

Pets

Some people regard some animals, like cats, as if they are people. They talk to them, buy them presents, even Christmas presents, prepare soft furnishings where they can sleep, feed them fine food. When they are ill they are taken to the vet and thousands of pounds are spent saving them. In many ways, they are treated better than some people. After all, if they are too sick to be treated by the vet, then they might be euthanised, which is not permitted for humans.

Such treatment is based on a theory about a pet's mind. The thought is that a pet, like a cat, is, apart from the lack of language, the possessor of a mind. The cat is seen to have a point of view, even perhaps to have opinions. It is seen as friend, and a comforter, possibly a therapist. There is felt to be something rich going on behind that barely shifting visage, inside those expressionless eyes. Most pet owners are what are called dualists about their pet's mind. The cat has a body, and the body is animated by a mind that sits in what one philosopher has called the 'Cartesian theatre', after the famous French dualist, Rene Descartes. And the pet's mind is generally thought to be richer than the pet's body, in the sense that what the cat does gives you no real clue to what is going on in the mind. At the very least, we do not really know what is going on in the cat's mind, so it is possible to imagine these riches, as one imagines the riches of the undiscovered mines of King Solomon.

Of course, what really gives a pet, such as a cat, its charm is that none of this is true. A cat does not have a mind. In a certain sense we would have to say that it is profoundly stupid. This is easily demonstrated. A young cat, for instance, will chase its own tail, even the shadow of its own tail, mistaking the accelerating shadow for prey. One might put this down to youthful folly, but the aged cat is little better. I have watched a mature cat spend a considerable time trying to work out how to walk through a cat flap, a task that a human child would figure out in a matter of seconds. It might be

said in the cat's defence that it has a different kind of intelligence to us, one that supports its ability to hunt. It can jump, for instance, much better than we can.

This, of course, is the point. What we love about pets is based on their differences from us. They say opposites attract and this is quite true with cats. What draws us to them is that they are actually quite unlike us. Their inability to reason is part of their appeal. Their inability to speak is infinitely charming. A cat will look at you with its unmoving, placid face, and say nothing, and not worry you with its own anxieties, got by reflecting on the world's difficulties. Their ignorance is our bliss. They comfort us because they have nothing to tell us, and so are unable to divest us of any of our own absurd preconceptions. Far from being drawn to them by their minds, what actually draws us in the end is their bodies. They are malleable and soft, warm and endearing. In bad gangster films the big boss always had a dumb blonde, a pliable, attractive woman, with few opinions. Cats, apart from the sex, serve much the same function, with their own brand of affectionate dumbness. We can be thankful for that.