

## Why do cats bring you rodents, and what does this have to do with party games and well-being?

## Warum Katzen Ihnen Nagetiere bringen, und was das mit Gesellschaftsspielen und Wohlbefinden zu tun hat

Gabor Aranyi

I regret to inform the reader that my beloved cat has surrendered his perfect furry body some time ago, but not before demonstrating some important lessons. Demonstrating, not telling; more on this distinction in due course. Even those not particularly fond of cats can perhaps agree that felines have an uncanny capacity to feel good and navigate their environment with grace. My cat, as many others, had developed a habit of bringing me rodents (mostly mice, hares a couple of times, but also birds), dead or alive.

There are speculations (even theories) about why cats might do this. According to one, cats view their human companions as kitten incapable of hunting, and this is an expression of their instinct to feed their young and teach them to hunt – hence the occasional live prey deposited in the house, not just the mangled carcass ready for consumption. They try to feed and teach us. A notion of cats as hunting and reproducing automatons perfected by the evolution of physiology and instinct may resonate with this explanation, but my cat was a loving and caring thing, just as lions are between two gruesome kills. Of course, we could reach into our bag of instincts and pull out a few others to keep the argument running consistently, but here I elect to deviate.

A commonly asserted point when separating humans from animals is the ability to speak; man is the speaking animal<sup>1</sup>. Thus, animals are said to be locked in the eternal present. A gazelle may be chased by lion (a large cat...), only to resume grazing with indifference should the lethal danger be, often quite

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<sup>1</sup> As commonly touted by linguists and cognitivists when espousing the merits of humans as opposed to animals; for a general source, see Herskovits, M. J. (1933). Man, the speaking animal. *Sigma Xi Quarterly*, 21(2), 67–82. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27824494>

narrowly, avoided. “The danger has passed”, a person observing the drama on National Geographic might hear a pleasant British voice narrating, “now back to fuelling up and socialising. The lion [cat!] will just have to pick a better victim or go back to sleep; our business, for now, is concluded”.

I propose that my cat brought back such presents to show what he has been up to. He was telling me. Lacking the ability to produce small mouth noises (i.e. speech) to precisely articulate meaning (discounting the very-much-so informative purrs, hisses, and meows), bringing me the prey achieved just as much. Even more, one could argue, as I had proof positive of the asserted exploits without having to believe what was said. This is admittedly very anthropomorphic, but I raised the point to progress it to human affairs and, eventually, party games. Over to the human condition then.

Sages of all colour and persuasion assert that many of our troubles lie in the past or the future. I will pick Seneca (the Elder) to make this point. According to one of his letters to his friend Lucilius<sup>2</sup>, we are not appropriately adapted to the present. A troubled person spends a lot of thought on the past, a condition that is associated with depression, and a lot on worries about the future, which is related to anxiety. In the here-and-now, however, we have the capacity to be content. It is incessant inner speech that often removes us from the present moment. Thus, the use of language can be a problem; this is a trivial point, but by no means passé. Monks taking vows of silence would have a lot to say about this (pun intended), but such commitments hardly seem practical or desirable for most.

Flow theory<sup>3</sup> asserts that our peak experiences are characterized by a complete involvement in our present affairs. In such cases, one’s perception of the passing of time is distorted – a key indicator of the flow experience. Time seems to be (subjectively) non-existent when we are in the present. Flow is additionally characterised with a complete absorption in an activity, rendering the perception of the self (or ego) insignificant or even non-existent. Similarly, various meditative practices concentrate explicitly on bringing conscious attention into the present while minimising or excluding self-directed thought. Promoting flow experience requires the pursuit of an activity without interruption that is a perfect balance of stimulation and mastery – not too difficult to be frustrating and not too easy to be boring. Meditation also requires practice, skill, and discipline. Furthermore, these pursuits are often personal and not very sociable. A bit of contemplative reflection follows before we get to the party game.

I observe my environment (henceforth: the world). The world observes me, or at least parts of it do. Nearby humans and animals clearly have the capacity to do so. With a bit of a stretch, even the chair under me can be said to observe my weight, just as I may observe the chair through my behind (should I find nothing better to observe). In short, I am present. I exist in the Cartesian sense<sup>4</sup>. I look at the world. This is not a strictly voluntary act. I can close my eyes and avert my gaze, but my experience of seeing feels much more like something happening to me as opposed to something I voluntarily do. I could not explain in detail how I do it. My circulatory system is likewise a part of me, but I am not

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<sup>2</sup> See Seneca’s *Letters from a Stoic* (2016, Dover Thrift Editions: Philosophy).

<sup>3</sup> See Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2013). *Flow: The psychology of happiness*. Random House.

<sup>4</sup> The famous ‘cogito ergo sum’, the first principle of Descartes in his *Discourse on the method* (1637).

circulating my blood<sup>5</sup>. I am doing it, but it happens to me. My conscious experience, for all intents and purposes, is equivalent to the world.

I stop producing my habitual internal monologue. I attend. The word, perhaps not incidentally, comes from the Latin *attendere*, which means 'to stretch toward, to heed to'. So long as I do not talk, I am present. In fact, I understand the world, which is now equivalent to my conscious attention, not as some abstract representation removed from the present. If somebody looks at me, I understand it. If a cat grazes my leg with its curving tail, I understand it. I can express myself by doing: looking back, stroking the quickly retreating cat, or simply by leaving the room – it is all perfectly clear. The spell breaks when I start inward or outward speech: reflecting, planning, or talking. Until then, time is stopped. To the party game then.

There are two of us or more. Perhaps a bit inebriated, as might happen at parties or in good company. We decide to play. The rules are:

- We stop talking.
- We opt to attend to others and de-focus ourselves. Internal monologues and elaborate plans of behaviour are right out.
- We do whatever we do. I can look at others, walk around and poke people, make a drink and offer it to somebody, start dancing (heaven forbid...), even laugh at what others might do. But no talk.
- We see what happens. Creativity should rear its head in expressive behaviour soon enough. We are effectively trying to entertain and observe others. Surprising behaviour and humour in bad taste are bound to ensue. Clowns will reveal themselves. One can always just observe.
- The round stops when somebody says anything. This we agree on strictly before playing and adhere to with utmost diligence. If you are bored or upset by anything, you stop the show.
- We decide in advance not to talk about what we did later. We are attempting to stop time, not to produce history. You can remember what happened later but should not talk about it, lest we spoil the game. It is all in the present and nowhere else.

Back to the cat. My cat did this a lot. Just smashing down a pot from the sill fit the bill perfectly. I found myself being watched for hours on end. I got cuddled. Hunted down from behind. Pestered for food. Nose-bumped in the middle of the night. It was great fun, without much being achieved in our entire history together. The cat was mostly demonstrating, by doing, by existing. Did what it was, in the moment, and it was gorgeous. I could do just the same, and I can tell he thought I was gorgeous too, for he showed it to me. That's well-being, right there. Being, well. Animals are great at this. When he brought me some animal, he was telling me he was hunting. Come to think of it, that was also demonstration, but with a reference to the past, but also to the present: he was showing me that he is a great hunter and that he wanted me to know that. So I did.

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<sup>5</sup> This is a frequently recurring theme in lectures and books by Alan Watts and the reader is warmly recommended to take a dive into his work.

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