Rats Are Different

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Abstract

JANET straightened from her intent stooping over the wiretopped lab cage. She continued to watch the rat dispassionately as she groped behind her for the high stool, hooking it with one foot and dragging it into position...
“Hier!” As I leaped inside, mumbling “Bitts,” she turned and ran back across the street, miraculously unscathed.

I stepped through the door into the rear of a little cafe, and a shell landed at the alley entrance. The concussion flattened me; shrapnel ripped ugly gashes in the pavement and walls where I had been crouching. Fragments tore through the iron shutters over the big front windows. The room was filled with plaster dust and tinkling glass.

Dazed, I looked up for my helmet, but saw instead a lady with a black shawl about her shoulders hurrying towards me, through the dust and broken glass.

“Thanks—thanks, but I’m all right,” I mumbled, rubbing my eyes and shaking my head. When I looked again there was nothing there but the dust.


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JANET straightened from her intent stooping over the wire-topped lab cage. She continued to watch the rat dispassionately as she groped behind her for the high stool, hooking it with one foot and dragging it into position. Still watching, she pulled her notebook forward, flipping it open, and fumbled in her pockets for her pen. She eased herself onto the stool and took a deep breath. At last her gaze shifted from the huddled ball of spiked white fur, with its eyes like frosted shoebuttens, its twitching and its dubious suffering, and considered her page of neat notes.

She sighed. This was the part about research that frightened her—not the hours of patient observing; not the recording of minute details; not the endless wading through others’ masters thesis;—but this, the slow unfolding of a positive generalization: one valid conclusion: one useful step forward. She reached for her pen, uncapped it, then hesitated. She’d test this step one more time.
From the shelf above her she selected a fresh wooden swab and puttied one end with food-paste. Slowly she lowered the stick through the wire webbing until the food glob hovered a scant quarter inch from the animal's nose. Again she leaned forward to watch.

The rat's pinched nostrils dilated imperceptibly. Its head drew back, its glazed eyes focusing briefly on the food. Even more deliberately than before, it nibbled, then drew away. Its head tilted, hitching the eye focus up a notch onto the bare stick above the food. The body stretched and lifted itself, standing waveringly on its haunches, sniffing the stick higher and higher until the nose collided with the wires at the top of the cage. Abruptly the rat dropped back into a shuddering crouch, pulled its body into a tight bundle of bristled fur again.

Janet wafted the food glob slowly back and forth trying to draw out another nibble. The rat's eyes remained fixed, oblivious to everything. Janet jerked the stick out of the cage and tossed it into the trash basket. NOW how many times had she obtained identical results straight through to this final test? Automatically, her mind recited the data:

“Starvation diet gradually applied. Simultaneous denials, frustrations, torments, confusions. Testings of effects—on original intelligence,—on original stamina,—on original resourcefulness.”

Janet gripped her pen and began writing swiftly . . . 

“Conclusions: Intelligence of animal no relevant factor. Constant malnourishment conditions animal to a behavior pattern which proceeds through unvarying stages: 1. frenzied attempts at escape. 2. lapses, at shorter and shorter intervals, into coma. 3. inevitable final inability to respond to food stimulus . . .”

It was so quiet in the lab that even the shifting of the rat's tiny feet created a grating, causing Janet to glance over at it. She looked back at her watch. In another five minutes, the rat would be quiet. She frowned and wrote more slowly . . .

“Generalizations: A contradiction found to exist. Conditioning to hunger, over long period, reduces animal to final state of total indifference to all stimuli, BUT, even to point of death, animal exerts final energies investigating even the frailest chance of . . .”

She put her pen down suddenly, without seeing where, so wide-eyed was her gaze that drifted off into space.

—Anonymous