

Sympathy for the Underdog

by [Theodore Dalrymple](#) (January 2023)



Self-Portrait (Inn of the Dawn Horse), Leonora Carrington, 1937-38

Hazlitt begins his essay on the pleasures of hating, published in 1826, with an account of his near-arachnophobia. He sees a spider coming towards him in his study but forbears to crush it as his forebears might have done, shooing it rather to safety under matting, which he gallantly lifts for it so that it may make good its escape. (He calls it 'the little reptile,' suggesting a somewhat shaky grasp of animal

taxonomy.) It is not that he likes spiders any the more than did his forebears, but that in the meantime there has been moral improvement, and therefore slower resort to killing a living being that rationality tells us is harmless, even useful to us. This, however, does not alter our feelings:

We give up the external demonstration, the brute violence, but cannot part with the essence or principle of hostility. We do not tread on the poor little animal in question (that seems barbarous and pitiful!) but we regard it with a sort of mystic horror and superstitious loathing.

In other words, our conduct is, or ought to be, under greater conscious control than our emotions. 'The spirit of malevolence,' says Hazlitt, 'survives the practical exertion of it.'

Like Hazlitt, I shrink from spiders, and have done so for as long as I can remember. How did I learn to dislike spiders, or was it indeed an instinct, as chimpanzees are said to be born with a fear of snakes? I don't suppose that in my childhood anyone sat me down for a serious talk and warned me to avoid spiders, in the way I was told as a young child not to speak to strangers in the street. (That lesson has become supererogatory, since nowadays children are not allowed on the street in the first place.) And since I grew up in a country in which no one has ever been died as a result of the bite of a native spider, my repulsion against them is not the result of the inculcated need for precaution or self-defence.

My fear of spiders is not so great that I cannot overcome it. I have greater fears, for example that of appearing foolish, cowardly and irrational in the eyes of others. My wife, who also does not like spiders, especially in the bath (the garden is another matter) calls on me to evacuate them. I try to do so without letting on quite how much I dislike the task. Generally, I take a large piece of paper on to which I funnel the offending arachnid, then fold it in such a way that it

cannot escape (or be harmed), and rush to the nearest window and throw it out. I assume that a fall from the first floor will not injure it: if cats have nine lives, spiders much surely have a hundred and nine. My duty has been done: I have triumphed over the spider and my dislike of it, and retained my humanity by not killing it, which would have been easy to do. I am at one with Hazlitt.

I am still puzzled by the origin of my dislike of spiders. If it is instinctual, it is either an instinct that not everyone shares (there is no reason why instincts should be universal), or it is one that is not so strong that it cannot be overcome and even replaced by a fondness for spiders.

Some time ago, I became interested in the increasing numbers of people who kept snakes or other reptiles as pets. I found this puzzling because, while I can see the fascination of snakes and lizards, they seem to lack the essential qualities that I assume people, or at any rate adults, seek in pets, namely the ability to form a personal relationship, to express affection and to have individual character. Of course, there are liminal cases: hamsters, guinea pigs and rabbits, for example, and perhaps birds. But these are warm-blooded creatures, furry or feathery, not cold and scaly. Fish are decorative and no trouble, not like the python of a patient of mine that grew so large that its owner, returning from abroad, was afraid to enter his own home. He was not being merely neurotic, though he was neurotic as well: not long ago, I read of an America lady who had been constricted to death by one of her snakes, and I also saw a case of rattlesnake poisoning in a man who lived in the suburb of an English conurbation, where the most dangerous kind of snake is usually of the metaphorical variety.

I visited the largest reptile pet-shop in the area, said to be the largest in Europe. All the customers were heavily tattooed, of course: there seems to be some kind of elective aesthetic affinity between those who mutilate themselves in

this way and a fondness for reptiles as pets—or kept animals. They were mainly bikers too (but I am not claiming that all tattooed bikers keep snakes).

A point of interest, perhaps, was that the owner of the reptile establishment was later found floating in a nearby canal, whether by accident, suicide or murder is not known, but it was rumoured that he was part of a reptile-smuggling ring, bringing rare and prohibited species into the country. It is not only the forbidden fruit that attracts, but the forbidden serpent too. At any rate, he was—according to rumour—the victim of a rival reptile-smuggling ring. How much goes on around us of which we have not the faintest suspicion or inkling!

Anyway, reptile shops also sell tarantulas as pets, the spiders with the worst popular reputation, other than black widows, perhaps. I discovered in the reptile shop what I had not previously suspected, that there are people who keep tarantulas as pets, who must either have overcome completely their instinctive dislike or fear of their eight-legged friends, or never have felt it in the first place.

The keeping of tarantulas is by no means vanishingly rare. When I typed 'tarantula as pets' into Google, 799,000 pages came up. The sites were instructive. 'In general,' said one, 'handling tarantulas is not recommended except when necessary.' This gives a new dimension to the notion of necessity. 'While keeping tarantula spiders as a pet might be exciting for some people,' said another, 'there are a large number of people who are extremely scared and creeped out just by looking at a spider. Because of this reason, they are not suitable for social environments.'

As a social, or perhaps antisocial, phenomenon, the keeping of tarantulas is surely of some interest and even significance, especially if it is becoming an ever more popular pastime, as the number of commercial outlets for tarantulas (and reptiles)

suggests. It bespeaks a society in which more people are leading isolated lives, in which they not only do they have no social life at home, but wish to have no social life at home, indeed want to protect themselves from the need or even the possibility of having one. It is possible that the keeping of a tarantula acts as an explanation, *ex post facto*, of social isolation and loneliness. People often do get cause and effect the wrong way round when they consider their own lives: for example, those who drink too much often say that they do so because their marriage broke up when, considered objectively, their marriage broke up because they drank too much.

But to return to my own dislike of spiders. Recently I observed a spider of the daddy-long-legs kind (I discovered to my surprise that there are 1800 species known, itself a tribute to mankind's collective effort to catalogue and understand the world) with a struggling little moth caught up in its web just behind a lavatory bowl. The webs of this type of spider are not miracles of geometrical construction, but untidy and randomly-spun threads without adherent properties. When a prey gets caught up in such a web, the predator spider rushes towards it and spins a thread round it, immobilising it before injecting it with venom to kill it. I watched the spider do precisely this.

Absurdly, no doubt, I felt a sense of outrage and disgust at the spider, as if it had been a moral agent and could have behaved differently, by (for example) turning vegetarian. I felt sympathy for the moth which struggled to preserve its life before giving up, even though moths not so infrequently make little holes in my jumpers, notwithstanding all the prophylactics I have tried from lavender to naphthalene (now illegal), and daddy-long-legs never do any harm either to me or to my property. I invested both creatures with mind, the first malign and cruel, the second peaceful and suffering.

Actually, I am not normally all that well-disposed to moths. I think of them as rather dull nocturnal butterflies that fold

their wings horizontally rather than vertically, though a few of them are beautiful in a restrained way, and do not have charming little knobs at the end of their antennae. The caterpillars of one species of moth, *Cydalima perspectalis*, recently killed or severely damaged all the box trees or bushes in my garden after a sudden, locust-like explosive increase in number (they are recent imports into Europe from China, like so much that we consume and that, perhaps, will end by consuming us). Individually, the adult moth is rather pretty, being cream-coloured with metallic silver or golden edging to their wings; but when they invade your bedroom by the tens of thousands your attitude to them changes. There are few more unpleasant sensations than that of moths fluttering about your head after you have just turned off your bedside lamp, causing you to flail about in an attempt to ward them off.

But my attitude to moths changes completely when they become, so to speak, the underdog, as this individual moth did once it was caught up in the spider's web. Then it had all my sympathy, though I forbore to rescue it: nature, like the law, must take its course.

How easily we assume that the underdog has virtues, more or less *ex officio*, as underdog, despite the many times that we learn or discover to our dismay that the underdog, once he becomes top dog, has (at least incipiently) precisely the same vices as the people who previously and until recently persecuted him! The small nation that is liberated from the tyranny of a larger nation immediately begins to oppress a smaller nation. How often has the first fruit of freedom for some been tyranny for others! The drive to tyrannize is a strong one that requires conscious efforts to subdue. I feel it in some small way myself, and consciously suppress, not always successfully, it when I do.

That is why we often find egalitarians to be among the most determined of dominators, who espouse in theory and at a

distance what they are unwilling or unable to practise near to themselves.

It is strange how we invest what used to be called the lower animals, until the drive for equality included even them, with moral qualities, but our judgments are often superficial. We root for the gazelle against the lion, but not so much for the warthog. This is not because the warthog is assumed to be any less capable of suffering or that it values its life any less: it is because one is beautiful and the other ugly, a shallow distinction which, if applied to justice between humans, would have the most terrible consequences. As for hyaenas (which are not called hyaenas for nothing), they are so hideous that we grant them in our minds no rights at all and would not mind if they disappeared from the face of the earth altogether, though no doubt they play some functional role in the ecology of the savannah. This is despite the fact that hyaenas can be tamed and even become affectionate pets. They are highly intelligent (which, of course, is not incompatible with being evil). They are hunters rather than scavengers, as legend would have it, and lions scavenge more from them than they from lions. Once it was discovered that females were the dominant sex among hyenas, it is surprising in these politically-correct times that their stock has not risen. But legend and aesthetic judgment outlasts fact, and in our mind a hyaena is still a hyaena.

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