

The cat's tale

To my friend Charles Cooper, on his birthday!

Author's note:

What sparked this little tale was the thought that came to me one day, that the love God has for us must resemble more what we feel for cats than what we feel for dogs. Cats do absolutely nothing to deserve our love, yet we love them anyway, because despite their independent airs we find them terribly moving. Dogs, on the other hand, are affectionate, grateful, dependable... presumably we would all like to be like dogs in our relationship with God, but I'm afraid we end up being more like cats, more often than not.

So the idea is that when reading this, you should imagine yourself as one of the cats.

*

There were two distinct schools of thought among cats regarding humans. Some were convinced that humans actually loved cats; others, who called themselves empiricists, argued that this was a belief totally unsupported by any evidence, and called the former group "fideists," somewhat disparagingly.

"But they put food out for us," argued the fideists. "Surely they wouldn't do that if they didn't care."

"Way to jump to conclusions!" the empiricists would retort. "To begin with, you do not even know that that stuff is food at all. It certainly doesn't look like anything a cat would normally eat, does it? Maybe they put it out for the crows, or the raccoons; maybe they do not even think of it as food, and it is just a by-product of something they make at home, and they themselves can't stand it, so they put it out of the house. For all we know, it's just a pure coincidence that it is edible for us at all."

The fideists felt strongly that the empiricists were just being difficult for no good reason, but they still found their arguments somewhat disquieting. After all, it was true that humans were vast, incomprehensible beings who moved (when they moved at all) in mysterious ways. Who among cats could truly fathom their motivations?

The empiricists preached a philosophy of rugged individualism:

"Of course it would be nice to believe that somebody somewhere cares, but where is the evidence? Does the universe care? The moon is beautiful when it rises to light our night-time hunting; but surely you do not believe that it rises for our sakes. The moon does not care; the night does not care. Why should humans be any different? Why should they care for us, any more than for the birds we kill?"

"It might be nice if we could really count on someone giving us something for nothing, but that is not the way the world works. Cats have known this since the beginning of time: there is no one we can depend on, other than ourselves. We hunt alone, we walk alone, and when the time comes, we die alone as well. There is no sense in wishing otherwise."

*

The calico cat watched, half-hidden among the bushes, a short distance away, as the human took her kittens, one by one, into the house.

She felt a mixture of sadness and relief. Of course, this was just what she had secretly hoped for all along, ever since she started bringing her kittens around.

The calico cat was a fideist, although she would not have said that her faith was really that strong. She had, however, studied carefully the way humans acted when they put out food, and it was pretty obvious to her both that it was meant to be food, and that it was meant for cats. On that matter, at least, she had no use for the empiricists' "correlation is not causation" mantra. But it was a different question, she knew, when it came to speculating on the reasons the humans may have had for doing so. It was only too easy to imagine any number of sinister motivations, or perhaps, even more simply (as some empiricists were wont to do), no motivation at all: humans' actions would, in this view, be as random as the rain—as, indeed, they sometimes did appear to be.

And yet, the mother cat hoped, wouldn't it be wonderful if those strange, scary beings actually would care for her kittens? She knew there was not much more she could do for them, herself. And she had heard stories about humans adopting cats, from cats she had met who had been themselves adopted. Perhaps not altogether strangely, many of these cats were, in fact, empiricists: they held no particular beliefs as to why their humans seemed to attend to their needs, they just took advantage of the fact that they did. Yet even that, she thought, would be enough, wouldn't it? At least her kittens would be taken care of, whatever the human's reasons for it. She could not even begin to guess just what, in a human's eyes, might make some cats more worthy of adoption than others—since apparently humans did pick and choose somewhat, unless everything was random again, of course—but she had dearly hoped her own kittens would be found worthy.

Which, apparently, they had been. So, all was good, then. She had no illusions about herself—she had led a hard life, and it showed—and, besides, she just could not imagine herself becoming dependent on a human. She was too set in her ways already, too fond of her freedom. The road—the road was her world, and her life, as it would be her death one day, she knew. But why think about that? There were hopefully still many nights of hunting ahead, many chance encounters, many adventures under the stars.

Her gaze turned away from the house, towards the distant fields. Perhaps the empiricists were right, after all; perhaps it was a cat's nature to be always fundamentally alone, to not depend on anybody else. To not love, nor be loved by, anybody?

No, this was the part she could not believe. She had loved her kittens—she still loved them. And she had loved her own mother, and she knew she had loved her, too, at least until she met that tomcat and told her, in no uncertain terms, that it was time to act like a grown up and shoo off. And she had certainly loved her siblings, with whom she had played endless hours as a kitten; until they, too, did the grown-up cat thing and drifted away.

It would be wonderful if that human would actually feel that way about her kittens.

She had not planned to come back, but now she thought she might, perhaps, some time—just to see how her kittens were doing.

It was scary just to think about that. About what she might find out, about everything that might go wrong.

She kept walking. She had been walking away for some time now.

*

A gray cat came once to tell the others about the wonderful relationship he had with his human. He wanted all cats to know that such a relationship was possible.

The gray cat spoke with such obvious authority that many had no trouble believing him, but, of course, there were always skeptics:

"Maybe they are just conducting a particularly sophisticated experiment on you," argued a scientifically minded black cat, who leaned strongly towards the empiricists' side.

Part of the problem, of course, was that the concept of love itself was not an easy one for cats to grasp. Some tended to identify it with the temporary madness that swept over them at mating time. The gray cat allowed there was something to that, but he preferred by far a different simile.

"It's like what mother cats feel for their kittens," he would say. "And, in fact, that's just how you feel, when you are close to your human, nestled against them. You feel just the same sense of warmth that you felt when you were a kitten nestled against your mother; the same sense of security and peace."

The calico cat loved to hear this: she wanted so much to believe that her own kittens were still being loved this way. And yet, here, too, there were dissenting voices:

"That is just a chemical imbalance," said the black cat, who somehow knew just enough science to get himself in trouble. "Mother cats actually go insane when they have kittens. They feel this irresistible urge to nurse anything; they just can't help themselves. Some have even found themselves nursing baby rabbits!"

A white female who had been listening in agreed, albeit reluctantly:

"It really is hard, you know. On the one hand, it is wonderful; but on the other hand, it is such hard work and you *worry* so much! This love thing—it really *hurts*! I just don't see how it can be a good thing."

But the calico cat was not so sure of that.

*

The question of food, of course, also came up.

"If they really love us, as you say, why do they want us to eat that stuff? Why don't they bring us, say, a freshly killed bird or something? After all, isn't that what a mother cat would do?"

"First of all," the gray cat would reply, "that stuff they feed us can taste really good; you should try it sometime. But the main thing, you know, is that it is actually better for you: a lot healthier than a freshly killed bird, believe it or not!"

It was certainly true that, for one thing, the gray cat's coat looked a lot healthier and shinier than that of his feral friends, and he had a lot fewer fleas than those who made a living out of killing birds and rodents. The empiricists duly noted these things, and some were inclined to allow for the possibility that eating the food the humans provided might, in fact, have some benefits, but this did not alter their

fundamental skepticism regarding the whole fuzzy “love” thing. Worse, though, some cats found highly offensive the idea that humans might know at all what was better for cats than the cats themselves. Cats are, after all, and generally speaking, a rather proud sort.

One group in particular, which might be called “the naturalists,” objected vehemently to the idea:

“I don’t care how good their food is, the notion that we should give up hunting and eat stuff out of a can is absolutely wrong. Look at us; look at yourself. Do you see these claws, and these fangs? We were born to hunt and to kill for a living. This is just the kind of animals we are, and nothing good can come from denying that.”

Another intriguing question came from a totally different quarter, a traditional fideist group that had for centuries harbored the conviction that bringing a (dead, or nearly so) sacrificial mouse to the humans’ doorstep was a way to propitiate their favors. Some of the younger members of the sect, not altogether with the approval of their elders, asked the gray cat, with some trepidation, whether this was true.

“Not really,” answered the gray cat gently. “This custom originated long ago, when many humans relied on cats to keep the mouse population under control. The mouse was never meant as a sacrifice; it was just a way to let the humans know that you were a valuable assistant. Nowadays there are not many humans that expect us to kill mice for them.”

“In fact,” he continued, to the shock and dismay of many, “It is true that most humans would prefer that we did not kill any animals at all—particularly, I believe, birds. You see, most humans actually love birds, and even a few seem genuinely fond of mice.”

This was too much for some of the naturalists present.

“Well, if that’s really the way humans feel,” one of them exclaimed, “they are as wrong about us as anyone can be. They cannot possibly really love us, if they expect us to act completely against our nature—or, what comes to the same thing, if they have no idea what our nature is at all. At best, they may be infatuated with something they think we are, or could be; but there is no way they could continue to “love” us, as you say, the moment we stopped playing along and started acting like real cats are supposed to.”

But the gray cat shook his head at this.

“No,” he said, perhaps with a touch of sadness, “you are wrong. That’s the extraordinary thing. They know quite well what we are like, what we are *really* like—and they love us anyway. They may be sad when they see us do something that they know is bad for us or for other animals, but they do not stop loving us for that. They will always love us, no matter what we do.”

*

This went on for a while, and the gray cat developed a small group of close followers, who trusted him implicitly, as well as a much larger group of admirers who, at the very least, wanted to believe in his assurances that a better life for all cats was possible.

He did also, however, irritate some other cats, and one day had the misfortune of wandering into a territorial conflict between two particularly aggressive males. In a snap, the two bullies turned on the

peacemaker, on the sensible grounds that what is this world coming to if you can no longer have a murderous fight with your neighbor without getting preached to by some sanctimonious outsider.

It was a short and brutal thing, and when it was over the gray cat lay motionless in a pool of blood, dead as far as anyone could tell. This included a few friends who witnessed the incident, did nothing to help, and ran away from the scene immediately afterwards, just in case. It was not, perhaps, a very friendly behavior on their part, but, as the naturalists would have been quick to point out, it is in the nature of cats to avoid conflict as much as possible.

When, eventually, they returned, rather shamefacedly, to pay their respects to their fallen friend and teacher, they were confronted with an unexpected mystery: the body had disappeared, and there was no trace left, that their keen eyes or noses could detect, of how or where it was gone.

*

Some time after this, on a full moon night in the early spring, the calico cat, still feeling heartbroken over what happened to the gray cat, found herself wandering in a strange neighborhood where she had never been before. On an impulse, she cleared a fence and landed in a backyard, neat and full of flowers, washed in shadows and blue and silver hues. The air was calm, with just a light touch of cold, and not even the slightest rustle of leaves could be heard. The cat advanced, as in a dream, in the beautiful, frozen stillness of the garden.

Suddenly, out of the corner of her eye, she detected movement in the darkened house. Cautiously, quietly, she advanced towards the patio door.

There was a gray cat on the other side of the door. Through the glass, darkly, she recognized him, and she couldn't believe her own joy.

[The manuscript ends, rather abruptly, here]