

Equanimity in the Laboratory? The Sentimentalists versus the Sufferers in America c.1900

by Rob Boddice

A prone rabbit, bolted to an operating table, stares sightlessly upwards into the glare of an electric light. Above its head a scalpel, held like a pen in the hand of a white-coated, white-bearded physiologist, is poised to make an incision. The raking light also illuminates the wraiths of the sick, the physically disabled, and the diseased, drawn to the scene in the hope of an end to their suffering. These abundant phantoms



© Will Crawford, "Vivisection" (LC, Washington)

stalk the physiologist's laboratory: a child on crutches, an ailing baby writhing in the arms of a frantic mother, a blind man. The other faces are those of the poor, whose own lives and the lives of their families are exposed to the ravages of polio, diphtheria, tuberculosis, and a host of other diseases. They yearn for security, for vaccines, sera, and curative medicines, and their hopes lie at the sharp edge of the scientist's scalpel. They plead, this band of "Sufferers": "For Humanity's Sake, Go On!".

Across the other side of the operating table, in the dark shadows that stand for ignorance, the well-to-do make their protestations in small numbers. The ladies, who are in the majority, are bedecked in fur tippets and muffs, and adorned with the plumes of rare birds. The lone gentleman of the elite stands effetely to the rear, motioning in kid gloves. This group of "Sentimentalists", who literally wear their general lack of concern for animals, demand hysterically: "For Mercy's Sake, Stop!".

Central to the piece the physiologist is distracted, annoyed, delayed in his work. His assistant too finds the clamour over his shoulder difficult to ignore. The experimental animal, the rabbit on the table, fixed into a holding apparatus, anaesthetised against pain by the assistant, lies motionless and objectified. Nobody's gaze fixates on this instrumental being. Indeed, it is the only emotionless entity in the room. It feels nothing at the centre of the hubbub.

The image, styled simply "Vivisection", is from a 1911 edition of *Puck* magazine. A pioneer in graphical political satire in the United States, it is clear which side of the vivisection debate the magazine took. The debate had been raging since the early 1870s, beginning in England before appearing somewhat later in Germany and somewhat later again in the US. The controversy ran parallel to the emergence of physiology, which depended upon experimentation on living animals, as a significant professional specialism within medical research. Much of the debate centred on the effect of vivisection on the character – the *feeling* – of the men who did it. Indeed, even as this image clearly comes down on the side of physiology, its representation of the animal as object is an accurate portrayal of the majority of attitudes to those beings actually subjected to vivisection. Of chief concern were the moral qualities of scientists, as men of influence at the vanguard of society. If they were callous, hard-hearted, merciless, then there was a serious risk that society would follow their example. From the point of view of anti-vivisectionists, civilisation itself was risked by the insensitivity, cool detachment, or brutality of men of influence.

One notable anti-vivisectionist, for example, Mrs. Caroline Earl White (founder of the American Anti-Vivisection Society in 1883), claimed that Alexis Carrel of the Rockefeller Institute in New York was "a thinking machine" in whom the "finer instincts of humanity are drowned in the one passion for so-called scientific research".[1] Carrel would win the Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine in 1912. Anti-vivisection as a movement had been driven largely by women in the English context, and White's rhetoric echoed that of the chief English anti-vivisectionist, Frances Power Cobbe, who had wondered aloud whether "the advancement of the 'noble science of physiology' is so supreme an object of human effort that the corresponding retreat and disappearance of the sentiments of compassion and sympathy must be accounted as of no consequence in the balance?"[2] In this context, the plea "For Mercy's sake" seems to be a direct exhortation to preserve the emotion of "mercy" itself, lest civilisation be lost in the quest for knowledge.

The arrival of anti-vivisection in the United States, with its rhetoric pre-formed from the English example, was immediately gendered and written off by the medical establishment as "womanish": an overly sentimental or hysterical reaction based on an aesthetic (literally, sensitive) response to the idea or the image of the knife-wielding mad scientist and his helpless victim. The public debate seemed to hinge on the question of what emotions were appropriate in different contexts. It was a pitted battle between the rational humanists of the scientific community, self-proclaimed "men of feeling" who claimed expertly to practice emotional control, and the (female or effeminate) advocates of "common compassion", Christian mercy, or "clemency", with their feeling-driven or aesthetic basis for civil society.

This graphical representation of the vivisection controversy conforms to the view of the medical establishment in America, whose chief aim as the controversy unfolded, first in New York and Massachusetts, was to wrest control of the emotional discourse surrounding vivisection, to reduce the complaints against it to mere "sentimentalism", and to flag up any apparent hypocrisy among anti-vivisectionists. Their case rested on two claims: first, the performance of vivisection had no ill effects on the moral character of the physiologist; second, the resulting gain in knowledge would serve, in a vast number of ways, to alleviate suffering at the level of humanity. The two claims were connected. Any visceral aesthetic responses to the specific setting of the physiological laboratory, in the name of sympathy or compassion for the creature under the knife, would be out of place, or "false". The animal, in most cases, was rendered insensitive to pain by anaesthetic. The medical establishment was at great pains to point out the widespread and matter-of-course use of chloroform to eliminate suffering from the operational setting. If the operator was struck by a sympathetic or compassionate response, to what could it be ascribed save for an incorrect – irrational – appraisal of the situation? The moral qualities of the physiologist were only jeopardised, so they argued, by a "feminine" response to the situation that would disable them from carrying out their research. The "true" sympathetic reaction lay at the other end of that research, in the alleviation of suffering among the diseased and disabled. The calm manner of their practice allowed them to defer sympathy in the name of a greater good. Far from becoming blunt instruments with knives, so they claimed, medical scientists were increasingly deepening and extending the range of "true" sympathy. This was "humanity", an old synonym for compassion, encompassing the human species *per se*.

Inspiration could be drawn from one of the chief defenders of vivisection, both in the US and in England. William Osler told the graduating class of medical students at the University of Pennsylvania in 1889 to have their 'nerves well in hand' and to avoid the slightest facial expression of "anxiety or fear" even under "the most serious circumstances". In the operating theatre, they were to put their "medullary centres under the highest control" and render their bodies "imperturbable" – a state of "coolness", "calmness", and "clearness of judgment in moments of grave peril". Their character was to be defined by "*phlegm*":

"Now a certain measure of insensibility is not only an advantage, but a positive necessity in the exercise of a clam judgment, and in carrying out delicate operations. Keen sensibility is doubtless a virtue of high order, when it does not interfere with steadiness of hand or coolness of nerve; but for the practitioner in his working-day world, a callousness which thinks only of the good to be effected, and goes ahead regardless of smaller considerations, is the preferable quality." He urged these young doctors to "cultivate [...] such a judicious measure of obtuseness" that would "meet the exigencies of practice with firmness and courage, without, at the same time, hardening 'the human heart by which we live'".[3]

There were clear echoes of this throughout the medical establishment's defence of physiology in America, from the late 1880s up until the First World War. Defending physiology from an anti-vivisection Bill in the Massachusetts State Legislature in 1900, William Thompson Sedgwick (who would become president of the *American Public Health Association* the following year), defended the "honourable reputation" of his colleagues and attested that vivisection made "men more humane and tender-hearted".[4] In 1908, the *American Medical Association* charged Walter B. Cannon of Harvard Medical School with heading up a *Council on the Defense of Medical Research*. He set about organising a public-education campaign concerning the merits of physiology. At all times, "sensationalism" was to be avoided. "Sentimentalism" was to be bypassed. Education was to be "sober", with reason prevailing.[5] The medical establishment even aimed to strike at what they thought was the core of anti-vivisection "hysteria": society women. William Williams Keen, a pioneering brain surgeon and at various times the president of the *American Surgical Association*, the *American Medical Association*, and the *American Philosophical Society*, wrote an article for the *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1910 (re-printed as pamphlet XIV of the *Council on the Defense of Medical Research series*, and again in his collected works, *Animal Experimentation and Medical Progress*, 1914). He asked plainly, if rhetorically, which "was the more cruel:" experimentation on animals "with the pure and holy purpose of finding an antidote to a deadly disease and with the result of saving hundreds of human lives; or the women who were 'fanned into fury' in their opposition to all experiments on living animals"?[6] This sentimental fury was, for Keen and the vast majority of his peers, an emotion out of place. The campaign to defend medical research sought to educate that emotion away.

The image in *Puck* captures precisely this contest for the feeling of the physiologist. Should he, remembering his Christian upbringing, preserve those "tender mercies" that served as the cornerstone of Gilded-Age philanthropy? Or should he project his sympathetic gaze to the non-present suffering of humanity, allowing him to practice with "equanimity"? The rapid expansion of physiology in the early decades of the twentieth century, and the failure of American anti-vivisectionists to make any significant headway before World War Two, are suggestive of the answer. In the name of "humanity", physiology went on.

Further Reading

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- Paul White, "Sympathy under the Knife: Experimentation and Emotion in Late Victorian Medicine," in *Medicine, Emotion, and Disease, 1700-1950*, Fay Bound Alberti, ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
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[1] Quoted in an open letter to George H. Simmons, written by Grace D. Davis, Secretary of the *Society for the Prevention of Abuse in Animal Experimentation*, 12 Nov. 1908. Countway Library of Medicine, Harvard Medical School, Walter B. Cannon archive, H MS c40, Box 28, Folder 333.

[2] *The Times* (London), 19 Apr. 1881.

[3] William Osler, "Aequanimitas," in *Aequanimitas: With Other Addresses to Medical Students and Practitioners of Medicine*, 2nd edn (Philadelphia: Blakiston's, 1925), 3-6.

[4] "Remarks of W.T. Sedgwick on Vivisections restriction bill. 1900," Sedgwick to Ernst, 10 Apr. 1900, Countway Library of Medicine, Harvard Medical School, Walter B. Cannon archive, H MS c40, Box 26, Folder 309.

[5] Cannon to John G. Clarke, 16 Nov. 1908, Countway Library of Medicine, Harvard Medical School, Walter B. Cannon archive, H MS c40, Box 28, Folder 332.

[6] W. W. Keen, "What Vivisection Has Done for Humanity," *Animal Experimentation and Medical Progress* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1914), 222.

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