Beyond the Menagerie

by Theodore Dalrymple (June 2025)

Insects and the Head of a Wind God (Joris Hoefnagel, 1590–1600)

Our house in France has been invaded for the last two years by brown marmorated stinkbugs, *Halyomorpha halys*. Like the Covid virus, this was an import from China, and appears not to have established itself in Europe until about 2010, when I first noticed it while picking blackberries. One of them would sit on a blackberry, either sucking or preparing to suck juice from it. I quickly learnt that if I did not brush it off quickly, but tried rather to pick it off, it would emit an unpleasant odour that could linger on my hands. Stinkbugs fly with a beetle-like whirring and often smack into lightshades

as if they were blind. Like many a creature, including humans, they are slightly more attractive to look at when young but grow ugly, or uglier, with age.

We have been invaded, too, by the Asiatic hornet, *Vespa velutina*, which I have learned to distinguish from the European variety, *Vespa crabro*. It is, like the economies of the Association of South-East Asian Nations, smaller and faster moving than the European, and its worst characteristic is its tendency to kill honeybees wherever it finds them. Whereas the European hornet is a protected species in France which it is prohibited to kill (except in self-defence, no doubt a law of the dead-letter variety), one is enjoined to inform the authorities if the presence of Asiatic hornets. They (the hornets, not the authorities) tend to make their nests in trees, and if you come across one, you are not supposed to try to destroy it yourself, but call the local mairie, who will in turn call a pest-controller. My experience of pest-controllers is that they love their work. They combine a respect for their enemy with the pleasure of killing in a good cause.

A third recent invader from East Asia is the box tree moth, *Cydalima perspectalis*, which arrived in Europe only in the 2000s. An explosion of this rather pretty, gold-fringed, cream-coloured moth, decimated our box trees for a year, but the recuperative powers of nature are such that a few years later you would never known that they had ever seemed near to extinction. One of the reasons for the sudden explosion of the population of recently introduced species is the absence of natural predators: potential predators shun the newcomers rather than see in them a new source of food, at least until they are, so to speak, acculturated in their new environment. In the case of Cydalima perspectalis, this freedom from predators did not last long. One of their natural predators was precisely *Vespa velutina* that arrived in Europe a little after them, and we haven’t had a population explosion since.

The taking of the sudden irruption of Asian, particularly Chinese, insects into Europe as some kind of metaphor for the tide of history, à la Tolstoy, and which now goes from east to west rather than from west to east, is tempting. Eastward the course of Empire takes its way. I suppose the arrival and flourishing of the Burmese boa in Florida might be seen in a similar light. The North American grey squirrel largely replaced the (much prettier) European red squirrel many years ago, when the tide of history was in the other direction. The brown rat spread from Central Asia at the apogee of that region's power, and subsequently replaced the black rat in Britain, which was itself introduced into the islands by the Romans.

The habit of reading human significance into animal life is so old and universal, at least in all recorded societies, that it might as well be hard-wired into our natures if it is not in actuality. Having personality, purposes and consciousness ourselves, we invest all animal life with them, though we know this to be absurd. Whenever I look at, hear or smell the detestable stinkbugs, I do not think, or rather feel, 'Poor creatures! They can't help being stinkbugs!' On the contrary, feel, though do not believe, that they are deliberately unpleasant, even though I know that the biological function of their emission of a foul-smelling liquid is to protect them from being attacked, eaten or interfered with. I feel that, with a little effort, they could be much nicer, like butterflies (though not, of course, caterpillars), dragonflies or even grasshoppers. After all, they too are insects: why can't a stinkbug be more like a ladybird?

I was sitting on my terrace the other day with an old friend who came to visit us. He is keen on the theory of evolution to explain ourselves to ourselves, and reads a lot on that subject. And it so happened that on an ivy-clad wall nearby we noticed two large lizards apparently courting. The male was larger and more dramatically coloured, bright apple green with

a sky-blue throat and jaw; the female was smaller and more drab in coloration. They were European green lizards, *Lacerta bilineata*, the latter Latin word indicating that, when young, the species has two lines running down the body.

Normally, I have found these lizards to be extremely shy: they scuttle away fast the moment one approaches or the moment that they see even the shadow of a movement. On this occasion, however, we could approach quite close to them, for they were deeply preoccupied by their courting ceremonies. We could have been kestrels or buzzards (their natural enemies) for all they cared.

The female did not move. She was approached by the male who sidled up to her. He was very near her when she turned and gave him a nip. He retreated rapidly but not completely. She did not move away. He tried again, with the same result. The female stayed still, and the male departed, this time for good. She did not move, as if she expected his return. Had she overplayed her hand, played too hard to get? Did she regret the lost opportunity? Did he think that, metaphorically speaking, there were plenty more fish in the sea, and he wasn't going to put up with her pretence of uninterest? Would he teach her a lesson.

Observing all this, my friend said, 'You can learn a lot from observing animals.'

But what, exactly, can we learn from observing animals? If we consider the comparative indifference of the courting pair of lizards to possible danger, we learn that sexual preoccupation can override all other interests, even to the exclusion of safety. But did we not know this already? Antony and Cleopatra would have told us this, and it surely wasn't news even in Shakespeare's day. Indeed, the impact of such a play is the recognition of its truth, not only about Roman generals and Egyptian queens, but about all of us. How many people has the overwhelming power of sexual attraction ruined, albeit that

its power is also necessary, at least where reproduction is not by asexual budding for the continuation of the race such as the hydrozoan, *Hydra vulgaris*? Incidentally, the success of this organism, which to all intents and purposes is immortal, is not generally taken to teach us anything—for example, the glory of clones.

Does anyone suppose that, by closely observing the lizards, anyone will become the wiser in his personal conduct or even better-informed as to human behaviour? Will any male (human male, that is) be thenceforth more circumspect or more constant in his conduct towards the females of the species, or the latter more straightforward in acknowledgment of her attraction to her pursuer? ('Wherefore says she not she is unkind?' as Shakespeare asks in a sonnet.) Once you recognise that the lizards' behaviour resembles ours in some analogical way, what do you do with this recognition? Does it count as knowledge?

Once we know that we share a third of our genome with ants, are we to conclude that we are one third ant? By the same token, are we 99 per cent, more or less, chimpanzee? If so, the one per cent difference seems to be of some importance, just as the one per cent by weight of a bathtub constituted by the plug is of some importance for its functioning. While there have been attempts to persuade us that chimpanzees (our nearest biological relatives) are but one step away from us, I cannot but feel that, at least until recently, Man's cultural achievements outweighed those of chimpanzees by quite a margin.

This does not mean that Man has secured a 'triumph' over Nature, as if Nature were the enemy of mankind. It is true that people talk loosely of 'conquering' disease or space, but these are vainglorious boasts when one considers the continuing mortality of Man and the size of the universe he inhabits. If the criterion of fitness for survival is survival itself, it is not even certain—indeed, it seems unlikely—that

man is peculiarly destined for it. On the contrary, most dinosaur species, that every schoolboy knows had a special propensity for extinction, lasted far longer than we have so far done. Because of their small brains, they were unable to adapt to new conditions and therefore deserved their extinction; it served them right for being so stupid. We, on the other hand, can adapt to anything because we are so brilliant. Well, pride still goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall. This is true both on a short and a long timescale.

The idea that animals teach us a lot about ourselves depends on what you mean by a lot. Only an obscurantist would deny that knowledge of our physiology has benefited enormously from observation of, and experimentation on, animals. The small town nearest my home in France was the birthplace of the great 19th century orthopaedic surgeon, Léopold Ollier, who was the first to demonstrate how bone grew and thereby develop bone grafting in humans, to the immense benefit of the deformed and injured. He experimented on rabbits, on the assumption that their physiology was in important respects like our own, and he was right. Many other examples could be given. No doubt there are some who would argue that our species' self-interest does not entitle it to inflict suffering on other animals, but that is another matter altogether.

In any case, medical advance, while important, is not all-important—at least for most of us, most of the time. It is true that if you listen to, or merely overhear, the conversation of people on buses and other public spaces, a great deal seems to be about what the doctor said, what the blood tests showed, when the operation is scheduled, and so forth; people seem to like to talk about ill-health, their own or that of others, as readers like to read about murder. But just as murder is not, even in our times of high crime rates (by comparison with the fairly recent past), within everyday experience of great swathes of the population, so most people

most of the time have things other than their health to think about. And animal behaviour will not guide them in their thoughts about what to do or how to react to their situation. No number of experiments on rats in a cage will illuminate the scores or hundreds of decisions that we have to take every day: only deliberation will do that, albeit that many of us are not very good at deliberation, and many of our decisions are bad and self-damaging.

To jump from watching lizards, or any of the other animals that used to be called lower, to explanations or judgments (or lack of them) about human behaviour is an attempt to disburden ourselves from the inescapable choices that we must make every day of our lives, and therefore of our moral responsibility that weighs on our shoulders like an immoveable backpack. It is not the only way to disburden ourselves, of course. Some of the greatest criminals in human history have used historical inevitability to justify their own crimes. But biological inevitability is no better than the historical kind as a motive for conduct. It is a smokescreen behind which we hide our most disreputable desires.

There is a very good reason to observe animal behaviour: namely that it is fascinating, which is to say an end, in itself. Stinkbugs are stinkbugs because they can be no other; but that is no reason why we should be what, in old-fashioned English, used to be called stinkers.

Table of Contents

Theodore Dalrymple's latest books are *Neither Trumpets nor Violins* (with Kenneth Francis and Samuel Hux) and *Ramses: A Memoir* from New English Review Press.

Follow NER on Twitter @NERIconoclast