

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

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My Life as a Dog

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Those of us who share our lives and homes with four-legged domestic animals are often divided into “dog-people,” and “cat-people.” I must confess that I am a dog-person. I have nothing against cats, mind you. Some of my closest friends have been cats. But for whatever reason, my life has gone to the dogs.

I *like* being a dog-person. In fact, I find it to be one of the most rewarding, meaningful, indeed *noble* aspects of my life. There is an openness and generosity of spirit one comes to appreciate from spending time with canine companions, and when I look to those I see as exemplars after which to model my life, my dog *Felix* appears high on the list. Is this absurd, misanthropic, perhaps even pathological? I think not. I think it is the exact opposite of all of these. The world would be a far better place were more of us to spend a just a little time trying to emulate our pets.

I have two dogs, *Felix* and *Fiona*, diminutive Terriers both, as full of life and energy as Einstein’s famous dictum prescribes. And while I love and respect them both, I must confess that *Felix* is my favorite. *Fiona* is dear and sweet, gentle and adorable, but she can also be coy and petty. *Fiona* will sulk and feign indifference when (she feels) she is not receiving the love and affection that are, after all, her *due*. *Fiona* was my first, and she has never quite gotten over the affront of my taking another dog into the house, nor the belief that I am neglecting my duties towards her when I

pay any attention whatsoever to Felix. And so she engages in a kind of deception by feigning certain emotions and, so far as she is able, hiding others. As much as I understand the basis of her feelings, I can't help but find a small moral failing in this. Small and understandable, and all the more human because of it, but a failing nonetheless.

Felix, on the other hand, wears his heart on his sleeves, and it is this particular trait I admire most. His heart is as big as his legs are small, and there is no exhausting his enthusiasm. Felix is intent upon living his life in the moment and to the fullest, being always fully and completely present, with no regrets about what has been, and no worries about what is yet to be. *I am here*, he says when he enters the room. *I see the world, and it is good*. And how can one argue with that?

Felix's enthusiasm, his inexhaustible presence and unquestioning faith in the goodness of the world, is what I admire most, and what I aspire to in my own life. In this presence, this commitment to reality, there are no words, and there is no deception. Nothing is hidden or held back, and nothing is feigned or affected. Reality is on the surface and is what it is, so self-evidently and transparently good that one is hard put to remember the lie that is yesterday or to imagine the false hope that is tomorrow.

Many are the times when Felix interrupts my work. Engrossed in reading philosophy or trying to comprehend the absence of subjectivity in a world that is *my own*, Felix displaces my reverie and insists that I rejoin him in life, that I participate with him in the expansive goodness that is the fundamental bedrock of being. And again, how can I argue with that?

What Felix embodies is the lack of the language of lies, a presence that is real and good, an existence that is what it is and so grows and expands and excites and incites, without ever being other or feigning incompleteness. *I am here*. *I am the world, and it is good*. Would that I could

mean this, could *be* this, as completely, as honestly and unreservedly as my two small friends! Am I wrong in choosing to emulate a dog? On the contrary, I cannot imagine a thing more right.

But, you will say, Felix is naïve. He is, after all, just a dog. Only in his ignorance, his lack of intellect and reasoning, can he “think” the world is good. The world, you say, is metaphysically indifferent to value. One would be far more reasonable to see it as a fundamentally evil place, full not only of suffering, but worse yet, of depraved indifference to that suffering. At best, such a world is hopelessly varied, a place where despair and despondency are more rational than enthusiasm and naïveté. Isn’t happiness and wonder in the face of raw evil and confusion a sign, if anything, of moral insensitivity?

What a travesty of cowardice and self-deception! This is what happens when we think too much, and in so doing, separate ourselves from the stuff of our soul, opening up that strange, unholy chasm in which self-deception becomes first a conceptual possibility and then a malignant reality. Felix naïve? On the contrary, he is far too wise and transparent for such life-denying crap. No space separates Felix from his world, and so he surrenders no foothold to indifference. The pregnant void pressed into inexistence by words is where cynicism and alienation arise. The world is not indifferent: indifference arises in the hollow noises we create in these self-defeating, self-creating attempts to hide from the world, from ourselves, from what is, from what is good.

I recently visited the Museum of Modern Art. Feeling as though I were in church, I took communion at van Gogh’s “Starry Night.” I am always at a loss to articulate what I feel in this holy place. I have no formal training in art, and so lack the words to describe the pleasant ache in my soul as it resonates in dissonant harmony at the sight of some Monet, Seurat, or Cézanne. Sometimes I wonder if my experience would be enhanced were I to educate my palette so that I could give voice

to what I feel. But I am afraid I would lose something in the process. Words would make things too easy, create a space in which I might hide from the simple reality touching my senses, lending structure to my soul. As things are now, my response is only to murmur or sigh or pass by in awed silence. The experience is too real, too direct, too painful and beautiful to be subjugated by the mindless violence of words. I will remain in the bliss of my ignorance and leave to others the task of trying to say what cannot be said, what will not be said, what need not be said.

This life *as and with a dog* is not merely a goal towards which I must ceaselessly, if ever unsuccessfully aspire; it is a source of pleasure and centered serenity, a search that already *is* its own destination. Felix can be made completely happy and alive by the simplest of activities. When I set aside my work and play with him, his happiness and excitement become living things, expanding by cellular division, dividing and multiplying, consuming and incorporating everything within the fleeting moment. Am I wrong to play with Felix rather than struggling to accept accountability for my life? Can I do one without the other? Indeed, is there a difference?

My life *as a dog*? Surely this is metaphor! Surely better a human dissatisfied than a dog satisfied! But says who? Who will test this hypothesis? “Ask those who have experienced both,” Mill will tell us. Fair enough. But with no four-legged philosophers to recount their experiences as humans, we must rely instead on the testimony of humans who can still find the canine within, who can still experience this zest for being, who can still surrender defenselessly to the ecstasy of the moment, who can still appreciate and resonate with a lost soul howling at the moon. Metaphors again? Surely yes, but to stop with this admission is to hide behind a tapestry of empty words for fear of facing the sublime and wordless reality that lies just past them, in that elusive space where lives the very core of our being.

When I talk with students about the identity of persons across time, I talk about a three-year-old boy opening presents on Christmas Eve. I remember the experiences of that boy, and can still feel the excitement, magic, and anticipation that the ensuing years have covered with layers of lies and lost youth, but have not yet buried beneath the effluvia of passing time. And so, according to some, this boy and I make up different stages of the same continuing person. But this is too simple, too lifeless and sterile to give life and breadth to the paradox of personhood. I am not identical to this boy, so much as I contain him somewhere inside myself. He is still there, still lives and breathes, still waits for Santa, remains alive to the magic and the mystery of what has since become mundane and monotonous. And while death alone can stop the years from squeezing this young boy into a smaller and smaller space inside me, it just as true (and far more important) that to lose sight of this boy within is to lose touch with a part of myself, to become a lesser person, a less complete being.

But as with those persons contained within on whose hopes and dreams I have been buffeted to this island in time, so it is with the forms of life and structures of cells whose histories have brought us all to this moment in the explosion of the cosmos. We are surely more than all these structures and cells, but just as surely they are all still here within us. If we fail to see them, fail to love and embrace them, we are simply less real, less human, less valuable.

And so I aspire to keep alive the canine within, aspire to be present in the moment, enthusiastic about reality, neither possessed by the past nor enamored of the future, in touch with that experience of the world too big and too important to trust to words or other true lies. I will look to Felix for inspiration and as a role model, and yet will forgive myself if occasionally I behave more like Fiona than Felix, more like a man than a dog. And in this way I will lead my life as both man

and boy, without thereby losing touch with my life as a dog.