‘CATNESSES’

Cathy Legg

“Surely the cat, when it assumes the meat loaf position and gazes meditatively through slitted eyes, is pondering thoughts of utter profundity.”
Mij Colson Barnum

“Cats’ names are more for human benefit. They give one a certain degree more confidence that the animal belongs to you.”
Alan Ayckbourn

“In an interview to a local newspaper, I was once asked what was the one thing I would define cat behavior by. My reply was "individuality". Each cat has his or her own particular characteristics and peculiarities. As a cat behaviorist, the issue of cat individuality was always prominent in my mind. Whatever the "rules" for cats are, there will always be the odd cat that will break the rules and display a different behavior pattern”

Anne Moss

Cats spend a lot of time deep in reflection. People who know and love cats often suspect that those thoughts are profound – profound enough to surprise people who don’t know and love cats. Like all of us who think, cats think a lot about *things*. A good example of a ‘thing’ which cats like to think about is a delicious bowl of milk. Cats love to just lie on the sofa while the thought of a delicious bowl of milk wanders gently in and out of their minds. It is a well-known fact that a mature, mentally alert cat can keep up this delightful activity for over 6 hours straight.

However, having thought a lot about things, such as delicious bowls of milk, cats sometimes then go on to think about their *thoughts* about those *things*. For example, they may think, “How interesting it is that, just lying here basking in the sun coming through the window, I can fill my head with a thought about a delicious bowl of milk!” This then raises the question, which cats sometimes pursue in their musings, of how it is that these *thoughts* are ‘about’ actual, drinkable, delicious bowls of milk. Cats are intelligent enough to know that their little furry heads do not contain bowls of milk, so, they wonder, how do they conjure them up just by thinking about them? They know that their thoughts are about delicious bowls of milk, but what makes this so?

Such thoughts can be a bit tiring, and sometimes cats get distracted from them by a bird flying past the window, the need to growl at a passing dog, or even by an actual bowl of milk placed on the floor by their own human. A cat would never confuse a mere thought about a delicious bowl of milk with an actual bowl of milk, and of course a cat much prefers to spend time with the latter.

I know all this because a cat once shared his thoughts on these things with me. This cat's name was Bruce, and his human was a philosopher named David. David wrote many very well-received philosophical papers about issues concerning things and thoughts, such as the question of how the thoughts manage to 'include' or 'talk about' the things. (Some philosophers refer to this issue as 'The Problem of Intentionality'.) Sometimes Bruce would read over David's shoulder when he was writing, and sometimes Bruce would open one furtive eye and peek at David's drafts of philosophical papers while lying spread out across them, to see what ideas David was coming up with about these matters.

David wrote that the world is made up of things and their *intrinsic properties* – in fact, forget the things, the *properties* were the really important part for David. Intrinsic properties are properties which things have quite apart from the properties which any other things have. For example, that the dog down the road, Chuckles, has a head like a misshapen football is an intrinsic property of Chuckles – because it depends solely on the way Chuckles himself happens to be. That he is despised by Bruce, however, is not an intrinsic property of Chuckles, because it depends on the way Bruce is as well as the way Chuckles is. Being despised is thus a *relational* property – it depends how the thing (in this case, Chuckles) is related to other things (i.e. Bruce, and his penchant for despising despisable dogs).

Still, if Bruce and Chuckles were recreated atom-for-atom, down to the last intrinsic property, the recreated Bruce would despise the recreated Chuckles, because of the way Bruce is and the way Chuckles is ('intrinsically'). In this sense, one might argue that intrinsic properties are more fundamental than relational properties, and that what relational properties exist depends on what intrinsic properties exist. David thought this was true, because of the obviousness of facts such as that if Bruce and Chuckles were recreated atom-for-atom, the recreated cat would despise the recreated dog. He came to

believe that if a human were to make a long, long list of *all* the things there are and *all* the intrinsic properties that those things have (it would probably have to be a human as only a human would bother with such a task – a cat certainly would not), then that long, long list would be a total story of everything! There would be nothing else we could say that would be true and not covered by the long, long list. Or in other words:

> "all there is to the world is a vast mosaic of local matters of particular fact, just one little thing and then another...We have geometry: a system of external relations of spatio-temporal distances between points...And at those points we have local qualities: perfectly natural intrinsic properties which need nothing bigger than a point at which to be instantiated. For short, we have an arrangement of qualities. And that is all." (*On the Plurality of Worlds*, p. ix)

Bruce overheard David referring to this view as "Human Supervenience". *['Humean Supervenience'! – ed.]* When Bruce first heard about this, he thought first of all that if Chuckles were recreated atom-for atom he would despise the new dog-clone *more* than the old one, as to have a *second* one living on the street would be even more annoying. Then, with respect to the general theory, he decided he was sceptical and resolved to think about it.

David pointed out, as many philosophers have, that not all of our thoughts are true – some of them are false. For instance, while lying on the sofa basking in the sun coming in from the window, a cat can think contentedly that his dish on the kitchen floor is full of sardines. If the dish is in fact full of sardines (or, as a philosopher might put it, has the *property* of being full of sardines), then the cat's thought is true. If the dish is empty, or it is only half-full of sardines because the greedy cat next door has sneaked in and eaten some, or if – horrible prospect – the dish is full of jellymeat! (UGH!), then the thought is false. A basking cat might wonder (and some do), *how* do we *manage* to have false thoughts? If the things the thoughts talk about are not part of actuality, where do we get them from to put them in our heads and think about them? We manage this, David thought, because we think in *propositions*, and propositions have some kind of reality, whether they are actually true or false.

What kind of reality do propositions have? David told a story about this in terms of what he called "possible worlds". David pointed out (cleverly, as he was a clever

philosopher) that 'The Truth' is not restricted to those things that are *actually* true. It is also true that certain things are *possible*. For instance, although Bruce did not catch the bird which he jumped out of the long grass in front of yesterday, he might have caught it, if he had just been a bit quicker. It was possible for him to have caught that bird. On the other hand, for Bruce to have both four and three legs is not possible. Even if Bruce were unfortunate enough to lose a leg, and so to have four legs at one time and three legs at a later time, he would never have four and three legs *at the same time.* So having both four and three legs is not a possibility for Bruce.

It seems that when we talk about reality, we don't always just refer to the way things actually *are*, we also refer to "ways things might have been". For instance, imagine that I state, "Every cat is cleverer than its owner". We all know that this claim is very arguably true. But it is not just a claim about the many thousands (perhaps millions?) of contented cat-owner pairs which have existed through history and up to the present time (for instance, David and Bruce, Edward Lear and Foss, Sir Walter Scott and Hinx, Matthew Flinders and Trim…and so on). It is a stronger claim than that. It says, for instance, that if Bruce had been owned by Edward Lear, Bruce would have been cleverer than Lear, (not to mention clever enough not to mistake him for the 13th Earl of Derby, unlike many humans) and it says that if Trim – the first cat to circumnavigate Australia – had instead accompanied "the author of Waverley" on his fictional journeys, the novelist would at times have felt rebuked beneath an unnerving gleam in the eye of his companion…

One way to think of "ways things might have been" is by imagining them happening. It is as if, for each possible way that things might be, there is a whole world, just as real as ours, where that thing *is* true. There is a world where Bruce caught the bird he jumped for yesterday and missed (but might have caught). There is another world where Bruce caught the bird but it then escaped and flew away, and Bruce was terribly frustrated….and so on for all the possibilities for Bruce and the bird – indeed, all the possibilities about anything.

David thought very carefully about these matters and decided that if part of talking about reality involves talking about ways things might have been, *why not say that ways things might have been are part of reality*? Surely this should follow? Thus David wrote (in more or less the following words):

> "I advocate a thesis of plurality of worlds, or *modal realism*, which holds that our world is but one world among many…absolutely *every* way that a world could possibly be is a way that some world *is*." (*On the Plurality of Worlds*, p. 2)

What makes the world the world it is? What makes two worlds different? It is, David thought, purely the arrangement of the intrinsic properties in worlds. "Just one little thing and then another". If we could ever work out all the possible permutations and combinations of arrangements of intrinsic properties (which is, once again, probably something only a human would think of doing), then we would have a list of all the possible worlds.

Now let us return to propositions. David claimed that we can understand a proposition as a *set of possible worlds* – all the possible worlds where it is true. For instance, consider the proposition, "Bruce lay on the sofa yesterday". That proposition corresponds to a set of worlds which includes the world where Bruce lay luxuriously on the sofa for four and a half hours (which is what actually happened), and other worlds – such as worlds where:

- Bruce lay on the sofa for 5 minutes
- he lay on the sofa on a golden cushion
- he lay on the sofa with a sardine on his head,
- he lay on the sofa with 12 lions stretched out beside him.

The same thing applies for false propositions. The proposition that Bruce did not lie on the sofa yesterday corresponds to a set of worlds including those where:

- Bruce sat on the roof all day,
- he spent the day stalking a sparrow through next-door's garden,
- he took the bus into town and went to the museum.

The set of worlds that corresponds to a false proposition does not however include the actual world, our world. That is what it is to be false. So when we think about things, really, we are only deciding which possible world-sets include our world, based on the arrangements of intrinsic properties in all the possible worlds, and the specific arrangement of intrinsic properties that exists the actual world. That is all there is to thinking.

Bruce thought about all of this. He had a number of questions. He was very interested in the world where he caught the bird. He asked David how he could get to that world. He

hoped that it would not involve a car-journey, or crossing the territory of the white cat who lives in the house with the big pine tree. (That is one very rude cat.) However David told Bruce that he could not go there! Though the worlds are just as real as ours, full of real grass, real birds, real sardines and real sofas, they are "isolated" in space and time. He said (in more or less the following words):

> "The worlds are something like remote planets; except that most of them are bigger than mere planets, and they are not remote. Neither are they nearby. They are not at any spatial distance whatever from here. They are not far in the past or future…they are not at any temporal distance whatever from now. They are isolated: there are no spatiotemporal relations at all between things that belong to different worlds." (*On the Plurality of Worlds*, p. 2)

Bruce asked what is a planet. David said it was something like a backyard, only bigger. "How strange", Bruce thought, "backyards totally cut off in space and time from each other! How could one get back for dinner?" Bruce wondered how, given that they were totally cut off in space and time from each other, David was able to know what was going on in them (enough to know for instance, that in one of them Bruce caught the bird he was so close to catching the other day)? Did his human have a special kind of whiskers?

Bruce protested, "If this 'world' is isolated in space and time, how do I get in there to catch the bird, like you said I could?" David replied – there is no need to 'get in there'. You are already there! There is a cat in that world, also named Bruce, who has the same coloured fur as you, with the same markings, who likes sardines just like you do, and who behaves in the same naughty way as you do on windy nights. This cat is so like you that he *is* you in that world ("speaking casually"). He is your "counterpart" there. To be more specific, he does not have to be exactly like you to be your counterpart, he just has to be *more like you than any other thing that exists in that world* (as long as the world isn't just full of things which are *totally* different to you, like poached eggs). And it is because *that* Bruce does catch the bird, that we can say that it was possible for you to catch the bird you jumped out of the grass in front of yesterday and just missed.

Bruce's head was hurting a bit so he went and sat on the fence and washed himself very thoroughly. There was something wrong with what David had said. Washing his head was always the best way to straighten out the thoughts in it. Suddenly he put his

paw down and sat up straight. He said, I don't care what *that cat* does, whether he catches *that bird.* Just because *that cat* happens to look like me, what should what he did mean about what *I* am able to do? Why does what *that cat* did mean that it was possible for *me* to catch the bird, any more than if that silly black kitten who lives next door by pure dumb luck manages to catch a bird, as he did last Tuesday. *Neither* of those cats is me, so neither of them has anything to do with me!

David replied, what is the *difference* between you and the other Bruce in the other world? What *property* do you have that he doesn't? I told you that he is the same colour, he has the same name, he loves sardines like you do, and he behaves exactly the same way you do. For instance, he plays with my fingers but never bites, and he always sits on the pink sofa cushion. What more is there for him to *be* you? Bruce said, "He has to be *me. This* cat". David said, "That is not an answer. You are begging the question." Bruce had heard David say that to other humans, "You are begging the question". It usually seemed to make them more inclined to agree with him. He didn't know what 'begging the question' was, it sounded a bit like something a dog might do – they seemed to like to beg for things, undignified supplicating animals. Well he was not a dog!

David said, "I don't believe in-" and then he said a word that sounded like "heck-cat-ies". *['Haecceities'! – ed.]* He said it was Latin for "this cat". He accused Bruce of saying that two possible worlds might differ in non-qualitative properties, and of denying "Human Supervenience" (or at least that is what Bruce thought he said). *['Humean!! – oh never mind' – ed.]* Bruce replied, "No, I'm just saying that *I am me*, and no other cat". Who was this 'Human'? What did he know about cats? Did a cat have him? He paused and rolled around on the ground for two minutes. Then he said, "You human, standing there, my owner, I know what you're thinking. You think that there exists one of your 'total stories' which concerns *me*. Given all the other things you have said, this 'story' will be some incredibly tedious list of boring 'intrinsic properties': my current fur-colour, my current food-preference, my recent *behavior*(!). Do you understand what you're saying? You're saying that if another cat came into this backyard, with the same fur colour, food preference and behavior, that cat would be your owner, and you would be its human. You would even (and here Bruce growled a little bit)…love it the way you love me! I am surprised at you! You don't understand cats! Why don't you get a dog? We

know that dog people love their dogs for their "intrinsic properties". Remember how when Mrs Brown's poodle died, she went and bought another one which was the exact same colour (which – surprise surprise – matches her living-room rug), liked to eat the same stinky dog roll, had exactly the same expression on its face, and made all the same feeble woofing noises. And she was perfectly happy. I would hate to think that *you* would do that to *me*.

"One day", he said, "you will understand that I and every other cat possesses a magnificent, utterly individual *catness* which underlies any mere 'property' we may choose to display at any given moment". Then suddenly, uttering a miaow which is incapable of being described in words, he bit David on the ankle, which he had never done in his life before (and has not done since). Since that day, I heard that David has behaved a little differently – so differently that given a choice of a roomful of philosophers, people who used to know David would pick out another philosopher than David as the philosopher most similar to the philosopher they used to know. However Bruce sits on David's knee as he has always done.

"The city of cats and the city of men exist one inside the other, but they are not the same city."

Italo Calvino

"A cat is a cat and that is that."

American folk saying

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