Cuckoo about Cuckoos

by Theodore Dalrymple (September 2015)

When I was a boy I used to collect wild birds' eggs, but I think I always knew that I had no serious purpose in doing so and that the passion would not last. I had not the patience of a real ornithologist; rather I was beguiled by the joys of the chase, the beauty of the eggs and pleasures of possession. Luckily I never took the eggs of any but the commonest birds, so that my contribution to the decline of bird populations was very minor. I suppose that for every hundred boys who go bird-nesting, only one becomes a true nature-lover.

I wish now that I had taken a more serious interest in the natural world when I was young (along with many other things). I suppose this amounts almost to wishing that I had been a different person, which is absurd; but yet the wish returned to me very strongly as I read recently a most wonderful book about cuckoos, called *Cuckoo*, by the professor of behavioural ecology at Cambridge, Nick Davies.

Here I must confess to a prejudice against authors, especially very learned ones, who call themselves by diminutives of their first names, but it took only a page or two of this book for me to overcome it in this case. I read the book at a sitting, though it was nearly three hundred pages long. I have seldom read a book about nature with such unalloyed pleasure.

Part of the pleasure, perhaps, was an awareness that I was reading completely without ulterior motive, for the sheer interest of the thing, as I seldom have the opportunity of doing: dull would he be of soul who saw no fascination in the conduct of these extraordinary birds. As the author points out, the nightingale has a more beautiful song, but the cuckoo has more metaphors.

Professor Davies is the man I wish I could have been. He has studied cuckoos and performed conceptually simple but practically difficult experiments on them in the same area of fenland ten miles out of Cambridge, for more than thirty years, that is to say for half his earthly existence. I do not mean that he is a monomaniac or a man whose intelligence is a narrow beam rather than a broad one, far from it: rather he is the kind of man who is able:

> To see a World in a Grain of Sand
>
> And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
>
> Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
>
> And Eternity in an hour.

His love of nature is evident in all he writes; he is a keen admirer of Darwin (as anyone who reads him must be), and his study of cuckoos provides convincing evidence of, or at least arguments for, Darwinian evolution that is taking place at a considerably faster rate than we usually suppose. If Professor Davies has no religious belief, he is certainly a nature mystic—as indeed was Darwin—believing that the world we have inherited is full of beauty and fascination, if we would but look at it with attention.

We infuse the world with meaning because it is impossible for us as humans not to do so. A purely mechanical view of the world is thus impossible for us. We may be evolved creatures, the product of natural selection, descended from the virus or the bacterium, but we have reached a stage at which moral and aesthetic judgment cannot be eliminated from our thought or consciousness: and, since goodness and beauty are not qualities that can be found measured in Angstrom units or light years, the attempt to reduce Man to a mere physical being is destined to fail, at least in the sense that no one could live as if it were true.

Indeed, there is evidence of this impossibility in the words of Darwin himself that Professor Davies quotes in the course of his book, including the famous last words of The Origin of Species:

> There is a grandeur in this view of life… from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being evolved.

Or again:

> When I view all beings not as special creations, but as the lineal descendants of some few beings which lived long before the first of the Cambrian system was deposited, they seem to me to become ennobled.

Beautiful, wonderful, ennobled: these are not the terms of naturalism, and in my view cannot be translated successfully into the language of naturalism. Of course, Darwin didn't have to use them at all: his book would have been none the less compelling, scientifically, if he had not. But it seems to me extremely unlikely that Darwin would ever have undertaken his profound studies of animate nature without having first been convinced that it was beautiful, wonderful, and important, a word he used in a letter to the great naturalist Bateson, who first described mimicry, to describe his, Bateson's, first scientific paper. Importance is a moral quality, for something can be important only according to a scale of values; no amount of looking down a microscope or through a telescope will reveal importance, and it is as useless to expect it as it would be to use a rubber stamp to boil potatoes.

It is curious that even the most convinced evolutionists find it difficult to eviscerate their language of intention, design and moral assessment. They claim that this language is a kind of shorthand, and that it would be tedious to translate such language into a purely naturalistic one: but I suspect that this is not really quite honest, and that in fact they not only speak, but think in this shorthand. At any rate, they conceive of Evolution as if it had designs as an entity rather than an abstraction—Evolution does this, Evolution does that—when, of course, the whole point of the concept is to explain how we became what we are without resort to design, Evolution's or anything or anybody else's. And I say this as one who does not believe in any overall purpose immanent in the universe, though I concede that I cannot prove it one way or the other.

It is particularly difficult to refrain from investing cuckoos with non-natural qualities. Their behaviour seems to us outrageous, even criminal. Never mind that they have tiny brains, are presumably incapable of moral distinctions and act out of instinct. When the cuckoo chick throws the eggs of the legitimate owners out of the nest, or even worse heaves the legitimate chicks out, we feel a sense of outrage. But the cuckoo can do what Luther said that he could do: in other words, no other. When Professor Davies told passers-by that he was searching for cuckoo eggs, they assumed that he would destroy them, as being those of a vicious and parasitical creature, rather than conduct scientific

experiments to discover why it was that birds parasitized by cuckoos did not recognise cuckoos' eggs and persisted in feeding cuckoo chicks though they had actually witnessed these chicks destroying their own offspring. And, indeed, it is astonishing to see photographs of small birds feeding chicks grown to eight times their own size: we would think it absurd if we were not mildly appalled. It offends our sense of justice and decency.

Indeed, Professor Davies himself cannot refrain using words of moral evaluation when he describes the behaviour of other birds that use cuckoo-like chick-rearing techniques. He says of a bird called the honeyguide, for example, that its conduct is 'as chilling as any horror story.' Honeyguides are so-called because, in Africa, they guide humans to bees' nests, and are therefore very liked and well-respected. 'However,' writes Professor Davies, 'there is a darker side to their apparently sweet nature.' And that dark side is that the female lays its egg in the nest of bee-eaters, which are in a tunnel underground:

> The honeyguide [chick] grabs a host chick using its bill tip, then repeatedly bites and shakes its victim for up to four minutes at a time. The bites rarely cause open wounds, but lead to haemorrhaging under the skin and heavy bruising… From the time of the first attack, they take from nine minutes to over seven hours to die.

Because of the darkness, the bee-eaters do not see what is going on, 'the horror' as Professor Davies calls it, and feed the honeyguide chick even as it is killing the bee-eater chicks (I confess that here I thought of foreign Muslim clerical fanatics in England receiving social security payments even as they call for the destruction of the society that pays them). We are horrified, it is true; but all the participants in the scene are acting only according to their nature. Our horror is a sign that we have transcended nature.

No tribute of mine can do justice, though, to the fascination of Professor Davies' researches (and those of others in the field). For example, he discovered why it was that host birds continue to feed the single cuckoo chick as much as they would have fed their four legitimate chicks had they survived. The cuckoo chick makes urgent begging sounds at a much higher rate than the 'real' chicks would have done; and it is these sounds which stimulate its step-

parents to respond by finding food with which to feed it.

I had always thought of the cuckoo as an English bird: after all, the earliest known poem in English begins:

> Sumer is icumen in,
>
> Lhude sing cuccu…

but, of course, it spends only a small portion of its life in England—three months at most—and it spends most of its life in the process of migration. Oddly enough, it never occurred to me to wonder where the cuckoo spent the rest of his life. But with astonishing ingenuity, by means of satellite tracking, its pattern of migration has been traced. The cuckoo (at least the male of the species) flies from England down across Europe and North Africa, stopping on the way to feed, and either flies via West Africa or across the Sahara to the Congo, where is stays for about three months, before returning north, not necessarily by the same route as it travelled south. The cuckoo is thus as much a Congolese bird as an English one, it all depends on your perspective.

The population of cuckoos has declined by 65 per cent in Britain since 1980. I cannot claim that cuckoos have played a big part in my life before reading this book, but nevertheless I should be deeply, perhaps even disproportionately, saddened if I knew that at some time in the near future this harbinger of spring and summer would never be heard again.

Why has there been this precipitous decline in numbers? It is far greater than the decline in the numbers of the birds in whose nests cuckoos lay their eggs. The answer appears to be that, to breed successfully, cuckoos need to time their egg-laying precisely, so that their chicks hatch in time successfully to destroy their competitors in the nests. But while cuckoos migrate according to the length of days, the birds whom they parasitise nest and lay according to temperature, and since spring comes earlier now than it did (thanks to global warming), the cuckoos arrive too late to optimise their egg-laying. Of course, some other explanation may emerge.

Professor Davies provides many startling examples in his wonderful book, which I urge everyone to read, of natural selection in action. All the same, I had the nagging feeling, of which I could not quite disembarrass myself however hard I

tried, that the argument from natural selection was more logically circular than strictly empirical, and that such was the ingenuity of the human mind that it could easily find an explanation for any trait or characteristic of any creature that was compatible with natural selection. Directly opposite traits were equally explicable by it; and it is probably logically, not empirically, impossible that surviving creatures should have survived because they were selected for survival. The theory is saved from banality by differentials in survival between naturally occurring variations (and also during changes in naturally-occurring or Man-induced circumstances). Professor Davies explains beautifully why some characteristics, for example egg-markings, that are advantageous in one set of conditions, will be lost when those circumstances change so that they become disadvantageous to survival, and give examples in his magisterial book.

But why do we find a beautiful explanation beautiful?

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