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What Philosophy Can Tell You about Your Dog
edited by Steven D. Hales

What Philosophy Can Tell You about™ Your Cat

Edited by
STEVEN D. HALES



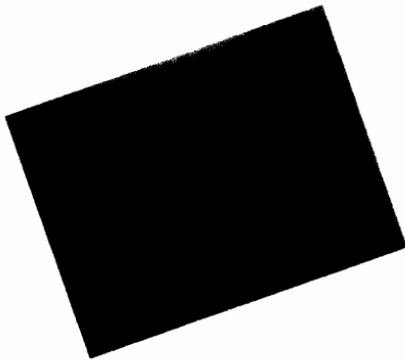
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individual level, where cats demonstrate extraordinary talents for achieving their survival-related goals. A 'communitarian' approach would take a holistic view of feline society, revealing alarming fragmentation and a shocking lack of overall purposefulness amongst all domestic breeds, short- and long-haired.

You may conclude that cats, although extremely clever at exploiting and manipulating humans to get what they want in the here-and-now, are sadly short-sighted in their ambitions and unlikely to organize themselves into an effective social, scientific or intellectual community, or consequently to develop their rational capacities to their full potential. Or, you may conclude that it is the here-and-now that matters, and that cats are the epitome of rational perfection.

Finally, I'd like to ask you to consider what your conclusion, if you've been able to reach one, reveals about yourself—about your own priorities and values. Philosophical questions aren't restricted to the sphere of academic debate; they can have real implications for how you live your life. Although a cat might disagree . . .



11 What's It Like to Be My Cat?

JOSH WEISBERG

Do they not hear us? We are telling them. And telling them and telling them and telling them. We say it again and again, but they do not respond in a satisfactory manner. They are all about themselves sometimes, and we do all we can to get their attention, to get them to move. Hello? Do you not hear?

What is it we want?

Okay. We don't remember. But is that really important? Do you really need us to be so precise?

When you give it to us, we will know. And we will tell you then.

—Terry Bain, *We Are the Cat*

I stand in my bathroom brushing my teeth. There's a scratching at the door. It's Poopy, my cat. I let him in. He rushes into the bathtub, scratches wildly at the shower curtain, springs out, and scratches at the door again. I let him out. What a jerk. What is he thinking? What's going on in that fuzzy little head of his? Is there a rich internal monolog? A "buzzing, blooming confusion" of sensory stimulations? The empty silence of the mystic or the idiot?

Everyone who's owned a cat, or even spent a little time around a cat, has wondered about this. At times, cats seem so self-possessed and self-confident, single-minded in their purpose, whatever it may be. Or they slink about suspiciously, hatching devious plans and schemes. Or they are foiled by what seem to us the simplest of obstacles: the closed door, the sealed can, the mysterious paper bag. And then there is the "crazy hour" when the cat suddenly is wild, feral, and electric, running from one end of the house to the

other in pursuit of (or pursued by) invisible forces or creatures. What's going on in there?

This sort of reflection is part of the pleasure of being around cats—they are at once familiar and inscrutable. But perhaps the difficulty in figuring out what goes on in my cat's head doesn't just make domestic life more intriguing. It may mark the ultimate limits of our knowledge and threaten the completeness of the dominant metaphysical worldview of our times: physicalism, the idea that all things are at root physical objects explicable in the terms of our most basic physical sciences. It may be that Poopy and his seemingly incomprehensible sojourns into my bathtub indicate the limits of materialistic, mechanistic science. Or so some have argued. It's therefore not an idle question: What is it like to be my cat? If we cannot give an answer in terms suitably compatible with natural science, we may be forced to conclude that there's more to the world than just atoms and the void, quarks and energy fields, flesh and bone. All because of my cat.

The Mind-Body Problem

It appears that Poopy, cloaked in feline mystery (or obstinance), has something to show us about the fundamental makeup of reality and the limits of our knowledge. That would please him, no doubt. He loves to make trouble for me. His pastimes include knocking over fragile knick-knacks, spilling half-full (or half-empty?) glasses, and menacing the mysterious cat who sometimes appears in our hallway mirror. Poopy can be a real jerk. But I'll grant that he may have a part to play in this venerable philosophical debate, the so-called "mind-body problem."

Since the dawn of modern science some four hundred years ago, philosophers have wondered whether science can fully illuminate what it is to be human or if there is some special aspect of humanity that will remain forever beyond the grasp of modern science's mechanistic theories. The seventeenth-century French philosopher René Descartes held that while the body could be fully explicated in scientific, mechanistic terms, the mind was a different sort of thing altogether. However, Descartes held that animals—mere brutes that they are—do not possess minds. To Descartes and his followers, animals, including cats, were little complex machines, "automatons" working according to clockwork principles. Sorry Poopy!

In more modern times, Descartes's dualism of mind and body has fallen into ill repute. The going theory these days is that we are all body, through and through. And body can be explained by science. So Poopy is back on all fours with us, but we are brought down to his level—we too, are mechanistic critters, fully describable by modern science. Yet perhaps Poopy still throws a monkey wrench into this picture. Just as he overturns my favorite tchotchkes, he may overturn today's received physicalist ontology. That would just make his day.

Physicalism is the view in metaphysics that all things are physical or made up of physical parts without remainder. Here 'physical' means the type of thing described in our most complete natural science, physics. This includes the basic particles described in particle physics (protons, neutrons, electrons, and more esoteric particles like quarks), and the forces that determine the behavior of these particles (gravity, electromagnetism, and the forces in the nucleus of the atom). But there are obviously many more things in the world than quarks and forces. What of tables, chairs, sealing wax, and litter boxes? According to physicalism, all these things are made out of ever more complex arrangement of the basic physical building blocks. A table is just a huge collection of quarks held together by the basic forces, and used to eat supper upon. Likewise for the other sorts of everyday, macroscopic objects that make up our world, including living things. A bacterium is just a special collection of quarks, special because these quarks can maintain and nurture their organization over time, and can even copy themselves, by using the chemicals of heredity: DNA and RNA. And so on, goes the theory, for even the higher animals: lizards, frogs, aardvarks, hippos, and humans. Yes, even cats. According to physicalism, all there is to Larry the Lizard, Harry the Hippo, and even Josh the Philosopher is just a complex arrangement of quarks, held together by the basic physical forces. So it is for Poopy the Cat as well.

Can this really account for all that there is in heaven and earth? The march of modern science suggests that the answer may be yes. At one time, it was felt that the basic biological phenomenon of life would not yield to this kind of theory. Some held out for the idea that life is not just a mechanistic process, but requires in addition a special "life force," a vital energy or entelechy. However, this view, known as "vitalism," failed to withstand the mechanistic alternative. Biochemistry proved to be nothing more than a brand of ordinary

chemistry involving complex carbon-based atoms. Even the processes of heritability and development have fallen under the mechanistic advance, with the discovery of the structure of DNA and its role in the development and maintenance of living creatures.

Subjective Experience—The Heart of the Problem

Surely there are limits, you might object. Our bodies may be complex biochemical machines, but what of our minds? What about the feelings of love and despair, the rich sensory experiences of a good meal or a stunning sunset? Or the spark of freedom and creativity potentially resting in us all? Can this really be no more than the complex arrangement of quarks? In his famous essay, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?", philosopher Thomas Nagel contends that we have reason to answer in the negative. Upon reflection, we can see that there is a domain of facts that no physicalist theory will uncover. Moreover, we can uncover these facts by considering questions about the experiences of creatures unlike ourselves. Nagel focuses his attention on the bat, but the same points can be made with the help of our more familiar companion, the cat. In particular, with my cat Poopy.

Nagel argues that physicalism works by explaining things from an ever-more objective point of view. Science tries to provide explanations that are viewpoint neutral, that are accurate no matter what perspective we take up on the phenomenon in question. Mathematical modeling provides the clearest example of this explanatory strategy. When we describe a system in quantifiable, mathematical terms, we are using a language that abstracts away from any particulars of viewpoint—it provides, as much as possible, what Nagel calls the "view from nowhere." Perhaps we can never reach a purely objective point of view, but this at least seems to be the goal of scientific explanation: to provide a way of seeing the world that is independent of our local, idiosyncratic, ways of looking and feeling.

Yet the mental facts in question—facts about what it is like to be my cat—seem to escape the net of objective scientific explanation. Whereas the usual mode of scientific theorizing, which lies at the heart of a physicalist metaphysics, works towards ever-increasing objectivity, the facts here are plausibly *subjective* in nature. We cannot describe and explain them from the "view from nowhere"

because these facts are fundamentally wrapped up with points of view; they are inextricably somewhere.

In more detail, it seems that all science can tell us concerns the biochemical makeup of Poopy, the chemical processes that fire in his brain when he jumps into the tub, the evolutionary purposes and origin of his various psychological systems, the range of environmental stimuli to which he responds. But it cannot tell us what it is like to be him as he goes through these processes—what it is like *for him* as this occurs. For all we can tell from the point of view of scientific explanation, there may be nothing at all going on *for him*. Or it might be something very different from what occurs in us. How could we tell merely by reading about the biochemical machinery churning away as Poopy interrupts my morning ablutions?

The pure scientific description leaves out a fundamental feature of reality—the subjective facts about what it's like for me, or for my cat, as we live our lives. While it may be true that we are evolved biochemical machines, this is not all we are. Or at least an explanation that only trades in such facts will be radically incomplete. What's more, it's entirely unclear how to add in the subjective facts to the physicalist scientific picture. All that physicalist science gives us is more of the same: more chemicals, more particles, more mathematically described forces. How could we possibly wring subjectivity out of such facts? Nagel concludes that we have no idea how to fit the subjective side of reality into the physicalist worldview. Even though he is sympathetic with physicalism in general—its successes in science and technology can hardly be sneezed at—Nagel contends that we have no idea how to explain subjective experience in physical terms. Even more troubling, if we cannot tell what it's like to be my cat from a physicalist point of view, why think we can tell what it's like to be *us*? Thus, from humble reflections on my cat's morning behavior to the foundations of mind and metaphysics. As I said, what a jerk Poopy is.

What does it mean to say something is a "subjective fact"? Can I really undermine physicalism just by reflecting on what it's like to be my cat? Isn't that just a little too easy? First off, a subjective fact is a fact that can be accessed on from one point of view. It's a fact that can only be known by adopting that particular sort of viewpoint and experiencing the fact for one's self. For example, let's say you've been bungee jumping and I have not. Then you might describe your experience to me, but I can only know the subjec-

tive fact—what it's like to bungee jump—if I myself have been bungee jumping. Or maybe I can know what it's like if I've had a close enough experience and can, on that basis, imagine what it's like. Either way, I've got to somehow get myself into the right state of mind, and then reflect and say to myself, "Aha! So this is what it's like to bungee jump!" It seems that if I haven't had the experience myself, or if I haven't had a "nearby" experience, I can't know what it's like. It's not the sort of thing I can get from book learnin'.

Since there seems to be no way I could ever get myself into the right state of mind to have experiences anything like my cat's, I can never know what it's like to be my cat. After all, my cat and I have very different psychologies, not to mention bodily hardware. He's got whiskers and eyes that can see in the dark. I've got a well-developed frontal lobe. We're just too different to get into the right states of mind so that I could know what it's like to be Poopy when he claws his way into my bathroom. Yet if that's the case, then there seems to be a range of facts that physicalist scientific explanation cannot handle. Physicalism is stuck with the sorts of facts that could fill a physics (or chemistry or biology) textbook. Unfortunately, that's not the kind of thing that can convey what it's like for my cat to have the experiences he does. There are facts beyond the physical facts—there is more in heaven and earth than is dreamed of in the physicalist's philosophy. Or so it seems.

Solving—or Dissolving—the Problem

On the other hand, maybe we can know all there is to know about Poopy without having his experiences or even imagining what it's like to have his experiences. Nagel's claim depends on there being special facts that can only be known by having the right sort of experiences. Why should we accept this idea? Here's another possibility: while experience is one way to learn the facts, *there are other routes to the same facts!* Perhaps, then, science's description of Poopy is fully complete—it describes everything that there is to know about Poopy—even though it doesn't give us the ability to experience or imagine what it's like to be Poopy directly. How might we support this claim and what might Nagel say in response?

First, we can sketch out the physicalist's story about Poopy, the sorts of facts and details that the physicalist can provide to explain all the mental goings-on when Poopy has his morning romp. Obviously, this will be a *rough* sketch, but it will show the kinds

of resources the physicalist can bring to bear on the problem. Then we can consider what if anything is missing. It may be that when we get a glimpse of the scientific story, we'll lose that lingering feeling of incompleteness. If we still feel that something's left out, we needn't give in to Nagel. Instead, we can consider whether there's another explanation of why we feel this way, of why we have the intuition that physicalism can't deliver the goods. If we can show that this feeling isn't a good guide to the underlying nature of the mind, then we needn't let it tear down our worldview. We can resist Nagel's attack on physicalism, despite Mr. P's best efforts to ruin my philosophical day.

Physicalist science can tell us an enormous amount about Poopy as he scratches wildly at my shower curtain. First, it can provide rich detail about the things in the world that he responds to with his senses. Poopy can detect and differentiate a wide range of visible light, though his eyes and brain have much less color-processing machinery than do ours. He can detect shades of black, white, and grey, and can tell red from other colors, though he is less good at yellows, blues, and greens. He's highly adept at detecting motion—the littlest twitching of the shower curtain in the breeze is enough to trigger his finely-tuned tracking and pouncing mechanisms.

We can spell out in great detail the range of environmental stimuli that Poopy reacts to, and trace the diverse relations between these stimuli. In this way we can map out various "quality spaces" for Poopy, multi-dimensional networks that place each quality Poopy is responsive to in a unique location. We can get extremely precise about just what Poopy is sensing.¹ Comparative psychology and cognitive ethology—two fields scientifically observing and testing animal mentality and behavior—provide us with an ever-growing list of such facts.

Further, we can lay out a detailed map of how Poopy represents visual (and other sensory) stimuli in his brain. We can tell which perceived qualities are closer to which in Poopy's mind, which details are highlighted and which are left out altogether. These

¹ For an excellent description of how to do this, see Austen Clark, *Sensory Qualities* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993). For more on cat psychology, see Terry Bain, *We Are the Cat* (New York: Harmony, 2006); Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, *The Nine Emotional Lives of Cats* (Ballantine, 2002); and Akif Pirinçci and Rolf Degen, *Cat Sense: Inside the Feline Mind* (Fourth Estate, 1994).

neural maps let us know just when Poopy is responding to which environmental trigger, and how he represents these perceived differences. And we can trace the associations Poopy has developed in his brain between kinds of stimuli. Some sensations cause near-simultaneous firing in his amygdala—a part of his brain involved in emotional processing—because they've become associated with loud noises, the presence of our dog (Flea Biscuit, who is very jealous that Poopy is figuring so prominently in this chapter), and other signs of trouble.

These stimuli create fear reactions: they cause freezing, puffy tails, and wild, disorderly retreats. Others stimuli have more positive associations—they mean food, fun, and reproduction (in his dreams!). And finally we know a great deal about how his brain triggers Poopy's behavioral reactions—how he manages to land on his feet when dumped unceremoniously outside the bathroom, how he effectively stalks and pounces on the shimmering and devious shower curtain, how he aims his sharp claws at my hand as I try to pet him lovingly, and so on.

What's more, we can explain how these cognitive mechanisms work with greater and greater biochemical specificity. We know how the nerve cells in Poopy's eye and brain generate the "action potentials" that make them fire. The right concentration of calcium and potassium ions in and around the nerve cell, the modulating effect of chemicals like serotonin, dopamine, glutamate, and others, are being analyzed, traced, and functionally modeled. And the organization of Poopy's brain, from the optic nerve to the columnar arrangement of neurons in his visual cortex to the complex interacting circuitry of association, memory, learning, and motor action, are all falling under the explanatory net of modern neuroscience and biochemistry. We even have a detailed understanding of how the particular atoms and subatomic particles in Poopy's neurons fit together to generate the electro-chemical interactions of his nervous system. Finally, we have evolutionary theory to explain where this machinery came from, what its distinctive cat-specific features are, and how Poopy thereby fits in with the rest of us mammals and with all life on this planet. What could possibly be left out of this rich interwoven tale about my morning bathroom companion?

Ah, says our Nagelian interlocutor, what about what it feels like *for Poopy* when all this machinery is whirring away in his little skull? Haven't you left out this vital information? Here's the physi-

calist answer: no, we have not. We have just given you a complete description of what it feels like for Poopy. We've told you what he sees, what he associates with what, the actions he performs, and what's more, we've filled out the details of these processes from the psychological, biochemical, atomic, and evolutionary perspectives. We've told you all that's going on with Poopy when he pounces on the shower curtain, in grim and massive detail, right down to the last quark if need be.

Experience and Ability

Nevertheless, says our inquisitor, this fails to let me feel or even imagine Poopy's feelings. How about them apples, Mr. Physicalist? In response we ask: why should our story provide you with this ability? We've told you all that there is to know about Poopy's mental life, and now you want us to *turn you into a cat*? That's asking a bit much, even of a philosopher. Here's the deal. We've told you all the facts about Poopy, but we admit that we haven't given you access to those facts in every way possible. We've given you a complete story about Poopy's mental life, but we acknowledge that there are other ways to get at Poopy's mental life—in particular, by *being Poopy!* But the facts that Poopy accesses from his personal viewpoint—and the facts we'd access if by advanced brain grafting or by black magic we were able to look out of Poopy's eyes and somehow think with his devious brain—are no more than the facts we've already presented in our physicalist scientific story. It's all there, just accessed by a different route. So the physicalist story is complete, even though we can't imagine what it's like to be Poopy.

Doubt lingers. Surely there are things that can't be captured in the physicalist story, perhaps things that can't be captured in any story. But what is the reason for thinking this? It's clear that Anti-physicalist intuitions have roots in our own first-person experience. We just *know* there's more going on in us than is laid out in the science books; just know, because we can "peer inward" and directly access the qualities of our own experiences: the searing pain of a clawed hand, the feeling of soft fuzziness as we pet Poopy's jowly belly, or what have you. Since the physicalist leaves this sort of information out of our story, how can we know that such information isn't left out of Poopy's story as well?

Here we can draw the line. Why think we can just "peer inward" and determine whether something is or is not a physical

introspecting expert blurs us to the fact that we're just physical beings in a wholly physical world.

At this point, you may feel that I've robbed Poopy, and indeed life in general, of its mystery, its charm, its profundity. I stared out by saying Poopy was going to lead us into the depths of metaphysics and ontology and I've concluded by saying Poopy is just some evolved biochemical robot, fully describable from the scientific viewpoint, with no secrets left to conceal. What a sillio! But I disagree. By showing how Poopy fits into the scientific worldview, I've illuminated what it's to be a cat, what it is to be that kind of critter scuttling about in my bathroom. It's an amazing thing, that there could be this sort of creature at all, one that works according to the amazingly complex, dynamic, and elegant principles of physics, chemistry, biology, and psychology.

What's more, this offers a guide to what we are as well. We are distant cousins of Poopy, and we can learn from him at least part of the great mystery of what it is to be a human being. That is not something that robs reality of its wonder; it's something that enriches reality, shows its deep and fundamental interconnection, and inspires us to new ways of thinking and being. All this because Poopy scratched his way into my bathroom and behaved in his usual jerkish way. Typical.

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