

Origins of the regulation of experimentation on animals

Societal concern for the welfare of animals began in Great Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century, where a more humanitarian stratum of society, recognising animals as sentient beings, urged the enactment of legislation to prevent cruelty to animals. The first legislation to regulate the slaughter of cattle was passed in 1785, and legislation to prevent cruelty and improper treatment of cattle was passed in 1822.

This same concern for animal welfare encouraged anti-vivisectionists to question the infliction of pain on animals used in the new discipline of experimental physiology, which had emerged in France after the French revolution. For most of the nineteenth century, it was accepted in France that the infliction of pain on experimental animals was far outweighed by the knowledge gained for the advancement of human health. However, the anti-vivisection movement refused to accept this justification and petitioned the British parliament in 1875 to prevent such experimentation. The scientific community asserted the contrary. Parliament, confronted by such a complex and emotionally-charged issue, appointed a Royal Commission to "allay the widespread feeling of anxiety in the community".

The Royal Commission found that experimentation on animals was essential for the advancement of knowledge for the benefit of mankind and that prohibition was not only unreasonable but also unrealistic. Nevertheless, its conclusion that inhumanity towards animals could be found in all strata of society, including the scientific community, made regulation by government inevitable.

In the following year, a Cruelty to Animals bill that was introduced into the parliament included a system for registration and licensing of experimenters and a prohibition of experimentation on cats and dogs. However, argument by the medical profession that experimentation on dogs and cats was necessary for research was accepted, and experimentation on these species was permitted when the bill was passed into law as the *Cruelty to Animals Act 1876*. In each subsequent year, the anti-vivisectionists sponsored a private members bill to abolish experimentation on animals, but each annual bill was soundly defeated. It was to take another century before the Act of 1876 was extensively revised.

It could be surmised that the majority of the community placed their faith in science and technology as the best way forward for improving the lot of mankind. Those in society who were sceptical of science and its so-called potential benefits included the anti-vivisectionists who were not prepared to sacrifice their core values to condone experimentation on animals. Debate on the ethical basis of experimentation on animals has increased in recent years as part of the larger issue of animal welfare, particularly since the publication of the works of the Australian philosopher, Peter Singer.

Reference

Peter Singer *Animal Liberation*. London. 1975

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