

# Felosophy\*

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Part of a discussion between two cat philosophers...

**Catocrates:** Consider then the threshold between the den of the Ideal and the territory of Danger. Where would you say it lies?

**Pythagocat:** Everywhere, we cross it constantly. Think of dawn, when the sun rises and the shadows of birds can first be seen. The light is chasing the darkness, and catching it everywhere, to release it and catch it again. Think of a fly, when it whirrs just above the reach of a kitten, lifting up and then tiring and falling down again. The earth is luring the fly into thinking it can escape upwards, pulling it down again then releasing its gravity paw.

**Catocrates:** Yes, Pythagocat, every kitten knows that. But you have not answered my question. Everything we see is made from the interaction of chase and escape, as God plays with matter. But how can this tell us when things are going as they should, and when they are going wrong?

**Pythagocat:** But is it not obvious, as tangible as the mouse around your neck? When one thing chases another it leaves its den and must eventually return. If it returns safely all is well. But if it returns hungry, or even remains lost in the territory of otherness, then the claw of misfortune has tampered with the hunting plans of the ideal.

Could you understand that? Some of it seems to make sense and some of it seems completely mysterious. Like cats themselves. Every human who has lived with cats must have wondered what it is like to be a cat, what their thoughts, sensations, and emotions really are. And every adult human cat-watcher who thinks about this must conclude that much of what it is like to be a cat must be so different from human experience that we cannot hope to imagine it. And

then human philosophy can enter, and ask unsettling questions. If we cannot even imagine the mind of a cat, why should we treat it as real? Are people who think that cats have thoughts and emotions that no human can imagine saying anything more than a sentimental version of the scientific fact that cats behave: they have brains that make their bodies do this and that?

But that suggestion is horrible. It can justify terrible things. If cat experience is not real experience then cat pain is not real pain and there is no really deep reason not to hurt cats. More subtly, if cats do not have real and complex emotions, whether or not we can know what it would be like to have them, then we can keep cats in ways that satisfy our emotions rather than theirs. We can keep cats in comfortable prisons, not bothering to think whether we are denying cat passions and cat adventures.

My aim here is to see how to resist this slide, to resist being led from 'we can't know what it is like to be a cat' to 'there is no cat experience we can take as seriously and literally as ours.'

First think of this. There are many things we are sure exist, but which we are just as sure we do not understand. Think of the laws of physics. We can know some simple ones, and make stabs at deeper and more complex ones. But there is always a point at which it goes beyond our understanding and we just have to say: there must be principles behind this, but we don't know what they are. Some people describe physics as trying to understand the mind of God: so their way of saying 'it's real but we may not be able to grasp all of it' is a comparison with the contents of a non-human mind. Think of the size of the whole universe, or the incredibly small sizes of subatomic particles. We can describe these things with words and mathematics, but we cannot imagine them. Think of how a fertilized ovum can turn into a whole functioning human baby: we can describe the stages and processes, but it remains completely incredible that this should turn into that. Think of the relation between the human brain and the human mind: we know that all our thoughts and

\*1. This piece first appeared, with a few minor differences, in the *Journal of the Somali Cat Club*, Autumn 1995 and we thank the editor for permission to reprint.

experiences are somehow produced by our brains, but not only is it pretty mysterious how this happens, we cannot imagine how it could be possible at all.

These are the special mind-boggling cases. But we meet simpler examples every day of our lives. You can't find your car keys and search your house, your office, everywhere you've been during the past twenty-four hours. Eventually they turn up in the refrigerator of a friend you haven't seen for weeks. How did they get there? You know there must be an explanation: if enough facts came to light the answer would be obvious. But you also know that you may never learn that explanation, and it doesn't bother you much. And there must be an explanation of where all my ball-point pens go when I cannot find them. But that one may be *completely* beyond human understanding. Or think of the attitudes you once had to people you now love or hate. Was there a time when the one you now sigh over was for you just another not particularly appealing member of the opposite sex? Can you remember how that person seemed then? Hardly, perhaps, but you know that you had an attitude and it was very different from the attitude you now have, so different that you cannot get it into the imagination of the person you now are.

So we are constantly faced with things we know must be true but also know we cannot really understand. Don't let the fact that you know you can't understand them make you think they aren't real. Last year's attitudes to people you now love are real; the path the car keys took is real; the unknown laws of physics are real. And the experiences of cats are real, just one of many things that we can only struggle to understand.

Why is it that some very real things are hard for us to understand? One reason is that we are a particular kind of animal, an over-evolved monkey, and at the bottom of our minds we have trouble with anything that does not fit into the monkey way of thinking. Monkeys work with their hands; they push on branches and pull off fruit. And when the distant descendants of monkeys try to understand the laws of the universe they want to think in terms of causes and effects—pushes and pulls that make things move in continuous paths like monkeys and their meals swinging through the trees. But the world is not just forest, and monkey thinking will only take us so far. So we are always going to be surrounded by things we find hard to

understand, and some of them we can be sure we will never understand.

Monkey thinking is not the only possible thinking. The cat philosophers were trying to unscrew the inscrutable, not in terms of pushes and pulls but in terms of hunting and play, den and territory. That is how cats would do it. And that leads me to a suggestion, which may seem wild and improbable. I think that the most promising way to understand a different species is to imagine what a culture of intelligent descendants of that species would be like. Suppose that there were creatures whose ancestors millions of years before were cats, and who were still cats in the way that we are still lemurs. What stories would they tell, what explanations of the universe would they give, what understanding of right and wrong would they fasten on? I think we can begin to imagine what these would be; we can see how the facts of cat life would translate into stories, explanations, and morals. And then to say what it is like to be a cat (a real cat, now) we would say: what it is like to be a cat is to see the world in a way that would make these the right stories, explanations, and morals. If you want to know what it was like to be a 19th century Russian aristocrat, you read Tolstoy. But then you have to subtract Tolstoy's intelligence and skill with words. You are left with a dim and delicate grasp of what it was like to be a stupid and inarticulate Russian aristocrat.

Does this help? Is the whole idea crazy? One problem that arises concerns language. Human words and even human grammar are not the right medium for describing the thoughts of intelligent cats, bats, or whales. That is why the dialogue between the felosophers sounds so mysterious. And perhaps that is the reason why the challenge of describing animal experience often appeals to poets. For example, the Australian poet Les Murray in his *Translations from the Natural World*. So we have a better chance if we allow ourselves to play with the form of language as well as with its content. Moreover, philosophy, mathematics, and physics, though abstract and seemingly neutral may be the most rather than the least human-specific of our thoughts. Remarks that can be taken as saying this are scattered through the writings of the philosopher Wittgenstein; some day there will be a school of Wittgenstein interpretation based on this. So, instead of trying to interpret cat thoughts about number, causation and reality, perhaps we should be less ambitious and look

at more basic parts of our common mammalian heritage. Sex for example. Here is a poem by the Armenian poet John Garibian which tries to describe a tomcat's inhuman erotic sense, in the form of something we can only just barely recognize as a love poem.

Be caught, and catch. You, and you. I  
have come so far  
To kill this you, that cries and smells

Like a wounded rat, while *you* stare back  
from your own space.  
We will kill you together, we will  
Sink my claws in your back, hold you  
immobile by the neck till  
You is dead.

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