# What's the Point If We Can't Have Fun?

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My friend June Thunderstorm and I once spent a half an hour sitting in a meadow by a mountain lake, watching an inchworm dangle from the top of a stalk of grass, twist about in every possible direction, and then leap to the next stalk and do the same thing. And so it proceeded, in a vast circle, with what must have been a vast expenditure of energy, for what seemed like absolutely no reason at all.

"All animals play," June had once said to me. "Even ants." She'd spent many years working as a professional gardener and had plenty of incidents like this to observe and ponder. "Look," she said, with an air of modest triumph. "See what I mean?"

Most of us, hearing this story, would insist on proof. How do we know the worm was playing? Perhaps the invisible circles it traced in the air were really just a search for some unknown sort of prey. Or a mating ritual. Can we prove they weren't? Even if the worm was playing, how do we know this form of play did not serve some ultimately practical purpose: exercise, or self-training for some possible future inchworm emergency?

This would be the reaction of most professional ethologists as well. Generally speaking, an analysis of animal behavior is not considered scientific unless the animal is assumed, at least tacitly, to be operating according to the same means/end calculations that one would apply to economic transactions. Under this assumption, an expenditure of energy must be directed toward some goal, whether it be obtaining food, securing territory, achieving dominance, or maximizing reproductive success—unless one can absolutely prove that it isn't, and absolute proof in such matters is, as one might imagine, very hard to come by.

I must emphasize here that it doesn't really matter what sort of theory of animal motivation a scientist might entertain: what she believes an animal to be thinking, whether she thinks an animal can be said to be "thinking" anything at all. I'm not saying that ethologists actually believe that animals are simply rational calculating machines. I'm simply saying that ethologists have boxed themselves into a world where to be scientific means to offer an explanation of behavior in rational terms—which in turn means describing an animal *as if* it were a calculating economic actor trying to maximize some sort of self-interest—whatever their theory of animal psychology, or motivation, might be.

That's why the existence of animal play is considered something of an intellectual scandal. It's understudied, and those who do study it are seen as mildly eccentric. As with many vaguely threatening, speculative notions, difficult-to-satisfy criteria are introduced for proving animal play exists, and even when it is acknowledged, the research more often than not cannibalizes its own insights by trying to demonstrate that play must have some long-term survival or reproductive function.

Despite all this, those who do look into the matter are invariably forced to the conclusion that play does exist across the animal universe. And exists not just among such notoriously frivolous creatures as monkeys, dolphins, or puppies, but among such unlikely species as frogs, minnows, salamanders, fiddler crabs, and yes, even ants—which not only engage in frivolous activities as individuals, but also have been observed since the nineteenth century to arrange mock-wars, apparently just for the fun of it.

Why do animals play? Well, why shouldn't they? The real question is: Why does the existence of action carried out for the sheer pleasure of acting, the exertion of powers for the sheer pleasure of exerting them, strike us as mysterious? What does it tell us about ourselves that we instinctively assume that it is?

## Survival of the Misfits

The tendency in popular thought to view the biological world in economic terms was present at the nineteenth-century beginnings of Darwinian science. Charles Darwin, after all, borrowed the term "survival of the fittest" from the sociologist Herbert Spencer, that darling of robber barons. Spencer, in turn, was struck by how much the forces driving natural selection in *On the Origin of Species* jibed with his own laissez-faire economic theories. Competition over resources, rational calculation of advantage, and the gradual extinction of the weak were taken to be the prime directives of the universe.

The stakes of this new view of nature as the theater for a brutal struggle for existence were high, and objections registered very early on. An alternative school of Darwinism emerged in Russia emphasizing cooperation, not competition, as the driver of evolutionary change. In 1902 this approach found a voice in a popular book, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, by naturalist and revolutionary anarchist pamphleteer Peter Kropotkin. In an explicit riposte to social Darwinists, Kropotkin argued that the entire theoretical basis for Social Darwinism was wrong: those species that cooperate most effectively tend to be the most competitive in the long run. Kropotkin, born a prince (he renounced his title as a young man), spent many years in Siberia as a naturalist and explorer before being imprisoned for revolutionary agitation, escaping, and fleeing to London. *Mutual Aid* grew from a series of essays written in response to Thomas Henry Huxley, a well-known Social Darwinist, and summarized the Russian understanding of the day, which was that while competition was undoubtedly one factor driving both natural and social evolution, the role of cooperation was ultimately decisive.

The Russian challenge was taken quite seriously in twentieth-century biology—particularly among the emerging subdiscipline of evolutionary psychology—even if it was rarely mentioned by name. It came, instead, to be subsumed under the broader "problem of altruism"—another phrase borrowed from the economists, and one that spills over into arguments among "rational choice" theorists in the social sciences. This was the question that already troubled Darwin: Why should animals ever sacrifice their individual advantage for others? Because no one can deny that they sometimes do. Why should a herd animal draw potentially lethal attention to himself by alerting his fellows a predator is coming? Why should worker bees kill themselves to protect their hive? If to advance a scientific explanation of any behavior means to attribute rational, maximizing motives, then what, precisely, was a kamikaze bee trying to maximize?

We all know the eventual answer, which the discovery of genes made possible. Animals were simply trying to maximize the propagation of their own genetic codes. Curiously, this view—which eventually came to be referred to as neo-Darwinian—was developed largely by figures who considered themselves radicals of one sort or another. Jack Haldane, a Marxist biologist, was already trying to annoy moralists in the 1930s by quipping that, like any biological entity, he'd be happy to sacrifice his life for "two brothers or eight cousins." The epitome of this line of thought came with militant atheist Richard Dawkins's book *The Selfish Gene*—a work that insisted all biological entities were best conceived of as "lumbering robots," programmed by genetic codes that, for some reason no one could quite explain, acted like "successful Chicago gangsters," ruthlessly expanding their territory in an endless desire to propagate themselves. Such descriptions were typically qualified by remarks like, "Of course, this is just a metaphor, genes don't *really* want or do anything." But in reality, the neo-Darwinists were practically driven to their conclusions by their initial assumption: that science demands a rational explanation, that this

means attributing rational motives to all behavior, and that a truly rational motivation can only be one that, if observed in humans, would normally be described as selfishness or greed. As a result, the neo-Darwinists went even further than the Victorian variety. If old-school Social Darwinists like Herbert Spencer viewed nature as a marketplace, albeit an unusually cutthroat one, the new version was outright capitalist. The neo-Darwinists assumed not just a struggle for survival, but a universe of rational calculation driven by an apparently irrational imperative to unlimited growth.

This, anyway, is how the Russian challenge was understood. Kropotkin's actual argument is far more interesting. Much of it, for instance, is concerned with how animal cooperation often has nothing to do with survival or reproduction, but is a form of pleasure in itself. "To take flight in flocks merely for pleasure is quite common among all sorts of birds," he writes. Kropotkin multiplies examples of social play: pairs of vultures wheeling about for their own entertainment, hares so keen to box with other species that they occasionally (and unwisely) approach foxes, flocks of birds performing military-style maneuvers, bands of squirrels coming together for wrestling and similar games:

> We know at the present time that all animals, beginning with the ants, going on to the birds, and ending with the highest mammals, are fond of plays, wrestling, running after each other, trying to capture each other, teasing each other, and so on. And while many plays are, so to speak, a school for the proper behavior of the young in mature life, there are others which, apart from their utilitarian purposes, are, together with dancing and singing, mere manifestations of an excess of forces—"the joy of life," and a desire to communicate in some way or another with other individuals of the same or of other species—in short, a manifestation of sociability proper, which is a distinctive feature of all the animal world.

To exercise one's capacities to their fullest extent is to take pleasure in one's own existence, and with sociable creatures, such pleasures are proportionally magnified when performed in company. From the Russian perspective, this does not need to be explained. It is simply what life is. We don't have to explain why creatures desire to be alive. Life is an end in itself. And if what being alive actually consists of is having powers—to run, jump, fight, fly through the air—then surely the exercise of such powers as an end in itself does not have to be explained either. It's just an extension of the same principle.

Friedrich Schiller had already argued in 1795 that it was precisely in play that we find the origins of self-consciousness, and hence freedom, and hence morality. "Man plays only when he is in the full sense of the word a man," Schiller wrote in his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, "and he is only wholly a Man when he is playing." If so, and if Kropotkin was right, then glimmers of freedom, or even of moral life, begin to appear everywhere around us.

It's hardly surprising, then, that this aspect of Kropotkin's argument was ignored by the neo-Darwinists. Unlike "the problem of altruism," cooperation for pleasure, as an end in itself, simply could not be recuperated for ideological purposes. In fact, the version of the struggle for existence that emerged over the twentieth century had even less room for play than the older Victorian one. Herbert Spencer himself had no problem with the idea of animal play as purposeless, a mere enjoyment of surplus energy. Just as a successful industrialist or salesman could go home and play a nice game of cribbage or polo, why should those animals that succeeded in the struggle

for existence not also have a bit of fun? But in the new full-blown capitalist version of evolution, where the drive for accumulation had no limits, life was no longer an end in itself, but a mere instrument for the propagation of DNA sequences—and so the very existence of play was something of a scandal.

## Why Me?

It's not just that scientists are reluctant to set out on a path that might lead them to see play—and therefore the seeds of self-consciousness, freedom, and moral life—among animals. Many are finding it increasingly difficult to come up with justifications for ascribing any of these things even to human beings. Once you reduce all living beings to the equivalent of market actors, rational calculating machines trying to propagate their genetic code, you accept that not only the cells that make up our bodies, but whatever beings are our immediate ancestors, lacked anything even remotely like self-consciousness, freedom, or moral life—which makes it hard to understand how or why consciousness (a mind, a soul) could ever have evolved in the first place.

American philosopher Daniel Dennett frames the problem quite lucidly. Take lobsters, he argues—they're just robots. Lobsters can get by with no sense of self at all. You can't ask what it's like to be a lobster. It's not like anything. They have nothing that even resembles consciousness; they're machines. But if this is so, Dennett argues, then the same must be assumed all the way up the evolutionary scale of complexity, from the living cells that make up our bodies to such elaborate creatures as monkeys and elephants, who, for all their apparently human-like qualities, cannot be proved to think about what they do. That is, until suddenly, Dennett gets to humans, which—while they are certainly gliding around on autopilot at least 95 percent of the time—nonetheless do appear to have this "me," this conscious self grafted on top of them, that occasionally shows up to take supervisory notice, intervening to tell the system to look for a new job, quit smoking, or write an academic paper about the origins of consciousness. In Dennett's formulation,

> Yes, we have a soul. But it's made of lots of tiny robots. Somehow, the trillions of robotic (and unconscious) cells that compose our bodies organize themselves into interacting systems that sustain the activities traditionally allocated to the soul, the ego or self. But since we have already granted that simple robots are unconscious (if toasters and thermostats and telephones are unconscious), why couldn't teams of such robots do their fancier projects without having to compose me? If the immune system has a mind of its own, and the hand–eye coordination circuit that picks berries has a mind of its own, why bother making a super-mind to supervise all this?

Dennett's own answer is not particularly convincing: he suggests we develop consciousness so we can lie, which gives us an evolutionary advantage. (If so, wouldn't foxes also be conscious?) But the question grows more difficult by an order of magnitude when you ask *how* it happens—the "hard problem of consciousness," as David Chalmers calls it. How do apparently robotic cells and systems combine in such a way as to have qualitative experiences: to feel dampness, savor wine, adore cumbia but be indifferent to salsa? Some scientists are honest enough to admit they don't have the slightest idea how to account for experiences like these, and suspect they never will.

## Do the Electron(s) Dance?

There is a way out of the dilemma, and the first step is to consider that our starting point could be wrong. Reconsider the lobster. Lobsters have a very bad reputation among philosophers, who frequently hold them out as examples of purely unthinking, unfeeling creatures. Presumably, this is because lobsters are the only animal most philosophers have killed with their own two hands before eating. It's unpleasant to throw a struggling creature in a pot of boiling water; one needs to be able to tell oneself that the lobster isn't really feeling it. (The only exception to this pattern appears to be, for some reason, France, where Gérard de Nerval used to walk a pet lobster on a leash and where Jean-Paul Sartre at one point became erotically obsessed with lobsters after taking too much mescaline.) But in fact, scientific observation has revealed that even lobsters engage in some forms of play—manipulating objects, for instance, possibly just for the pleasure of doing so. If that is the case, to call such creatures "robots" would be to shear the word "robot" of its meaning. Machines don't just fool around. But if living creatures are not robots after all, many of these apparently thorny questions instantly dissolve away.

What would happen if we proceeded from the reverse perspective and agreed to treat play not as some peculiar anomaly, but as our starting point, a principle already present not just in lobsters and indeed all living creatures, but also on every level where we find what physicists, chemists, and biologists refer to as "self-organizing systems"?

This is not nearly as crazy as it might sound.

Philosophers of science, faced with the puzzle of how life might emerge from dead matter or how conscious beings might evolve from microbes, have developed two types of explanations.

The first consists of what's called emergentism. The argument here is that once a certain level of complexity is reached, there is a kind of qualitative leap where completely new sorts of physical laws can "emerge"—ones that are premised on, but cannot be reduced to, what came before. In this way, the laws of chemistry can be said to be emergent from physics: the laws of chemistry presuppose the laws of physics, but can't simply be reduced to them. In the same way, the laws of biology emerge from chemistry: one obviously needs to understand the chemical components of a fish to understand how it swims, but chemical components will never provide a full explanation. In the same way, the human mind can be said to be emergent from the cells that make it up.

Those who hold the second position, usually called panpsychism or panexperientialism, agree that all this may be true but argue that emergence is not enough. As British philosopher Galen Strawson recently put it, to imagine that one can travel from insensate matter to a being capable of discussing the existence of insensate matter in a mere two jumps is simply to make emergence do too much work. Something has to be there already, on every level of material existence, even that of subatomic particles—something, however minimal and embryonic, that does some of the things we are used to thinking of life (and even mind) as doing—in order for that something to be organized on more and more complex levels to eventually produce self-conscious beings. That "something" might be very minimal indeed: some very rudimentary sense of responsiveness to one's environment, something like anticipation, something like memory. However rudimentary, it would have to exist for self-organizing systems like atoms or molecules to self-organize in the first place.

All sorts of questions are at stake in the debate, including the hoary problem of free will. As innumerable adolescents have pondered—often while stoned and first contemplating the mysteries of the universe—if the movements of the particles that make up our brains are already

determined by natural laws, then how can we be said to have free will? The standard answer is that we have known since Heisenberg that the movements of atomic particles are not predetermined; quantum physics can predict to which positions electrons, for instance, will *tend* to jump, in aggregate, in a given situation, but it is impossible to predict which way any particular electron will jump in any particular instance. Problem solved.

Except not really—something's still missing. If all this means is that the particles which make up our brains jump around randomly, one would still have to imagine some immaterial, metaphysical entity ("mind") that intervenes to guide the neurons in nonrandom directions. But that would be circular: you'd need to already have a mind to make your brain act like a mind.

If those motions are not random, in contrast, you can at least begin to think about a material explanation. And the presence of endless forms of self-organization in nature—structures maintaining themselves in equilibrium within their environments, from electromagnetic fields to processes of crystallization—does give panpsychists a great deal of material to work with. True, they argue, you can insist that all these entities must either simply be "obeying" natural laws (laws whose existence does not itself need to be explained) or just moving completely randomly . . . but if you do, it's really only because you've decided that's the only way you are willing to look at it. And it leaves the fact that you have a mind capable of making such decisions an utter mystery.

Granted, this approach has always been the minority position. During much of the twentieth century, it was put aside completely. It's easy enough to make fun of. ("Wait, you aren't seriously suggesting that tables can think?" No, actually, no one's suggesting that; the argument is that those self-organizing elements that make up tables, such as atoms, evince extremely simple forms of the qualities that, on an exponentially more complex level, we consider thought.) But in recent years, especially with the newfound popularity, in some scientific circles, of the ideas of philosophers like Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) and Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947), we have begun to see something of a revival.

Curiously, it's largely physicists who have proved receptive to such ideas. (Also mathematicians—perhaps unsurprisingly, since Peirce and Whitehead themselves both began their careers as mathematicians.) Physicists are more playful and less hidebound creatures than, say, biologists—partly, no doubt, because they rarely have to contend with religious fundamentalists challenging the laws of physics. They are the poets of the scientific world. If one is already willing to embrace thirteen-dimensional objects or an endless number of alternative universes, or to casually suggest that 95 percent of the universe is made up of dark matter and energy about whose properties we know nothing, it's perhaps not too much of a leap to also contemplate the possibility that subatomic particles have "free will" or even experiences. And indeed, the existence of freedom on the subatomic level is currently a heated question of debate.

Is it meaningful to say an electron "chooses" to jump the way it does? Obviously, there's no way to prove it. The only evidence we *could* have (that we can't predict what it's going to do), we do have. But it's hardly decisive. Still, if one wants a consistently materialist explanation of the world—that is, if one does not wish to treat the mind as some supernatural entity imposed on the material world, but rather as simply a more complex organization of processes that are already going on, at every level of material reality—then it makes sense that something at least a little like intentionality, something at least a little like experience, something at least a little like freedom, would have to exist on every level of physical reality as well.

Why do most of us, then, immediately recoil at such conclusions? Why do they seem crazy and unscientific? Or more to the point, why are we perfectly willing to ascribe agency to a strand

of DNA (however "metaphorically"), but consider it absurd to do the same with an electron, a snowflake, or a coherent electromagnetic field? The answer, it seems, is because it's pretty much impossible to ascribe self-interest to a snowflake. If we have convinced ourselves that rational explanation of action can consist only of treating action as if there were some sort of self-serving calculation behind it, then by that definition, on all these levels, rational explanations can't be found. Unlike a DNA molecule, which we can at least pretend is pursuing some gangster-like project of ruthless self-aggrandizement, an electron simply does not have a material interest to pursue, not even survival. It is in no sense competing with other electrons. If an electron is acting freely—if it, as Richard Feynman is supposed to have said, "does anything it likes"—it can only be acting freely as an end in itself. Which would mean that at the very foundations of physical reality, we encounter freedom for its own sake—which also means we encounter the most rudimentary form of play.

## Swim with the Fishes

Let us imagine a principle. Call it a principle of freedom—or, since Latinate constructions tend to carry more weight in such matters, call it a principle of ludic freedom. Let us imagine it to hold that the free exercise of an entity's most complex powers or capacities will, under certain circumstances at least, tend to become an end in itself. It would obviously not be the only principle active in nature. Others pull other ways. But if nothing else, it would help explain what we actually observe, such as why, despite the second law of thermodynamics, the universe seems to be getting more, rather than less, complex. Evolutionary psychologists claim they can explain—as the title of one recent book has it—"why sex is fun." What they can't explain is why fun is fun. This could.

I don't deny that what I've presented so far is a savage simplification of very complicated issues. I'm not even saying that the position I'm suggesting here—that there is a play principle at the basis of all physical reality—is necessarily true. I would just insist that such a perspective is at least as plausible as the weirdly inconsistent speculations that currently pass for orthodoxy, in which a mindless, robotic universe suddenly produces poets and philosophers out of nowhere. Nor, I think, does seeing play as a principle of nature necessarily mean adopting any sort of milky utopian view. The play principle can help explain why sex is fun, but it can also explain why cruelty is fun. (As anyone who has watched a cat play with a mouse can attest, a lot of animal play is not particularly nice.) But it gives us ground to unthink the world around us.

Years ago, when I taught at Yale, I would sometimes assign a reading containing a famous Taoist story. I offered an automatic "A" to any student who could tell me why the last line made sense. (None ever succeeded.)

> Zhuangzi and Huizi were strolling on a bridge over the River Hao, when the former observed, "See how the minnows dart between the rocks! Such is the happiness of fishes."
>
> "You not being a fish," said Huizi, "how can you possibly know what makes fish happy?"
>
> "And you not being I," said Zhuangzi, "how can you know that I don't know what makes fish happy?"

> "If I, not being you, cannot know what you know," replied Huizi, "does it not follow from that very fact that you, not being a fish, cannot know what makes fish happy?"
>
> "Let us go back," said Zhuangzi, "to your original question. You asked me how I knew what makes fish happy. The very fact you asked shows that you knew I knew—as I did know, from my own feelings on this bridge."

The anecdote is usually taken as a confrontation between two irreconcilable approaches to the world: the logician versus the mystic. But if that's true, then why did Zhuangzi, who wrote it down, show himself to be defeated by his logician friend?

After thinking about the story for years, it struck me that this was the entire point. By all accounts, Zhuangzi and Huizi were the best of friends. They liked to spend hours arguing like this. Surely, that was what Zhuangzi was really getting at. We can each understand what the other is feeling because, arguing about the fish, we are doing exactly what the fish are doing: having fun, doing something we do well for the sheer pleasure of doing it. Engaging in a form of play. The very fact that you felt compelled to try to beat me in an argument, and were so happy to be able to do so, shows that the premise you were arguing must be false. Since if even philosophers are motivated primarily by such pleasures, by the exercise of their highest powers simply for the sake of doing so, then surely this is a principle that exists on every level of nature—which is why I could spontaneously identify it, too, in fish.

Zhuangzi was right. So was June Thunderstorm. Our minds are just a part of nature. We can understand the happiness of fishes—or ants, or inchworms—because what drives us to think and argue about such matters is, ultimately, exactly the same thing.

Now wasn't that fun?

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