

The Meaning of Life

by Theodore Dalrymple (October 2014)

It always intrigued me when I practised as a doctor to observe how Man is always but a slight injury or biochemical disturbance away from paranoia. It is almost as if paranoia were always bubbling away under the smooth surface of normal social relations, like lava below the earth's crust, waiting just some slight crack or fissure for the opportunity to emerge and cover everything. The list of possible physiological causes of paranoia is legion.

No doubt the evolutionary biologists (or should I say the biologists of evolution?) have an explanation – as they have an explanation for everything. The ability instantly to explain everything and its opposite, for example why one species should be monogamous while another, apparently very similar, should indulge in the utmost promiscuity, is usually taken not as a strength but as a weakness in a theory; moreover the element of circularity in the theory of natural selection, that animals survive in greater numbers because they are better fit to survive in such numbers, as measured by the numbers in which they actually *do* survive, has struck many people. And yet Darwinian theory is clearly not empty, especially since the advent of modern genetics. The trouble comes, I think, when the theory is extended beyond its field of application or competence.

Anyway, it is easy to see that in a biosphere plentifully supplied with enemies, competitors (even if the competitors are genes, as some claim, rather than organisms), predators, parasites, etc., it is obvious that a paranoid stance, if not paranoia itself, might be advantageous. That is why every creature, every creature at any rate than can be said truly to have behaviour, exhibits nervousness. Even the king of the jungle has dethronement to fear; the price of life is eternal vigilance (and even then it's not guaranteed).

So perhaps it is *non-paranoia* rather than paranoia that needs to be explained, just as it is wealth and not poverty than stands in need of explanation. How is it that I have been able (so far) to go through life on the assumption that no one is trying to do me down, that no enemies are lurking for me anywhere, and that I have nothing to worry about even when people respond in an insulting fashion to things that I have written? When I can't get through to speak to anyone at my bank, my telephone or electricity company, I know that they have nothing against *me*: it is simply that they are trying to provide the least possible service for the maximum of charges. This is not paranoia, it is observable fact, or at least reasonable inference from observable fact.

Another source of human paranoia – I am not now talking of that which is produced by physiological disturbance – is the assumption that other people's thoughts are similar to ours, that is to say the thoughts to which we are especially and uniquely privy. Here I do indeed assume, dear reader, that you are like me, and that you have thoughts that you feel you ought not to have (I don't need to enumerate them, I think, but even if I did need to do so I wouldn't), thoughts that are disguised or not acted upon. I know that I habitually play the hypocrite and since I assume that you are like me, I assume that you too often play the hypocrite (thank goodness). It means that if I have hostile thoughts towards others that I never express, others must have hostile thoughts towards me that they never express. To suppose otherwise is to suppose that I am much worse than, or completely different from, others, which naturally I am reluctant to do. But this means that in a world which is, or might be, full of hostile thoughts towards us that we know nothing about, it is easy, if we dwell upon the situation, to become paranoid.

And because our thoughts and actions are so deeply impregnated with intention and purpose, we over-ascribe intention and purpose elsewhere, not only to our fellow humans, but to all kinds of creatures and even to inanimate objects. Which of us, for example, has never tripped over a stone or stubbed his toe on it, and not at least thought of revenging himself upon it for the indignity or pain it has inflicted on us? I have actually done so, though usually with disastrous effect: to stub one's toe on a stone once may be regarded as a misfortune, but to kick it in rage a second time looks like stupidity.

Of course we know perfectly well that the stone has no intentions or purposes, let alone the ability to suffer if we kick it or hurl into the distance it as far as we can, but yet we still feel that it did it on purpose: that is to say, deliberately put itself in the way of our foot just as it knew we were coming. I don't resort to swearing very much, and I should guess that on half the occasions that I do so it is to insult and otherwise humiliate inanimate objects.

With animate beings, not surprisingly, we go further: we endow them with personalities and characters. We do this almost without thinking, much as we automatically ascribe characteristics to people's faces without a separate thought-process, such as 'I wonder what that scar down the side of his cheek means?'

The other day I was driving on a small road in some woods when an eagle suddenly glided majestically in front of the car. I at once gave it a character, and try as I might I cannot disabuse myself of it, though I know it to be preposterous.

The eagle (I thought) was a serious bird, without a sense of humour and not much fun to be with; it had no small talk. It looked frightfully earnest, or serious rather (not the same thing, alas), and utterly concentrated on its own affairs, not to be diverted from them. It was also an upright and implacable bird – upright in the moral sense – and if it caught little animals it was only for their own good, to impose order on their anarchic ways, and to punish them for foolishness in running about.

That same evening a little sparrow flew through the window into my bedroom, landed on the top of my Louis Seize wardrobe and chirruped a little. Then he flew to the headboard of my bed and chirruped a bit more. Then, as if he had just come to wish me good evening, he flew out of the window again.

What a nice, friendly, amusing little chap he was! I think he had a sense of humour. He gave me a sense of company. Where the eagle was majestic, he was down to earth, perhaps a little ironical. He was full of life and I wished he had stayed longer (the eagle, if he ever condescended to enter my house, would not deign to talk to me and would outstay his welcome, like a boring hospital visitor, and yet he would manage to convey that the fault was mine). Of course, I know nothing real of the habits of sparrows and perhaps they are ferociously competitive birds, who like nothing better than to take the food out of each other's beaks and ruin each other's nests out of evolutionary spite; but I prefer to think that my sparrow liked me as much as I liked him.

Outside my kitchen door there is a terrace where, in the summer, the lizards play – and fight. They are not large lizards, maybe four or five inches long, and some of those inches mere tail. Sometimes I see them catch a large ant and crunch it in their jaws. At a certain time of year though, they fight ferociously, curling up and wrestling with one another, rolling around with considerable violence (considering their size).

They desist from time to time in their struggle and stand staring at one another, breathing very fast. I know their brains are very small and of the most primitive, but I find it hard to believe that they are not both very angry with each other, almost morally indignant. Then, after a short break, between the rounds as it were, they start again.

I can usually tell in advance who is going to win. One of the two seems almost to be reticent, or more on the defensive; he is fighting not so much to win (he knows that he won't), but for the sake of honour. To retire from the field without having put up a fight would be a fatal blow to his self-esteem. By the time he runs away, he (I assume it is a he) can honestly say to his wife, when she disparagingly asks him whether he is a lizard or a mouse, that he is a

lizard. He has nothing to be ashamed of.

The victor, usually the larger of the two, looks extremely pleased with himself as the sole occupant of the paving stone, his opponent having slunk away in defeat. The victor's head is raised, he is the monarch of all he surveys. I feel like Gulliver as he watched the battle between Lilliput and Blefescu. I could easily crush the proud victor of the saurian fight with one tramp of my foot and put an end to his ridiculous and intolerable pride: but then I think how easily crushed I could be, and I reprove myself.

Just beyond the terrace is a bed of lavender, and here, during the season, I can happily spend hours (well, minutes at any rate) looking at the butterflies and other insects that visit the flowers constantly. I particularly like the humming-bird moths, for they are not only beautiful but somehow their darting movements from one flower to another (that makes it difficult to catch them on camera, or rather difficult for *me* to catch them on camera) somehow symbolise the bittersweet transience of life.

Several different kinds of bees visit the lavender, which seems as a consequence to emit a cheerful buzzing, nothing loud or vulgar but pleasing on the ear. One might almost think the lavender a kind of heaven but, alas, there lurks within it an evil snow white spider that turns it into a hell for a small number of bees. This spider looks like something from a science fiction film, its whiteness somehow being sinister where that of the butterflies is charming.

This spider is much smaller than the bees; he (or she) spins no web but rather hides and then pounces, sticking its venomous palps (for such I suppose they must be) into the bee and paralysing it. Then it sticks to the bee, which hangs helpless from the lavender in its grip, while the latter sucks the life juices out of it and turns it into a dried exoskeleton.

Disgusting! If I could rescue a bee in this situation I would, but unfortunately the bees have always been dead by the time I reach them. It is too late. Besides, though I attribute evil to the spider and goodness to the bees, I also have the semi-pagan feeling that Nature must know best, and to interfere with the activities of the spiders would be somehow to upset Nature's carefully thought-out balance.

But, on the other hand, do not the spiders know that there is a world-wide bee crisis, a shortage of bees! Could they not, should they not, fix on other prey, less ecologically important, than bees? There are plenty of beetles around, for example. Selfish, selfish spiders! They are like men, thoughtlessly using up the resources of the world for their own current convenience, with ne'er a thought for the morrow.

On the one hand I know perfectly well that this habit of infusing meaning, intention and purpose into the living world around me is not a guide to the literal truth of that world; spiders are not wicked any more than bees are good, or lizards triumphant. But I should nevertheless feel I had lost something important if, as is very unlikely, I ever managed to expunge this way of thinking entirely from my mind. The strange thing is that I have noticed that the hardest of hard-line evolutionists never quite manage it either. They, too, describe the world by reference to function, purpose and intention. I suppose they would say we have evolved to be like this.

Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is