The Lizards

by Theodore Dalrymple (September 2018)

Boy Bitten by a Lizard, Caravaggio, 1593-94

On the terrace of my house towards the South of France, small lizards hunt their food, mainly small insects. They themselves have their enemies and are therefore very nervous, fleeing my approach, not knowing that I wish them well. Some of them take refuge in cracks in the stone walls of the house, their heads later slowly peeking out afterwards to see whether it is safe now for them to emerge.

The lizards are of different species. The members of one these species, bright green and not very numerous, that lives mainly in the bushes and is, at ten inches long, by far the largest of them, is so shy that it is hard to catch more than a glimpse at any one time.

I feel mildly guilty or inadequate at not knowing the names of the various species and have long intended to buy a book that would enable me to name them, which is rather odd because the ability to do so would not by itself add anything real or substantial to my understanding of the world. It would be the illusion of knowledge rather than knowledge itself, unless I were to use that ability as the beginning of a deeper comprehension of lizard life.

These small creatures move with an astonishing rapidity and while I could no doubt capture them if I had a mind to do so, their speed, at least by the time they are adult, would make capture difficult. What is their infant mortality rate, I wonder; do ten, or a hundred, or a thousand, have to be born for one to survive to adulthood? Are the lizards that I observe on my terrace an elite, the survivors of a ferocious struggle that winnows out the unfit, the biological equivalent

of Schumpeter’s creative destruction?

Certainly there is a time of year when the lizards seem far less preoccupied with the external dangers that surround them and more preoccupied with their relative status among themselves. They chase one another across the terrace oblivious to the proximity of large and potentially threatening creatures such as I.

I have noticed that the larger lizard always chases the smaller, the latter giving ground and running away, often only to return and try again to take possession of the ground, to be chased once more from the field. I presume (though I do not actually know) that all this has something to do with what Darwin called sexual selection, that the triumphant lizard is the one that gets the girl, so to speak. The victor has proved his worthiness to be a mate by his larger size and superior aggression, though whether he has achieved his larger size by simply having survived longer, or by being a better and more determined hunter, I do not know. I suppose that there is someone who does know the answer to this question; if so, it must have taken years of patient and ingenious research to establish the answer. If the answer is not known, how would *you* devise a method for finding it out?

Sometimes the lizards appear actually to fight. In these contests, the larger lizard again always has the upper hand, or rather leg. It wraps itself around the smaller and seems to crush it; it bites the smaller with every appearance of viciousness. It is possible, I suppose, that what I take to be a fight is actually copulation, with sadomasochistic undertones, and the chasing that precedes it a kind of foreplay. If so, in the lizard world at least, no most

definitely does not mean, or is not taken by males to mean, no.

Just outside our kitchen we have come to recognise a small lizard that has lost its tail and has paralysed back legs. It can drag itself with surprising speed over the ground with just its front legs. Its tail is in the process of growing back, but for the moment it is merely a pointed black stump. We have come to look on it as a friend, and we think of ourselves as its protector. We rejoice whenever we see it capture and eat an ant. It is strange how we speak of it a poor little fellow, worthy of our sympathy. Do lizards really suffer? We even imagine that it is aware of our benevolence towards it.

Yesterday, it was caught by a larger, able-bodied lizard and appeared to be losing a serious fight with it. Its struggle was hopeless; it was completely in the power of the larger creature.

I decided, in the name of fairness and justice, to intervene. The larger animal was so intent on achieving victory, whatever that might have consisted of, that he was oblivious of my approach. In normal times, he would have scarpered; but even with my shadow obliterating the sun, he did not apprehend the danger. His whole attention was fixed on his handicapped conspecific.

I bent over and flicked him far away, releasing the smaller lizard with paralysed legs. He ran, or dragged himself, off in the opposite direction. Thus I interfered with the course of

nature, whatever it might otherwise have been.

There are two points to this story. The first is that I had immediately infused moral meaning into the scene. The second is that it illustrates how easily attention to small affairs may lead to disregard of things much larger and more important.

However much I told myself that it was absurd to do so, I anthropomorphised the two lizards. When you see a little lizard's head popping out of its sanctuary in a stone wall, it is difficult to not imagine it endowed with some kind of personality. As for the larger of the two lizards, I could not help thinking, 'Why don't you pick on someone your own size, you bully?'—as if lizards ought to fight by a saurian version of the Marquess of Queensbury Rules, and always give the other lizard a chance.

Of course, the infusion moral meaning in such a scene depends on at least a degree of affection for one of the protagonists. If, for example, I saw a large and a small scorpion engaged in a fight, I would think of what Henry Kissinger said of the Iran-Iraq war: it's a pity that both of them can't lose. (Actually, they both did—or at least, both the populations did.)

It is very difficult to think of the animate world without the idea of intention, with which we invest even lowly animals For example, the other day I rolled a largish stone over, under which there was an ants' nest. There were almost as many eggs as ants, and sudden exposure to the sunlight galvanised the

ants into frantic activity. Within a very short time they had managed to transport the eggs—all of them—under another nearby stone.

One could not witness this without ascribing intention or purpose to the ants: the ants were *trying* to save the eggs. Their co-ordination and determination were admirable. How they all knew precisely what to do is beyond me, though I do not go so far in my admiration as to say that I wished human society were as well-organised as that of ants. That is the wish of every totalitarian and I do not share it.

I do not think that there is anybody who does not ascribe intention to animate beings, so saturated with the idea of intention is our conscious thought. Even as a biology pupil, watching a mere amoeba moving away from a noxious chemical simulant, I ascribed intention to it in a way I should not have done to, say, the antics of metallic phosphorus thrown into water. However much we protest that the dung beetle is an automaton, we still say that it is trying to roll its dung while it fails to manage it.

Curiously enough, even militant evolutionists who are firmly against the notion of intention in Nature as a whole find it difficult altogether to avoid the language of intention, not merely in the case of animals, but in that of the process of evolution itself. They speak of evolution as if it was an active, thoughtful, purposive being with a personality. Evolutions tried this, prevented that or decreed the other, they say.

We are not entitled to conclude from this, however, that militant evolutionists really do imbue evolution with purpose or direction. We are often prisoners of our metaphors, as I once said to a man called Howard Marks, an Oxford-educated large-scale drug-smuggler and campaigner for the legalisation of cannabis. ('That is a metaphor!' he rejoined, to which I could only say, 'Touché!') Still, I think anthropomorphisation is a more or less ineradicable feature of human thought with regard to animals, however much we struggle against it.

As I stood over the lizards engaged on combat (if that is what it was), I could not but think of the famous lines from *King Lear*: As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods:/ They kill us for their sport. I was as a god to the lizards, did they but know it, but they paid me no heed because their minds, or whatever you call the processes in their central nervous system, were entirely absorbed in their tiny own affairs.

Was the whole situation not emblematic of the human condition? Most of us are so profoundly involved in our daily affairs that we are oblivious of the dark storm clouds that may be gathering around us. I worry about what to have for dinner on the evening before the stock market collapses and thereby impoverishes me. I fret at the insufficiency of salt in the soup but there is a fatal cancer growing in me. I rejoice at a sports result but tomorrow am to be killed in a road accident. I am reminded of the Romanian peasant saying that I once read somewhere (oddly enough, I think it was in the *Times Literary Supplement*): The whole village is on fire, but grandmother wants to finish combing her hair.

We all want, metaphorically-speaking, to finish combing our hair before the whole village burns down. The human mind is

not capacious enough to take in everything in the world (and even things beyond the world, like asteroids) and ascribe to them an order of importance according to some objective scale of values. It may be necessary to see the larger picture, but it is also necessary to see all heaven in a grain of sand. There is no point in worrying over forces so overwhelming that one can do nothing about them and against whose operation one is wholly powerless. It does not flatter our self-importance to be as a fly to a wanton boy, but it has its consolations.

Where there is no power, there is no responsibility. Power without responsibility is the harlot's prerogative, but responsibility without power is both the neurotic's and the humbug's charter.

To assume a responsibility where you have no power is to invite yourself to indulge in high-flown rhetoric which may be gratifying to yourself but does no good and is likely to do harm in so far as rhetoric is itself a factor in human affairs. Responsibility assumed without power promotes intellectual and emotional dishonesty because it results in a simulacrum of guilt which is not really guilt at all, but exhibitionism.

We cannot attend to everything in its order of importance according to an objective criterion, and even if we could it would be destructive of civilisation, which is composed of many things. No one could not possibly say that a good meal was more important than the halting of hostilities between warring nations, but does that mean that no one is entitled to enjoy a good meal until hostilities between nations and the million other evils that the world is heir to, each of them more important than a good meal, have been halted?

We need to steer a path between utter selfishness or self-absorption on the one hand, and utter self-abnegation or disdain for the small change of life on the other. Where and how the line should be drawn is always a matter of judgment. You can’t blame lizards for sometimes getting it wrong.

Theodore Dalrymple’s latest book is @NERIconoclast