³⁰Where did the idea get started that autonomy is a moral idea which all rational persons ought to pursue and a constitutive feature of normal adult human life? Perhaps it was on an island, where controlling the boats that arrived on and departed from one's shores was essential for survival. If exercising control over one's watery boundaries means the difference between life and death, then control will become an important feature of that form of life. It is also likely that certain habits will be encouraged, habits like disciplining one's thoughts and emotions, pursuing one's interests, deliberately formulating a plan of life, and sticking to it. But "control" may come at the cost of other habits, such as "release," including the capacity to express emotion, sacrifice one's own desires, put the physical and spiritual needs of the vulnerable above one's own. Informal observation of the world tells me that the first set of traits is typically found in certain individuals (e.g., male anglophile academics), and not in others (e.g., female conservative Christians), and more commonly found in certain communities (e.g., secular institutions of higher learning in western Europe and North America), and not in others (e.g., loosely-knit networks of Iranian women friends). This is not surprising, of course. The first set of virtues are those conducive to the sustenance of certain forms of life, and the second set are those conducive to the sustenance of other forms of life. We should not fault one for not being the other.

³¹It is also to employ the sort of gendered language feminists have taught us to recognize as rhetorical in the worst sense. It is the worst because it sounds benign even as it carries powerful political import. Its use has long been the most subtle and effective tool with which one group (often composed primarily but not exclusively of men) has, wittingly or unwittingly, marginalized the moral experiences and languages of other groups (often composed largely but not exclusively of women). To continue to pursue such ways of speaking is not profitable for those of us trying to listen "with a different ear" to "the different voices" not only of women but also of all those historically excluded from the moral philosophers' games. I take the phrases from Gilligan and Claudia Card, the latter of whom has written that "It is important to listen to women *with a different ear*, not simply to listen for a *different voice* in women." Card, "Women's Voices," p. 134.

³²In addition to the commentators whose responses follow, I have profited from the criticisms of Ned Hettinger, Peter List, Phil Quinn, Richard Noland, and Harry Frankfurt. I discussed the paper with colleagues in the Philosophy Departments at Oregon State University and Western Illinois University; read it at the Society for the Study of Ethics and Animals at the 1990 Pacific Division Meeting; and read it again at a conference on animal rights at San Francisco State University in April, 1990.

Response: Comstock on Autonomy

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There are many things to say about Comstock's paper. I want to comment on two issues: the role of "line drawing about autonomy" in the discussion of our treatment of animals and the conclusion that fuller autonomy might decrease the moral quality of the life of a caring woman such as Carrie.

Comstock's basic point is that "autonomy is virtually useless as a line telling us which beings have and which beings do not have moral standing." The bulk of his paper is devoted to an argument that autonomy is not always part of a good life for human beings, aimed to show that a line drawn in terms of autonomy between humans and nonhumans is at best very fuzzy. But what is the relevance of this strategy to conclusions we might draw about our treatment of animals?

Comstock's strategy is directed to an argument for differential treatment of humans and nonhumans which goes like this. Defenders of the differential treatment of humans and nonhumans rely on showing that humans and nonhumans have different moral statuses. One method of showing this different status is to attribute a property to humans that nonhumans lack. Autonomy is the property used by Frey to draw this line. But if the line cannot be drawn, because autonomy is not of value to all humans, then we cannot show that humans and nonhumans have different moral statuses and thus that it is permissible to treat them differently.

But there are crucial gaps in Comstock's strategy. First, even if we grant that increased autonomy would not be good for all humans, it does not follow that autonomy is irrelevant to how we ought to treat them. Second, there are many ways to defend differential

DISCUSSION

treatment of humans and nonhumans short of showing they have different moral statuses. Suppose, for example, that someone wants to defend a preference for using nonhuman animals for risky, nontherapeutic medical research, under circumstances in which research subjects are necessary for the discovery of scientific knowledge that is likely to reduce human mortality or morbidity, utilization of research subjects is limited, and pain and risks to subjects are minimized consistent with scientific requirements. This preference might be defended on utilitarian grounds. Or it might be defended on the ground that there are different and stronger objections to the killing of humans than there are to the killing of nonhumans. Relations among humans, rights, and even autonomy might be the basis for such objections. Whatever we think of these arguments, rejecting a bright line drawn in terms of autonomy doesn't answer the human chauvinist who has more limited reasons for his humanoid preferences.

On Comstock's account, autonomy requires self-determination on three fronts. (Comstock says his account is based on Frey's, and I'll let Frey speak for himself about whether it is his.) Autonomy requires, first, acting on our own behalf, that is, self-reliance; second, ordering our own preferences, that is, self-control; and third, deciding on our own about the kind of life we want to lead, i.e., self-determination. There is ambiguity in Comstock's presentation of these elements of autonomy, particularly with respect to how individualistic and how radical they are.

Comstock describes the requirement of self-reliance variously, as "the freedom to act on our own behalf," "our desire to achieve things for ourselves," "rely[ing] on [our] own talents and powers," "not [being] subject to control by paternalistic outside forces," and being "free of the coercive influence of others." The example he gives of this requirement is a woman who refuses to let her husband write the papers necessary for her to get tenure. Because of this example, and because Comstock's third element focuses on external influences on choice, I take this first requirement of autonomy to be about standing on one's own feet, being independent and self-reliant. The woman who lets her husband establish her credentials is an extreme case; She is fraudulently claiming credit for someone else's work and not achieving what she ought to achieve on her own. But Comstock's descriptions suggest that he has a broader range of self-reliance in mind for autonomy. How much broader, however, is difficult to determine. Do I lack autonomy if

I hire (and properly credit) a research assistant? If I join with others to develop a team-taught course in which we reciprocally rely on each other's contributions? Comstock describes an open-ended linkage between autonomy and self-reliance, under which it is unclear whether such appropriate forms of interdependence and cooperation might violate autonomy.

Internal self-control is the second element of autonomy as described by Comstock. He refers to this element as "making higher order decisions about the relative importance of lower order desires," "devot[ing] ourselves] to the desires [we] desire most," and as "forego[ing] certain lower order preferences." There is a clear confusion here between structure and substance. The regulative principle that we should order our desires to allow coherent action toward what we most want is not the same as the substantive requirement that we should forego lesser pleasures such as recreation in the service of higher values of achievement such as academic promotion. Comstock's choice of career achievement as a clear example of a higher order preference once again suggests an apparent identification of autonomy with individualistic values.

Comstock's final element of autonomy is self-determination in the sense of choosing for ourselves who we want to be. Sometimes Comstock suggests this means being free altogether of background influences, such as family traditions. At other points he suggests it means only deliberately selecting our own life from a menu of conceptions of the good life. Comstock's example of failed self-determination is the man who stays with the family business rather than becoming a painter, a choice described as letting others impose their conceptions of the good life on him. But bowing to his father's dictates is only one explanation of such a choice, the explanation that would involve a clear loss of self-determination. Other explanations of the choice, such as concern for his father or desire to carry on the family tradition, stem from nonindividualistic values that may not indicate a loss of self-determination.

Now why is Carrie deficient in autonomy? She muddles through life, in a motherly way, thinking she might like to do something else. Here are some deficiencies listed by Comstock:

1. She has not deliberately chosen a life plan.
2. The causal explanation for what she does—mothering—is largely her upbringing.

3. What she does involves the fulfillment of "lower order" desires, motherhood and nurturance, rather than a "career" (I put "career" in quotes because the implication that motherhood is not a "career" is Comstock's, not mine).
4. She allows herself to pursue cooperative strategies and takes interest in others' needs rather than her own self-interest.
5. She does not pursue what she thinks she would like to do most, be a hospital volunteer or a nurse.

The last three of these focus largely on Carrie's failure to pursue her own self-interest. That she seeks motherhood rather than a "career," puts others' interests before her own preferences, and continues her current job rather than volunteering in a hospital, go to the content of what she has chosen rather than to the structure of her choosing. The first two deficiencies—her failure to choose a life plan and the fact that her upbringing largely explains her life—come closer to the core notion of autonomy as freedom of choice. But even here, what Comstock says links autonomy to a rejection of background and tradition that is far too strong.

To see this, consider some other possible deficiencies in Carrie as a chooser, that Comstock does not mention:

6. Carrie lacks important knowledge about the courses of life available to her. She apparently has little experience of what nursing is actually like and whether she would enjoy it. She believes, falsely, that her family would oppose a change, so she perceives herself as hemmed in, when she is not.
7. She is paid the wages of a secretary rather than an administrative assistant, and she accepts this exploitation uncomplainingly, without apparently even recognizing it.
8. She is vaguely dissatisfied with her life, casting out for something different but not knowing how to go about finding it.

These do suggest defects in Carrie as a chooser: lack of knowledge, a failure to value her own contributions, and the vague sense that whatever it is that she wants, she is not getting it. To be sure, the search for fuller

knowledge and a more secure sense of her own value might well be at odds with the person Carrie now is. She does not think in these ways, and if she did, she might reexamine her background and change some of what she values. On the other hand, a fuller sense of her own value and possibilities might resolve some of Carrie's current dissatisfaction and place her current virtues, her nurturance and caring, on a more secure footing in her life. There are risks to autonomy, but Comstock is wrong to see these risks as principally the risks of selfishness.

Finally, suppose we grant that a more autonomous Carrie would have lost something of value. It does not follow that autonomy is irrelevant to how others should treat her. Even if she does not recognize her own worth and demand more, she is wronged by someone who pays her too little. Carrie is in a classic double bind situation diagnosed by feminists: hurt if she risks changes, yet diminished even in her own eyes if she does not. Respecting her autonomy in this context raises complex and important issues. Participants in the debate over how to treat both humans and nonhumans, in many different contexts, would do better to focus on the characteristics of creatures and their situations that matter morally, and why and how these characteristics matter, rather than bright lines or irrelevance.