

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

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Response

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Professor Lynch provides a useful evaluation of arguments trying to reconcile animal pain with the traditional conception of God. Assuming that those who believe in a perfectly good and all powerful deity must explain why God would construct the universe so as to allow animal pain not caused by humans, Lynch discusses four arguments in defense of God: the corrupted creation thesis; the animals are non-conscious thesis; the animal pain isn't as bad as it seems thesis; and the God just doesn't care thesis.

Lynch supplies reasons to find them wanting. He argues, first, that theists should not blame animal suffering on fallen angels because evolution provides a better explanation of predation and God could prevent animal suffering even though creation is corrupted. He argues, second, that theists should not endorse the idea that animal pain is illusory, Peter Harrison's views notwithstanding. We are justified in believing that animals feel pain because we see animals writhing in pain; we know that their neurophysiological structures are incredibly similar to ours; and we recognize that we evolved these structures in common with animals. Responsible theists should not try to defend God by invoking the Devil or dismissing animals.

Third, argues Lynch, theists should not try to deflate animal pain. Even if animal pain states are less complex than human pain states, this supposed fact should not lead us to underestimate the degree to which animal pains hurt. Fourth, Lynch argues that even though God is incorporeal, God can still sympathize with animal suffering because of God's omniscience.

While conceding that he has not refuted traditional theistic belief, Lynch suggests that the burden of proof is on the theist, and I agree. Theists need to offer an explanation of the problem that does not exempt God from responsibility for animal pain, and that neither denies nor trivializes animal suffering. I am not certain that I have such an argument to defend the God of traditional monotheism, but I would like to suggest some lines for further inquiry.

Lynch claims that "an omnipotent deity presumably could have prevented animal suffering," and *prima facie* it seems possible for God to have made things much better than they are for animals. The world apparently could have been one in which all events, people and animals exist just as they do in our world, except that all events of animal pain

and suffering were absent. Lions could have been herbivores; domesticated cats could have been so disposed that they would never torture backyard bunnies; deer could have been so hardwired that they would always successfully avoid onrushing cars. The idea seems plausible enough. Animals are good, but suffering is bad; God wants to create the best world God can, and in the best world God can create there is a favorable balance of good over evil. So God creates animals, but only those that cannot suffer.

I am not convinced that such a world is possible. First, there is the question of whether it makes sense to speak of herbivorous lions and predators that do not eat meat. But one can easily imagine this objection being answered by supposing that the world contains no predators at all, and no animal suffering resulting from animal to animal aggression. Even in a world in which animals never caused each other pain there would still be plenty of animal pain: pain caused by natural evils such as plagues and earthquakes. So take out of the world all predators and all animal pain caused by other animals; you still will not have eliminated all animal suffering.

The question of predation aside, the issue we must address is this: Can any animals whatsoever exist if it is not possible for them to suffer? Yes, you will say. Molluscs and microorganisms are animals, and they exist even though it is not possible for them to suffer. The point is probably correct; we have very little reason to suppose that animals without brains are sentient. But a world without sentient creatures would not, presumably, be the best God could do. So the question is, Can any of the so-called “higher” animals, animals with brains, exist if it is not possible for them to suffer? (Henceforth, when I speak of “animals,” I will mean, unless I indicate otherwise, animals with brains—mammals, birds, reptiles—sentient animals capable of having, choosing among, and acting on, at least simple desires.) Here is the first premise of my argument:

1) In creating the world, God did the best God could (BGC).¹

What’s the difference between God doing the best God could in creating the world and God creating the best of all possible worlds (BOAPW)? If God is omnipotent and omniscient and did the best God could, wouldn’t God necessarily have created the BOAPW?² Perhaps not. The BOAPW presumably would contain no evil at all, but a BGC world might contain evil so long as it were compensated for by something else. In BGC, evil may exist so long as it is necessary in order for there to be a (greater) good. For example, animal pain probably would not exist in BOAPW. But, I am arguing, it may exist in BGC because it is the only way that human freedom can evolve. Whereas BOAPW does not allow us to trade off evils for goods, BGC does.

BGC may be preferable to BOAPW if it can be shown that BOAPW is ambiguous. There is reason to doubt that BOAPW is any more intelligible than the concept of the highest of all possible numbers. We can always improve on the largest number imaginable by doubling it, giving us all the reason we need to deny that there is a largest number imaginable. Similarly, couldn’t we always improve on whatever world is proposed as BOAPW by saying, well, imagine that there are two such worlds? If so, then we would have all the reason we need to deny that there is a BOAPW. There’s another well-known

problem. BOAPW would presumably be one in which humans (a) have the freedom to choose between good and evil and (b) always choose to do the good. But if Alvin Plantinga is right, (a) and (b) are contradictory.³ Assuming that an omnipotent God cannot do what is logically impossible, God could not bring about BOAPW if it included both (a) and (b).

Holding BGC allows us not to have to defend the troublesome thesis that God created the best of all possible worlds. To hold BGC means to hold a theodicy in which whatever bad things exist are necessary for the existence of other good things. On BGC, had the bad things in question not existed, the world would have had to have been worse than it is.

What is the best God could do? God could create a world in which there are no mental operations at all, a world consisting only of matter, motion and life, and containing rocks, streams, viruses and microorganisms. No individuals with brains. In such a world, all events would be brought about by God, either by God's direct manipulations, like a puppeteer pulling strings, or indirectly, by God setting up the original conditions so that each event would occur in turn. Such a world might contain simple animals, even molluscs, but they would engage only in comparatively simple movements, all of which could be explained using a mechanical paradigm, say, for example, something like the behaviorist's stimulus-response language.

But God could do better than that by creating a world in which there are also individuals who engage in at least some actions that are not constrained, that is, not brought about by external forces. One way God could do this is by creating a world in which individuals are capable of: having certain simple desires, forming hypotheses about how to satisfy them, and testing the hypotheses by acting on them. In such a world, all events would not be controlled by God; the individuals themselves would control some of their actions. To act on a desire is not to be directed by external forces. If God caused all individuals to do x every time they did x , or brought it about that they did x every time they did x , then it would make little sense to say that animals are capable of acting on *their* desires.

Such a world might contain more complex animals—birds, mammals—that engage in movements not explicable in terms of involuntary responses to inputs. It is not implausible to say that these animals would be capable of having more than one thing they might want to do at any time. These animals would be capable of wanting to do both x and y at time t and of believing that if they did y at t that they would not be able to do x . Suppose a coyote simultaneously wants to search for food for its offspring *and* to sleep. It cannot do both. So it chooses to search rather than sleep. Or fight rather than flee, swim rather than sun, gaze rather than wander, and so on. Then, in order to satisfy its desire to find food for its offspring, it must decide again: to go down this canyon rather than that one. So it chooses, and it goes this way. This manner of speaking, with its concepts of belief, desire, and (rudimentary) choice may be anthropomorphic. But anthropomorphism is not necessarily a weakness, and the conceptual scheme is widely used by animal ecologists to explain animal behavior. I take this to be some evidence that we have good reasons to explain worlds containing animals with brains in terms of desires and choices.

But God could do better. God could create a world containing individuals who are unconditionally free to will to act on very complex desires or not to will to act on them. They would be free to choose to help create just institutions or not, to sacrifice some of their interests for another's welfare, and so on. If so, then it would follow that:

2) A BGC world must contain individuals with free will.

Now we must ask, What is the best way for God to create such a world? There are at least two options: instantaneous creation or evolution. Arguably, an evolved BGC world would be a better world, because more "storied:" temporally more complex and interesting, and more of a challenge to create.

Thus:

3) A BGC world must evolve in such a way that individuals with free will emerge through a long historical process something like that described by Darwin.

The next three premises claim that the evolution of humans requires the evolution of beings capable of feeling pain.

4) To evolve individuals with free will, a BGC world must first contain desiring creatures, animals capable of having, choosing among, and acting on at least simple desires.

The argument for 4) is straightforward. Free will involves choosing among the things we want to do based on various reasons we have for acting. To choose among the things we want to do requires that we have more than one thing we want to do and that we have some elementary way to choose one rather than another.

But desiring creatures do not arise spontaneously, so:

5) To evolve desiring creatures, a BGC world must first contain animals capable of proto-reasoning about their desires.

By animals capable of proto-reasoning about their desires I mean creatures capable of formulating multiple hypotheses of ways to satisfy desire x , of selecting from this menu one hypothesis as the preferred means by which to try to satisfy desire x , and of proceeding to act upon that hypothesis.⁴ By hypothesis formation and testing I do not have in mind anything very intellectual. I take it that an individual's behavior can be explained in terms of hypothesis formation and testing even when the individual is incapable of articulating that they are engaged in forming and testing hypotheses. A coyote has to decide to act on one of two competing desires: (a) to attempt to feed its offspring or (b) to sleep. The coyote may hypothesize that by searching for food first she will be able to sleep later as well, but that if she sleeps first, prey will escape, her offspring will starve, and she will have failed to feed them. Her hypothesis (though not of course at this level of abstraction) is that by acting on (a) she will also have a good

chance to act on (b), but by acting initially on (b) she will forego the opportunity to act on (a). So she tests the hypothesis by acting on (a) rather than (b). The coyote is involved in proto-reasoning about her desires.

- 6) To evolve animals capable of proto-reasoning about their desires, a BGC world must first contain animals capable of feeling pain.

What would be required to evolve proto-reasoning in nonhuman animals from non-reasoning animals? One requirement would seem to be that structures develop in the central nervous system and the brain necessary to support the complex mental operations required for hypothesis formation and testing. Life requires the ability to store and use information. Pain is a vital source of information, necessary for successful life and death decisions.⁵ But how does such critical information—about which actions will insure survival, which will cause pleasure, which will cause pain—enter the hominid if the hominid is unable to experience pleasure and pain? To develop such brain structures and neural pathways in the hominid, similar structures must have evolved in the hominid's precursors. As Holmes Rolston suggests, the capacity for moral autonomy must have “evolved out of choicelike precedents in the protopsychologies of animal behavior.”⁶

But what does this have to do with pain? I think it is true that at least some of a desiring creature's choices are painful. Obviously, to choose to fight is to face the potential of serious bodily harm; to choose to search for food is potentially to be lost or disoriented; to choose to flee is potentially to be panicked, caught, and terrorized.⁷

But even when physical harm is not a risk of one's choice, it seems there is always a psychological price to be paid. Choosing to satisfy desire x means foregoing the opportunity to satisfy desire y , and foregone opportunity at least sometimes entails frustration. Frustration is arguably a kind of pain. In a very important sense, therefore, it is impossible to choose among even trivial desires (lick rather than scratch) without losing the opportunity to satisfy some other desire. An implication of 6), therefore, is that if God wants to make a world containing animals with the capacity to choose among even simple desires, then God must make a world in which there is (not merely the possibility but) the actual occurrence of pain: the pain of frustration.

So complex hypothesis formation and testing and choice, achieved through evolution, appears to be impossible without animal pain. If this is so, then it would be necessary for God to create a world in which animals suffer if that world is going to contain individuals with free will.

This leads to the conclusion:

7. Unless God makes a world containing animals capable of suffering, God cannot evolve humans.

One might object that the argument just presented justifies a certain low level of animal pain, but not the amount and severity of animal pain we see around us. As my

colleague, Margaret Holmgren has put it, “could humans not evolve if lions were herbivores who experience [only] the pain of frustration on a fairly regular basis?” In response, I can only appeal to ignorance; I suspect that we do not really know how much animal pain is out there, and how much human happiness is out there. If it turns out that animal pain is usually of a fairly low, simple, and brief sort, and human flourishing is usually of a fairly high, complex, and lasting sort, then maybe the calculus would end up justifying God’s creating this world with its animal pain, assuming that animal pain is required by the process of evolution. This is by no means an adequate answer to the objection, and I repeat my agreement with Lynch’s point, that theists should not try to save God by trivializing animal suffering. I mean only to suggest the direction a theist might take in response to this problem.

Lynch claims in his final paragraph that “animals do not fit neatly into the Theistic moral world view” and that “the moral view that takes animals very seriously seems to be at odds with the morality of Theism.” I have provided in briefest outline an argument suggesting otherwise. I agree with Lynch: A respectable theodicy should recognize the pain and suffering of animals without absolving God of responsibility for it. But it may well be that animal pain is justified on the grounds that animals could not have the richness of life they have without the possibility of suffering. And it may well be that God would not have done the best God could without evolving us, and the richness of life we have, using as our precursors animals who, unfortunately, suffer.

Notes

¹ For help in formulating this point and many others throughout the paper, I thank my colleague, Bill Robinson.

² My friend Margaret Holmgren raised this important question about my argument.

³ Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

⁴ I am indebted to the work of Gary Varner for the idea that the best way to understand animal behavior is on the model of hypothesis-formation and -testing. See his book, *In Nature’s Interest?* forthcoming from Oxford University Press.

⁵ Cf. Holmes Rolston, III, *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in The Natural World* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), p. 23.

⁶ Rolston, p. 21.

⁷ Cf. Richard Swinburne, *Is There a God?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 111.