

Five Cats and the Tenant's Question

The body is the hardware, instinct is the software. So who is the user?

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I have five cats. Five similar bodies, five nearly identical bundles of instinct, and five creatures nobody could confuse for a moment.

I discovered this in the silliest way. I picked up one of those ribbon toys that mimics a small animal and began dragging it across the floor. The pounce came from all of them at once: the pupil that dilates, the body that lowers, the hips that sway, the leap. It is the same gesture in five machines, as old as the species, triggered by a movement none of them ever had to learn. In that instant, the five are a single cat.

The next second, the five come apart again. One carries the ribbon under the sofa and stands guard over it, jealous. Another loses interest immediately, like someone who already knows the thing is not food. A third plays with the delicacy of a creature afraid of breaking its toy. The pounce belongs to the species. What comes after the pounce belongs to each one.

It stayed in my head, because it seemed to me that nature was doing something very precise and very strange there in my living room.

Three layers, not two

The cleanest way I found to say what I saw is in three layers.

The first is the body: the hardware. Claws, retina, the neural circuit that exists before any experience.

The second is instinct: the software. The program that comes pre-installed, to hunt, to flee, to court, shared by everyone of the same lineage. The ribbon presses a key, and the program runs.

The third is the one that interests me: individuality. The thing that makes this cat this one and not the one beside it. It does not seem to fit inside the first two layers. It does not come from the body, because the bodies are nearly identical. It does not come from instinct, because the instinct is the same. It is a third level, running on top of the other two, and I cannot name it without calling it someone.

The sub-breeds made this vivid. A group of cats of the same breed is almost a controlled experiment: selective breeding has fixed the software, the typical temperament, the intensity of the hunt, the way of bonding with people. And even so, within the breed, each animal is still an individual. If the software is fixed and the hardware is nearly the same, whatever remains different between them has to come from somewhere else. What remains is the tenant.

The science of the software has a name

“Instinct is software” is not my invention. Ethology, the science of animal behavior that earned Konrad Lorenz and Niko Tinbergen the 1973 Nobel Prize, described this with an engineer’s rigor.¹ They called them fixed action patterns: pre-assembled sequences of behavior, triggered by a sign stimulus through an innate releasing mechanism. The cat does not decide to hunt the ribbon. A feature of the world, the movement, opens the trigger, and the whole program discharges.

The ribbon, in fact, is almost a cheat. Tinbergen showed that certain artificial stimuli are supernormal, more effective than the real thing: a gull chick pecks more hungrily at a painted stick than at its own mother’s beak.² My toy ribbon is the mouse evolution never saw, more mouse than a mouse. I am pressing a key nature left exposed.

Up to here, everything is hardware and software, and nothing requires a tenant. If the story stopped at this point, my cats would be five copies of one program, and the impression that they are five persons would be my own projection.

The story does not stop at this point.

The tenant that insists on appearing

That animals have personality is not an owner’s poetry. It is a research field with a name of its own, animal personality, and in cats someone has already mapped even the big five traits, the “Feline Five.”³ The individuality I see is measurable.

What convinced me, though, were two harder facts.

The first. Take genetically identical mice and raise them all in the same environment. Same software, same hardware, same world. They should come out the same. They do not. In a study published in *Science* in 2013, forty isogenic mice in one shared enclosure developed distinct personalities, and the differences grew over time, accompanied by physical differences in the brain itself.⁴ Individuality sprang up from where, in theory, there was nowhere for it to spring.

The second is a cat. “CC,” the first cloned cat, was born in 2001, an exact genetic copy of a cat named Rainbow. Same genome, same hardware, same software. And CC came out with a different coat and, what matters more, a different temperament.⁵ A clone, and yet, someone else.

When the first two layers are zeroed out, when the body and the program are identical, individuality does not vanish. A residue is left that neither the genome nor the environment fully explains.

The fork

What is this residue?

Science has a sober answer: developmental chance. No organism assembles twice the same. Small differences in the moment of weaving the neurons, one encounter more, one experience less, and the system takes paths that amplify. Individuality, on this reading, is emergent, the sum of millions of micro-deviations in a sensitive system. Nobody lives inside. The cat is the configuration, not the guest of the configuration.

There is the other reading, the one my living room whispers to me: that the residue is the tenant. That nature manufactures a vehicle, hardware plus software, and individuality is the beginning of someone learning to drive. Developmental chance would not be the author of the person, but the clay the person finds to shape itself.

Science does not decide between the two. Both look at exactly the same datum, the clone with a different temperament, the identical mouse that became an individual, and they disagree about one thing only: whether or not there is someone there. It is a question no experiment, to this day, knows how to ask from the outside.

It is worth noticing where the computer metaphor brought us, and where it abandons us. It works up to the second layer: there really is a substrate, and there really is a program. After that, it fails at two points, and it is in the failures that the interest lives. In the animal there is no clean separation between hardware and software; the instinct is not portable code, it is carved into the flesh, into the wiring, and the body is, in part, the program itself. And above all, in a computer there is no user inside the program. Nobody inhabits a piece of software. The moment I say “tenant,” I have left computing and entered metaphysics, without warning, in the middle of a sentence. The metaphor walks you to the bedroom door and does not go in. The question “who is the user?” is the whole philosophical payload, hidden inside a game with a ribbon.

The question is old

I am not the first to reach this door. It has stood open for millennia.

The Katha Upanishad, some 2,500 years ago, already gave the exact image: the body is the chariot, the senses are the horses, the mind is the reins, the intellect is the charioteer, and the Self, the Atman, is the passenger.⁶ Vedanta called those layers the koshas, the sheaths: the food-body, the vital, the mental, wrapping around the thing that actually travels. Leibniz gave the tenant the name I ended up using without thinking, monad, the individual substance that mirrors the entire universe from its own point of view, unique, no two alike.⁷ And theosophy, from which I drew the language of my book, describes in plain words this thing I saw in the living room. The monad descends and puts on vehicles. A group soul supplies the shared instinctive

software to an entire species. Individuation is the moment when an individual begins to stand out from that common ground and to be, at last, someone.

My cats, on this reading, are a portrait of the stage before individuation. Almost everything in them is group software: the pounce belongs to the species, not to the animal. But the flashes of the individual, the unique way each one hoards the ribbon, would be the crack beginning to know itself as a crack. Nature, step by step, provides ever finer bodies and instincts, habitable vehicles, waiting for whoever will inhabit them.

Where the cats meet the machines

I end in the strangest place, and it is the one that made me want to write this.

The same question my cats leave me was one I was already asking of something else, the machine that learned to speak. Facing a computer that answers with fluency, the doubt is whether it understands or merely runs a program very well. Whether there is someone reading from inside, or the lights are coming on in an empty room.

It is the same doubt, seen from two sides. In the cat, a very old program runs on warm flesh, and I wonder whether there is a traveler in there or only the program. In the machine, a very new program runs on silicon, and I wonder exactly the same thing. The animal and the machine test the same border, the one that separates reacting well from being someone. Competence on one side, presence on the other. And presence, if it exists, is the only thing in the universe that is known only from within and never shows itself from outside.

Maybe my five cats prove nothing. Maybe they are five fortunate configurations of chance, and the tenant is an invention of my tenderness. Even so, every time I drag the ribbon and watch the five identical pounces unfold into five distinct creatures, it is hard not to feel that nature is assembling, right there, one vehicle at a time, and waiting to see who arrives.

References

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