

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

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Reply

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Suppose it is agreed both that God can create a world containing free beings which is better than one without and that such a world must contain evil. I take Comstock to be arguing that the absolute best God could do in order to achieve this good is through a process of evolution involving untold amounts of animal suffering. The good of human free will must be brought about on the backs of beasts; they bear the burden, while we enjoy the benefit. Two questions must be asked of Comstock's proposal. First, is it true that this world is the best that God can do with respect to animal pain and human freedom? Second, what does this proposal say about the relationship between theism and the moral status of animals?

Historically most Christians have held that human beings were instantly created by God, and in spite of Darwin, many continue to believe in Special Creation even now. While such a thesis is implausible now, it is clearly not a logical impossibility. If God could have brought about free human beings instantaneously, then why didn't he? Comstock's only suggestion is that perhaps an evolved world "would be more temporally complex and interesting, more of a challenge to create." I have no idea what the "challenges" of creation might be for an all-powerful deity, but I would have thought that to create free beings instantaneously without involving the suffering of millions of other creatures is not only more impressive but also more noble. Given a choice between creating a world that is "temporally more complex and interesting" but involves much animal suffering, and a instantaneous and less complex one without animal suffering, it seems to me that a perfectly good deity should sacrifice aesthetics for ethics and choose the latter.

Still, Comstock needs the evolutionary model, because that appears to be the situation of the actual world. Comstock's second through sixth premises present a plausible enough picture about how animal mentality might evolve into human mentality. There are other possible evolutionary pictures, however. Indeed, Harrison's theodicy, criticized in my paper, argues that it is logically possible that natural selection might have worked without animal conscious states at all. Given the little that is understood about the nature of consciousness, Harrison's suggestion is implausible, but it is clearly not logically impossible. It could have been the case that human capacities to reason and make choices evolve from completely non-conscious analogues in infra-human ancestors. It might well have been that consciousness, like free will, emerged only in humans, and if so, God could have created free human beings without any animal suffering at all. So, it appears

that the world that contains animal suffering, i.e., the actual world, is not the best that God can create.

Of course, Harrison's suggestion eliminates evils for animals but also eliminates goods for them. Perhaps it's not such a good world after all. I suppose that Comstock might well argue that the world that contains both animal pleasure and pain, etc., is a better one than that represented by Harrison. This would be a promising direction indeed, because the value of animal experience is determined by what is valuable for them, rather than their evolutionary value in producing us. Still, I prefer Hume's suggestion that the Creator might have created animals motivated solely by pleasure without the capacity for suffering. And, I see no reason why such a world could not have been divinely evolved. Thus, from the standpoint of theism, animal suffering remains an inscrutable evil.

Comstock's approach to the problem of animal pain underscores the final point of my paper. As for Augustine, the problem of animal suffering becomes the problem of animal existence. Why did God create animals in the first place? Comstock's answer, like Hick's, is in terms of some purported human good, in this case free will. Theologically, animals (and animal pain) have instrumental value for human and divine ends. Animal suffering, on Comstock's account, is justified not by any good to be enjoyed by animals, but rather, by the capacity for human freedom. Comstock's suggested path for animal theodicy thus provides for some interesting twists on familiar if unfortunate theological themes. Let me rephrase my earlier claim. An ethical position that attributes moral standing to animals independently of their value for human ends stands in sharp contrast to the morality of theism.