

Squirrel In Hell

2017-10-03

You Too Can See Suffering

Content warning: the last part of this post is saying some things that might be uncomfortable to hear, in a sharp tone which you might not like.

第一

I'm spending this week living in Airbnb with my partner. The host, a young Chinese woman, has a dog. Mixed-breed. Maybe half a year old. Underfed. Lonely. Mostly left alone for the day. It's a young dog goddamit, it wants to play. Or rather it *must* play! Play is needed to develop social instincts. Otherwise, the dog will never learn how to find its place in the pack. It will never be happy. Forget about playing. The dog needs to pee! It will never learn to stop doing it in the kitchen if it only has a chance to go out once or twice per day. And I'm not even telling you to care if the dog gets enough vitamins or whatever (no it doesn't, not if it always gets the same cheap food pellets).

The suffering of a dog, especially a young one, is *easy*. It's plain as day, innocent, and infinitely trusting. You just cannot avert your eyes from it. You'd have to literally pluck your own eyes out. And yet the owner doesn't seem to be noticing anything. My partner, who came with me to the same house, at the same time, *also* hadn't been noticing anything (until I pointed it out). It seems that seeing suffering is *not* so easy after all.

第二

Later, sitting on a bench, taking a good look at some strangers on a beach promenade. This one guy is sighing heavily, resting from the sun with a pained look on his face. That woman is walking with such a stiff, constricted step and posture, that I can only imagine what kind of horrible issues she has with her body. Among the dozen nearest people, I find one middle-aged guy about whom it's not immediately apparent that he is suffering right there and then. It's a beautiful day and a beautiful beach on the Canary Islands. The ultimate paradise in this corner of the world. Most of these people are probably on vacation, and they are supposed to be having fun.

I've asked my partner about her experience of seeing people on the street, at it's not like that at all. Most people who read this might not even know what I'm talking about. You might think that maybe I'm exaggerating, or imagining all this. But no. Maybe you had at least one moment of clarity, a time when you weren't too swamped with your own issues, so that you were free to *actually* make use of empathy. Then you know, and I don't need to explain anything. Otherwise, ha, good luck with understanding this post.

Update (added later): some readers interpret the word "see" as referring to opinions, morality, or other such metaphorical "viewpoints". However, what I mean by it is rather how perception works, and "seeing" in this sense feels very much like "seeing" what clothes someone is wearing etc.

第三

It seems that there is definitely some trick to seeing suffering. Otherwise, everyone would do it all the time, and we would live in a very different world.

It's probably worse than that - there are multiple tricks to doing this, and you need to get almost all of them right *at the same time*.

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By the way, if you actually learn some "trick", or a piece of wisdom as some might call it, it becomes a part of your nature. It's so much a part of your nature that you can't imagine how it is to be without it, even if it's written right there in your own notes/diary etc. You can repeat the thoughts as you thought them before, but they are now empty. They are no longer "you". So if you are lucky enough to have notes, they are basically *everything* you know about before you got here.

And of course you don't have notes! This is your whole life, and you only find out much later what was actually important. So I cannot tell you the tricks, because I don't know, OK?

第四

Knowing that, I'm still going to take some educated guesses. Better than nothing, huh?

1. Fix yourself right up! You need a surplus of strength to do anything. You can't change while you are just barely scraping by. Not gonna happen. Sorry.
2. Live your emotions! Don't avert your eyes from how they are all your world. If you need to put up the pretense of rational, calculated action for other people, at least you can stop fooling yourself. Of course it is *possible* to learn to act more rationally, but certainly *not before you admit that you aren't already doing it*.
3. Get out of your head! If you are thinking how to be more empathetic because e.g. then people would like you more... Come on. Let's not be ridiculous. You need to *actually care* about something that is not about you. Sounds easy right? Yeah, sure.
4. Look around! There is so much to see that it's just might boggling. You can't possibly integrate all this knowledge, and if you wanted to use your verbal cognition... No that's not even funny. I know, we are all sharply intellectual here, building models, making things explicit, sounding smart, all that crap. But please realize that this is just a thin show, mostly for signaling purposes. No one is actually smart because of their explicit cognition. If you don't use all of your brain, you are not just stupid, you are *blind*. You cannot possibly see the things happening around you, not to mention make sense of them.

Now with all this, you should have the basics covered. Please excuse the sharp tone, if that was not what you needed at this moment. I wish you good luck on your journey.

Update (added later): some other readers got the impression that I just have a built-in, permanent property of seeing a lot of suffering. Couldn't be more wrong! My starting point was a pretty unusual lack of empathy, and it took me years to get to the point where I was able to change this. It's a specific skill, and I have learned to execute it pretty much at will. Since I learned it, my base level seems higher than before, but not in a negatively life-affecting way.

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