

THE QUARRY

Kingdom Animalia

Simon Emmerson

For decades before he died, a man living in New York fed sick and parasite infested pigeons. This man was a germaphobe, well known for his propensity to shun any and all things unclean. He would often wear clothes only once, before throwing them away. And yet, for all this, he reveled in the pigeons that flocked to him. It is curious to imagine why such a man as this would give such consideration to an animal that, by all accounts, is a common, dirty, carrier of disease. And yet, despite having numerous friends and admirers, Nikola Tesla would never write so fondly of any person, as he did of his favourite pigeon. Since I first read of him, I have often wondered what kind of upbringing and experiences developed such a disparity in his mind, and why these proclivities of his made him such a target of scorn and mirth. Unfortunately, I can only speculate on much of Tesla's experiences, and I will do so, but for the bulk of this piece, my own life, which can be more confidently expounded upon, will have to suffice.

Having spent my childhood around many animals, treated in many different ways, I spent a large portion of my life simply ascribing certain levels of importance

to animals. Before affection could even be considered, their importance was paramount.

Cattle dogs; important, respected and cared for.

Cattle; less important, a means to an end.

Snakes; important, kill if they're anywhere near the house.

These separations were, unsurprisingly, not inherent in my mind; they were taught. My mother taught me to hate rodents. My father taught me to handle dogs. Separations that I believed, but I now know don't make sense.

DaVinci, one of the greatest minds of history, pointedly described man as the "king of the beasts." That though we have power over them, we are not above them. This is something that many cultures find difficult. Greyhound racing, cockfighting, even the faceless, guiltless packed meat in a grocery store, requires us to think of ourselves as somehow different. And to do that, children are taught from a young age that it is correct. Many children are taught that animals are good, but eating meat is also good. In some places more extreme examples are necessary. To separate a dog's inherent worth and your emotional attachment to it is an impossible thing to explain to anyone who hasn't grown up seeing pups drowned because we couldn't afford to keep them, and there was nowhere that would take them. To invoke DaVinci again, the man was known for digging up human corpses to better understand how the human body worked, but he spent much time and energy purchasing and releasing captured animals. We may never know how Leonardo's childhood affected these attitudes, but I can only imagine his genius contributed.

I don't condemn my parents for instilling these harsh attitudes. It was how they were taught, and the way they knew to survive in a place that could be cruel and unforgiving. And I hope I will not be condemned for my childhood, complicit in these things. Necessity and indoctrination are insidious bedfellows.

With the perspective I have since gained, these early attitudes being drummed into me feel almost Orwellian, though I understand how extremist that statement may seem. But being forced to accept a concept that goes against empirical evidence is fundamental to the sort of world described in 1984. The first discordant note struck for me in this system I had been taught was cats.

Cats that we feed, cats that catch rats and mice, good.

Feral cats, bad.

But as a child, this was something that couldn't be seen so clearly. In the same way that a person I've never met before doesn't become less real because of a lack of familiarity, cats as a species should have had an absolute value.

Curiously, Ayn Rand, a brilliant and famously dry author driven by that same absolutist objectivism, felt strongly about the value of animals, particularly cats, and was instrumental in the expansion of my philosophical perspectives on animals. Much like the Orwellian notion of Double Think, I accepted the difference despite the objective flaws in the philosophy. I trusted (subconsciously, of course) that those who taught me had a deeper understanding that made the difference clear. Of course, the difference was ultimately arbitrary. To accept it was one thing, but to believe it, it needed to be taught, to be felt, in a biased manner. And I was taught, in a sense. Interactions between children and feral cats are rarely without strife, and I was no exception. It is hardly surprising that spilled blood solidified my capacity to believe in the apparently inherent divergences of domesticated and feral wildlife. But later, as my experiences grew, and my thoughts strayed back to the little cat, and towards these ideas, it became clear that my perceived notions were, at best, oversimplified.

Perspective was once more forced upon me almost a decade later. In my early teens, stepping through a box thorn looking for rabbits, I almost stepped onto an Eastern Brown Snake. It, quite understandably, took exception to this. A hiss was my first warning, and certainly the only one I needed. As soon as I looked down and laid eyes on the scaly fiend, my fear utterly took over. Instinct carried me maybe 50 metres before I even realised I'd started to run. That incident induced revelation in me. The realisation that I had been the aggressor; that the snake had in fact given me

more warning than I deserved; and that I had so thoroughly regressed to my fear instinct that I don't even remember beginning to run. Frankly, the snake had acted a lot more reasonably than I had. In fact, if the snake had reacted the same way I have, I would likely not be alive to write this now.

It created a paradigm shift in my mind between myself and animals, and the way I'd always treated and categorised them. I remembered the cat I'd once foolishly tried to befriend, but this time, with the filter of perspective, and the epiphany that the cat must have given some warning that I, tiny ignorant human that I was, could not interpret.

Long after I had moved to the city, after graduating high school, there were more irreconcilable phenomena. Friends who had snakes and rodents as pets were difficult to become accustomed to. A disparity between animals that are owned, and animals that aren't, could be rationalised in my mind, but the same animal being different due to their status of ownership, still didn't sit right with me. That same ring of falsity that began with feral cats began to manifest in more complex notions. I have since come to love snakes, and though I haven't quite come around on rodents, I certainly don't hold them in the scorn I once did.

It was at this point in my philosophical growth that I first read of Tesla and his beloved pigeons. And not only his pigeons, but the disparity between his kind generosity, and his general avoidance of most human contact. It strikes many people as odd that he would behave this way, and so; it is a remarkable subversion of human pack bonding. Many species, ours included, bond easily to each other, while bonds with other species are much more difficult to form and keep. There are many reasons for this, the psychological "other," language/culture barrier, etc, but the important point is that, for whatever reason, Tesla formed a pack bond with his birds, a space in his heart humanity had never been able to fill. It even seems likely that he saw no cogent difference between his companionship with the birds, and the companionship other people found with each other.

We are taught from childhood to consider animals in certain ways, ways that I have outlined, many of which are often not conducive to equivalent treatment. But

throughout history we have come to treat people and their experiences in similarly degrading fashions, time and time again. We go to the zoo to watch animals we don't often get to see, to watch how they act and react behind walls of glass. How closely does this resemble so much of the media we consume in modern times? We watch celebrities, game shows, reality television, as we would watch chimpanzees. We watch talk shows and panel shows to sate this desire for closeness to these celebrities. While the freak shows and body horror circuses of the past have been abolished, shows such as *Embarrassing Bodies* or *Freak Show* feel uncomfortably close to being their spiritual successor.

But these musings are more symptomatic than causal. Such situations cannot exist without the mindset to create them. Where our minds go determines where our actions fall, for better or for worse. To exploit a creature, one must mentally be able to divorce itself from the reality of that creature's experience. I would be lying if I said that I had never done wrong to an animal, and each time I had no thought of how the animal would react. As I have grown older, however, my mind has regularly gone back to that first false feeling. Perhaps if the small black cat that scratched up my arm as a child had been less wary and more curious, my later revelations would have occurred more quickly. Perhaps if I had been calmer, more cognisant of the caution of a lone cat in an unforgiving country, I would never have needed a revelation at all. But I was a child, and a life in the Australian bush does little to soften a cat's temperament.

I understand that this talk of modern media styled as freak shows, and Orwellian realities may sound a little extreme, and in many ways, it is. For most of us, the way we view people at concerts or on television is fundamentally disparate from how we view animals at parks or zoos. We put ourselves in the place of others, we empathise, we live their journey. But when hearing about stalkers, about obsessive fanatics, or seeing shows like *Big Brother* or *the Bachelor*, to me, at least, the idea rings true. Perhaps the reason Nikola Tesla was considered so strange was because he forced us to confront our own relationship with each other and nature. Or maybe Ayn Rand's objectivist views drew such ire because people like to feel as if they are important, as if, on a universal scale, we matter. But if we are to enter a truly accepting society, we might just have to admit that we aren't more significant than Ayn Rand's cats. That we have no more meaning in the grand scheme of things than Tesla's pigeons, or

Einstein's parrot, or any of the animals DaVinci owned or release. That we have no more reason to think ourselves important than a scared little black cat on an old wooden verandah. After all, humans aren't all that special. We're all just animals.