explore how Cobbe tried to do so.

2 Moral Theory

2.1 *Intuitive Morals*

Cobbe’s first book was the *Essay on Intuitive Morals*. It ‘served me, personally’, she said, ‘as a scaffolding for all my life-work, a key to open most of the locks

³ On the positives of anonymity for women, see Easley (2004).

which might have barred my way' (Cobbe 1894: vol. 1: 98). Initially, it came out anonymously. Volume One, *Theory of Morals*, appeared in 1855 and Volume Two, *Religious Duty*, in 1857. Both volumes were reissued in 1864 under Cobbe's name, because she had become well known in the meantime. In this section, I focus on Volume One, which sets out Cobbe's duty-based moral theory.

Not short of ambition, Cobbe proposed a new 'System of Morals better than any of those which are current among us', a system that treated the 'Law of Right' as an end in itself that transcends the empirical, natural world (Cobbe 1855: v, vi). However, Cobbe also said that she was merely popularising existing moral theories such as Kant's (vi). But this should not mislead us,⁴ for she immediately clarified that she was no 'exact exponent' of Kant or anyone else. Rather, she intended to 'unite into one homogeneous and self-consistent whole the purest and most enlarged theories . . . on ethical science' (vi). Her simultaneous assertion and denial of her originality reflects the fact that it was then widely thought that women could not produce original ideas but only reproduce the ideas of men, whether by popularising, translating, commenting, or educating the public. To avoid criticism, therefore, women often described their work as 'merely popularising' even when they were advancing original views, and Cobbe's vacillation typifies this.⁵

The scope of *Theory of Morals* is broad. Cobbe argues that duties presuppose a moral law, which presupposes a divine legislator. She then explains why God has created us as morally imperfect beings, why duty has priority over virtue and happiness, that there must be an afterlife in which we can continue to make moral progress, and why utilitarianism and other happiness-based moral theories are deficient. The book also includes an intuitionist account of moral knowledge and a voluntarist theory of moral agency.

Here, I will concentrate on three strands of Cobbe's theory: (1) the indissoluble link she makes between religion and morality, (2) why and how she puts duty

⁴ Unfortunately, it often has misled people, even scholars of Cobbe's work such as Williamson, who states: '*Intuitive Morals* was not an original work' (Williamson 2005: 29). Cobbe's champion Frank Newman (the brother of the better-known Cardinal Newman) criticised Cobbe for giving this misleading impression: 'she commits the great unfairness to her own moral system . . . of insisting that it shall be received through the doors of the Kantian philosophy' (Newman 1865: 271).

⁵ For example, in the obituary that Harriet Martineau wrote for herself when she (mistakenly) expected to die soon, she foreswore any originality: 'she could popularize, while she could neither discover nor invent' (Martineau 1877: vol. 2: 572–3). As Deirdre David puts it, Martineau intended to 'perform . . . work of auxiliary usefulness in the service of theories she never claims to have originated' (David 1987: 71). As with Cobbe, Martineau's self-descriptions should not be taken at face value; but they are telling about the climate of the time.

before happiness, and (3) the nature of her intuitionism. These strands are crucial for both *Intuitive Morals* and the subsequent development of Cobbe's thought.

2.2 Morality and Religion

Cobbe's theory starts from the concept of duty. A duty is something one is obliged to do or refrain from doing (Cobbe 1855: 8). Such obligations hold for all rational agents, i.e., all beings that can both grasp what is obligatory and do it because it is obligatory. Collectively, duties make up the moral law (9), and a law presupposes a legislator. It cannot be us who legislate the moral law to ourselves, as Kant thought. For 'it is needful to guard against the errors of applying to this underived law the analogies of human derived legislation. . . . It is not the standard of Right, which is, or can be, shifted so as to conduce to our beatification' (10–11). Cobbe's point is that the moral law binds us absolutely and exists prior to our wills – it is 'underived'. What the law specifies to be right is always and forever right and cannot change: 'The moral character of good and evil is a real, universal, and eternal distinction, existing through all worlds and for ever' (11). This can only be possible if the law is prescribed by an authority higher, and more constant and ultimate, than volatile human agents. The law must therefore come from God.

For Cobbe, then, the moral law is a religious law through and through, so that in doing what is right, we obey God's will. 'Morality necessarily includes Religion, and . . . the same Intuition which teaches us disinterested obedience to the Law because it is Right, teaches us also disinterested Obedience to that Will which is Righteous' (193). There can be no atheist morality, because there is 'no true virtue without Piety' (203).

Cobbe regards religion and morality as inextricable for a further reason too: morality requires an afterlife, and this presupposes a religious framework. Cobbe elaborates as follows. Because God exists, He must have created us, and created us as moral agents capable of following the law. Yet, manifestly, we are all morally imperfect. We often fail to do what is right, and we see others around us failing too. We can only reconcile our being made for virtue with our imperfection if we assume that we have immortal souls that go on progressing morally in the afterlife (39–43). Without this, our moral efforts will come to seem pointless, and the moral law will cease to motivate us. We must be immortal for morality to be possible.

2.3 Duty before Happiness

For Cobbe, we must do what the moral law obliges us to do, irrespective of our desires; the law is an end in itself. She thus opposed happiness-based moral

theories. Defining happiness as ‘the gratification of all the desires of our compound nature, . . . moral, intellectual, affectional, and sensual’ (142), she classified and rejected several happiness-based theories, including *euthumism* and *private and public eudaimonism*.

2.3.1 *Euthumism*

What Cobbe calls ‘euthumism’ – and what we today would call ‘virtue ethics’ – is the view that we should obey the moral law for the sake of having a virtuous character. This is taken to be desirable because it gives us moral pleasure: ‘the pursuit of virtue for the sake of its intrinsic, *i.e.* Moral pleasure, [is] . . . euthumism’ (142). Thus, of the several components of the compound *happiness*, euthumists foreground moral happiness. Their view is that ‘the Moral Pleasure, the peace and cheerfulness of mind, and applause of Conscience enjoyed in virtue [are] the proper motive for its practice’ (143). Cobbe associates euthumism with the ancients: Democritus, Cicero, the Epicureans, and Stoics (144).

She objects that euthumism gives the wrong reason for obeying the moral law: first, because for euthumists the agent’s ‘desire is for his *own* Moral pleasure’ (143), and he is not concerned for others for their own sake; second, because this slides into spiritual pride, performing actions to obtain a pleasant sense of self-approbation (147–8); and third, because euthumism cannot accommodate cases where we must do something – punishing a criminal, reproofing a child, renouncing an unworthy friend – even though it is wholly painful (148).

2.3.2 *Private Eudaimonism*

What Cobbe calls ‘private eudaimonism’ is a form of utilitarianism on which each individual can only pursue their own individual happiness, or ought to pursue only this because they have no reason or motivation to do anything else. Cobbe rejects this as no ‘System of MORALS’ at all (69), because it is entirely selfish, entailing, for example, that A can only ever perform an act of charity to B to obtain the benefit of B’s gratitude (148). Private eudaimonists try to get around this selfishness problem by including moral pleasure along with the other components of happiness which motivate us to action. But: ‘Eudaimonists confound *Affectional* with *Moral* Pleasures when they imagine they enjoy the latter for an action done from motives of interest’ (148). That is, the theory trades on a conflation of moral and affective pleasure, when really these are distinct and the theory only has room for the latter. Thus, it remains a creed of selfishness.