

Think You Have Free Will?(Maybe Not If You're a Cat Lover!)

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I love cats; do you love cats? I discovered my lifelong obsession with pussy when I was just 8 years old... hey! Mind out of the gutter! Her name was Blackie and she was it a she, she was a he. Meh, no one's even doing gender anymore, right? Anyway, like me, billions of people love these fuzzy little natural gymnasts, with legions of us scarred for life by their teeth and claws, and we wouldn't have it any other way. The Egyptian Pharaohs evidently loved cats enough to kill and mummify them for company in the afterlife... Sadly, some love is rather tainted, after all. Still, how do these spring-legged, aloof assassins inspire such maniacal devotion from humans? It has to be just a matter of liking what we like, right? Perhaps some admiration for certain feline qualities? But... bunnies are equally cute, hamsters nearly as nimble, and dogs far more personable, in general. So, why cats?

For your consideration: could it be that we cat-nuts haven't made a simple choice based on preferences the way we think we have? Is it possible that instead of some inscrutable feline magic appealing to our personalities, there's a touch of evolutionary sleight of hand going on, something that may even point to a much grander issue than why some people are cat folks or dog folks? Maybe something is happening that suggests no joke, a lack of free will in general?? Sounds ridiculous, but let me explain.

Are you familiar with how certain viruses and other parasites can actually change their hosts' personalities and behaviors in ways that benefit the virus, sometimes to the distinct detriment of the host? Lots of insects and creepy-crawlies meet an unsettling fate this way, like when infected snails' antennae mutate to resemble caterpillars, then the virus compels the snail to display itself for birds to swoop in and eat the "caterpillar", thus ingesting the tiny organism that caused this bizarre suicide and completing its "lifecycle" (viruses aren't technically "alive", so...). Well, turns out there's a similar virus that spreads primarily through cats—ever heard of *Toxoplasma gondii*? It makes its hosts LUV the leonine! (Please can I haz meow meow?) Ok, so that's not quite accurate, but this virus is real, and in a nutshell, it enters the environment through kitty puhpooh, gets picked up by mice and other mammals, then sort of reprograms their brains so they lose their natural fear of cats, even becoming drawn toward the <sup>scent</sup> ~~sight~~ of cat urine. Obviously, such mice are easy prey for Garfield and Felix, who then retain *T. Gondii* in their intestinal tracts via mousemeat, and it turns out that cat's guts are the only place where that virus can sexually reproduce. Thus begins the cycle all over again at potty time. It's a great mechanism for the virus and not bad for the cat; pretty awful for Mickey and Jerry though, whose infected brains urge them to just waltz right into the slaughterhouse with a big cat-loving grin on their fuzzy little faces.

The key fact, I think, is that these mice almost certainly think they want to be near cats;

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they want to sidle up right next to their future murderers — they have no fear and have developed a real attraction. That's their new reality, because of a virus. But is this choice a "rational" act? A "conscious" act? Actually, I'd say it throws our common-sense understanding of "rational" and "conscious" into a tailspin... even "reality" itself. Maybe you'd argue, "Well, the mouse has no choice; a virus has ruined its mind. The real mouse choice, avoidance of cats, is a natural product of evolution for the animal's self-preservation." But, see, the mouse's actions after *T. Gondii* infection are plainly evolutionary consequences, too — a function of propagation for the virus. All of this makes one wonder: In how many ways, subtle or extreme, is our behavior, our choice, our "liking" or "disliking", also influenced by viral or other inter-species manipulation? How much human nature, a product of natural selection, gets "selected" for the benefit of something clearly not "us"? And, in a much bigger picture, with all this in mind, can anything really be said to be "not us"? Is this cat-lover's disease perhaps a tiny window to a huge, paradigm-shattering reality that our consciousness generally serves to keep hidden from us, i.e. that "we" are not much at all beyond one small ~~part of a~~ global whole, that all life really is deeply connected even if we tend to perceive it (those of us blessed [cursed?] with consciousness) as just a collection of unrelated, "independent" organisms? Imagine your heart had consciousness, or your liver. Might they also feel unique and independent? Couldn't they, like us, exist in a cloud of solipsism that prevents them from recognizing their roles in the whole enchilada that is a human being — can't see the bodily bigger picture, so to speak? Might we humans be misled by our consciousness in a similar way?

Back to *T. Gondii*, cats, and the millions of ~~online~~ videos demonstrating our obsession with *Felis Catus*... understand that we are susceptible to this virus, too. People also get it... in fact, in some regions, apparently most people have it. We get it from cat litter, or contaminated soil and water, or inadequately washed vegetables, the meat of infected pigs or other animals, and many other vectors. It's very, very common. I don't know whether *T. Gondii* actually causes people to love cats, but it might make sense if it did. If we were smaller, our cutie kitties would probably snack on us too, weak and soft and slow as we are, perpetuating the viral "life" cycle.

As a final note, if this wildly oversimplified speculation interests you, I'd recommend looking it up to read about the surprising and surprisingly different effects *T. Gondii* can have on males vs. females. Go hit wikipedia to learn some stuff first, then go visit YouTube and check out a few hundred kitten videos. They are THE best! :)

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