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Of cats, mice, and cocaine

The cats that live in our apartment share many characteristics with their owners. They eat, sleep, can be noisy, and occasionally fight. Each cat has a unique personality, just like humans and also (according to an Indian friend) cows. As with humans, they pose interesting but unanswerable metaphysical questions, such as why are they here (it was to reduce the cat load of friends with an unexpectedly large litter), what is the purpose of their life (other than to convert old furniture into very old furniture), and is there a cat heaven (with plenty of mice to eat and carpets to tear up).

With reference to the last question, a cat was recently allowed past the pearly gates and given a golfmobile to get around—followed by 12 mice, provided only with roller skates. An audit six months later found the cat very happy. "It is wonderful here," he said, and "thank God for those delicious meals on wheels."

Far from heaven, in our laboratory, we once used mice to study the action of cocaine, under the watchful eye of a mouse-friendly institutional scientific review board. Mice are exquisitely sensitive to cocaine but benefit greatly from pretreatment with clonidine. This confirms that cocaine acts at least in part through the sympathetic nervous system and explains why for many patients clonidine is the preferred antihypertensive drug, which they ingest in large quantities and also pass on to their street friends.

But to return to cats. Cats offer an irresistible opportunity for punning, as shown by Mark Twain's Catasauqua, her siblings, Cattaraugus and Catiline, her former husband, Catullus, her many catercousins, her catechism, and her catacaustic remarks. Cat healthcare bills can be catastrophic, there is no government supported medicat progamme, and there is no reimbursement for immunisation shots, declawing, and other services. Previous generations of our cats have developed diabetes requiring insulin, and various forms of renal diseases; so far we have avoided dialysis or transplantation, except for a brief episode of peritoneal dialysis some 30 years ago. The bill even then caused a man from a less developed country to explain that at home he could buy a wife for the same money.