

The Living Scale

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Take the difference between the bumblebee, who flutters idly in the air, and the curious six-year-old, who watches it and tries to understand why it makes that buzzing sound. They are both living, yet one is surviving and the other is thriving. The bee buzzes to shake pollen off its back, to breathe, and to fly. The six-year-old shows an interest in this; that type of observation demonstrates a higher level of existence, beyond the basic need to survive. The bee's survival needs are too pertinent. It cannot spend time "pondering." What remains is this essential idea: there is an identifiable difference between surviving and thriving.

The amount of time and energy invested into simple, everyday survival needs can account for an inability to thrive, as in the case of the busy bee. But equally important to this is an individual's relative awareness or sensitivity to the surrounding environment. Those who lack eyes, ears, sensory receptors, or the ability to feel compassion cannot experience their surroundings as wholly as sensitive beings. They are inherently handicapped from thriving to the same extent as more keen creatures. Disney films portray sentient animals that have the ability to surpass simple survival and take advantage of the opportunity to live. The talkative, social beings in *Bambi* and *The Lion King*—fawns, cubs, skunks, rabbits, wart hogs—have eyes, ears, proportionate brains, and similarly complex body systems; they are capable of soaking in their surroundings. The non-involved creatures—worms, centipedes, daisies, oak trees—while biologically defined as alive, are much less sensitive and cannot fully take in many of the more simple factors of the environment around them, let alone every social nuance. Plants cannot smell, hear, or taste, for that matter, so they are not associated with social capacity in these films.¹

In both *Bambi* and *The Lion King*, animals interact with one another through their ability to speak and create social systems much like

This paper was written for Carla Pugliese's senior elective English class, Nature, in the spring of 2011.

human civilizations, in which the goal of living is not just to subsist, but also to experience the surrounding environment and the figures within it. However, insects and greenery are mute figures in the background; they are present, but only going about the daily processes necessary for survival. These creatures are food for the more advanced animals, not peers. In *Bambi*, the whole forest of social animals come together to see the birth of the new prince at the beginning of the film, and again for the birth of Bambi's son at the end, but insects and plant figures are not involved in either ceremony. Almost identical to this is the presentation of Simba in *The Lion King*, when only the sentient members of the animal kingdom are present. Disney pushes even further with this when he blesses these same animals with the capacity to fall in love, or, as it is referred to in *Bambi*, to be "twitterpated." Bambi falls in love with Faline, and Simba with Nala. They do not just mate but share a stronger bond indicative of higher living—one that the simple procreating organisms cannot obtain. These animals are never portrayed as having trouble finding food or a warm place to sleep at night. They have time on their hands, and they use that time to be social and speculate about their surroundings. Simba's father, Mufasa, comments on the timeless "circle of life"—insight that does not occur to the mind without deep observation, contemplation, and analysis.²

For a similar reason, pets are often presented in film and fiction as particularly sensitive and perceptive beings. The comfort that domesticated animals rest in seems to allow them freedom above and beyond mere survival. They are fed, housed, and coddled. Cats and dogs, pets with sensory capability equal to their human companions, are considered especially personified in their ability to live life above the primal state. In *The Call of the Wild*, Jack London uses a dog as his protagonist to elaborate on this common assumption about pets: that they think, feel, and act much as thriving humans do. London emphasizes this with the way that Buck "loved to run in the dim twilight of the summer midnights, listening to the subdued and sleepy murmurs of the forest, reading signs and sounds as a man may read a book."³ This dog's apparent ability to enjoy an action unrelated to his need to survive is what sets him apart. Buck runs at twilight not to look for food, but to take in his environment, to appreciate the forest, not just to live in nature but to "read" it.

Brainpower is also a factor in an individual's potential to experience the world on a higher level. A complex brain is typically representative of more complex thought. Some brains allow animals to perceive their surroundings in an analytical way, and other brains function as no more than a control center. Jim Harrison uses the concept of brain potential in his novella *The Beast God Forgot to Invent*. Following a motorcycle accident, Joe suffers from brain damage that robs him of his speech capability, his cognitive skills, and his short-term memory. For all intents and purposes, Joe is mentally retarded. Harrison narrates, "Of course he was still technically alive, but I was beginning to think that in some ways he might have a distinct edge on the rest of us."⁴ With this, Harrison suggests that the ability to thrive is not strictly defined. While Joe may not be able to appreciate what happened the day before nor communicate with words, he sees the world as a child does, taking in and observing each of its aspects with enthusiasm. This "distinct edge" can be seen in Joe's newfound ability to discern faint sounds and small objects in the forest. He becomes more in tune with nature than any of his human friends, connecting with ease to wolf pups in the forest. In this way Joe still thrives, just not in the same way he had before the accident. This calls into question the way that humans view other animals. Harrison reminds the reader that there is a possibility that other animals experience the world with as much interest and vigor as thriving humans do, just not in the same way.

Human fascination with dolphins proceeds in a similar way. Dolphins are notorious for their extremely high mental aptitude. Their brain-to-body ratio is second only to that of humans, and they have an intricate communication system that has inspired man-made sonar systems. In one study conducted at Hunter College, bottlenose dolphins could recognize themselves in a mirror and use it to inspect various parts of their bodies. In January of 2010, researchers at Emory University declared dolphins to be 'non-human persons,' ranking second to humans in intelligence.⁵ This suggests that dolphins are capable of both thoughts and actions that are more advanced than what is necessary to remain alive. They may have morals, social codes, and their own language. The activists featured in the film *The Cove*, which documents the annual killings of dolphins in Taijii, Japan, use these and other

possibilities suggested by the observed intelligence of dolphins to suggest that these sea mammals have an equal right to life as humans—more than the cows, pigs, and chickens that are routinely slaughtered for human consumption. The notion that dolphins may experience life on the same level as humans makes their killing a more problematic act, perhaps akin to murder.⁶

Capacity, whether sensory or neurological, is not a definition of thriving. An individual who has that capacity may then make the choice to use the gift. The more individuals take advantage of the ability to experience the world around them, the more they can extract out of their time on earth. Especially in humans, whose intellectual abilities we understand the best, this choice to actually use the power to learn and value the surrounding world is more readily understood. Human thriving is rarely restricted by survival needs, but instead by comfort, routine, and everyday stress. Those who make the decision to live above and beyond these confinements are the ones who thrive the most. The most advanced and tangible ways that humans have risen to the challenge of immersing themselves in the many elements of the earth is through art and science. Art has been a form of expression for the way that different individuals perceive their surroundings as early as cave drawings in Chauvet 32,000 years ago. Science—the will to understand the workings of the world: its origins, its future and its present—has been an outlet for curious, complex animals with the time to put their advanced minds to work. The drive to be educated about the world is something associated only with animals advanced enough and willing to know more—something that has little to do with simple survival. This move beyond the instinctual flourishes in times of wealth and dwindles when focus must turn back to the primal need to find food and shelter. It was not until living conditions became stable that a new wave of introspection, experimentation, and expression, the Renaissance, could once again set these thriving individuals apart from their subsisting neighbors in the animal kingdom.

Ryan Murphy's adaptation of *Eat Pray Love* establishes this decision to elevate one's quality of life quite point-blank. The protagonist Liz leaves her middle-aged, unfulfilling life behind and chooses to travel to Rome, India, and Bali. In these places she starts a new, fresh life. Liz

defines her journey to find herself in this way: “If you’re brave enough to leave behind everything familiar and comforting...and set out on a truth-seeking journey...then the truth will not be withheld from you.”⁷ This is a textbook example of an animal identifying their life for what it is, taking advantage of that, and flourishing via sight, scent, sound, and raw intellectual experience. Liz’s journey is what other humans dream of taking on but can’t find the courage to actually execute.

Not everyone has the same conception as to what living life to its fullest really means. Timothy Treadwell’s take on this is heavily debated. What lies beneath his apparently “foolish” actions is a novel effort to make the most of his existence. As shown in *Grizzly Man*, Treadwell makes the counter-intuitive gesture of living alone amongst dangerous beasts—thousand-pound grizzlies. It is Treadwell’s escape from a life of drunkenness and lack of direction—he says of himself, “I had no life, I had no life, and now I have a life.”⁸ This new life is found in his love for the animals surviving in Alaska. He wants to know them, become their friend, watch them, and protect them. None of these things are necessary to his survival—in fact, they are evidently detrimental. He takes no precautions, refuses to use bear spray or even put up an electric fence at night. He strives to fulfill this duty as the “kind warrior” of the grizzlies so wholeheartedly that he puts his life at risk and is eventually mauled to death.⁹ But in doing so, Treadwell actually accomplishes more than the viewer of *Grizzly Man* who judges from the comfortable safety of his couch.

There are those who are blessed with the capacity to feel, see, taste, hear, or listen to the world. Then there are the even luckier creatures who along with these natural sensory resources are also gifted with brains so intricate that they can analyze their surroundings and even themselves. These creatures that do more than subsist—that paint, sing, write, think, love, listen—are the privileged ones. But don’t think that the less fortunate organisms are unimportant or dispensable. They are the backdrop that the thriving animals can observe, study, and marvel at. ●

Notes

1. James Algar, *Bambi* (Disney, 1942); Roger Allers, *The Lion King*. (Disney, 1994).
2. Algar, *Bambi*.; Allers, *The Lion King*.
3. Jack London, *The Call of the Wild, White Fang & To Build a Fire* (New York: The Modern Library, 1998).
4. Jim Harrison, *The Beast God Forgot to Invent* (New York: Grove Press, 2000).
5. Johnathan Leake, "Scientists Say Dolphins Should be Treated as Non-Human Persons," *Sunday Times*, 3 Jan. 2010. Web.
6. Louie Psihoyos, *The Cove*, 2009.
7. Ryan Murphy, *Eat Pray Love* (Columbia Pictures, 2010).
8. Werner Herzog, *Grizzly Man* (Discovery Docs, 2005).
9. Ibid.

