The Mystery of Life and Mr Toad

by Theodore Dalrymple (August 2022)



At the Wheel, Philip Mendoza, 1983

My wife does not like toads, and in this she is at one with the great majority of mankind. It is not therefore surprising that when she finds one in the garden, large, fat and sluggish, she involuntarily lets out a little scream of disgust or horror. Sometimes, she asks me to remove it to somewhere out of sight and therefore out of mind.

Toads have a bad reputation on the whole. 'You toad!' is, as far as I know, never a compliment. When the poet, Philip Larkin, protested against the tyranny of paid employment, he wrote:

Why should I let the toad work
Squat on my life?

The choice of the toad as the odious squatter on his shoulder was hardly coincidental: there are plenty of other monosyllabic creatures of doubtful reputation – rat, mouse, snake, pig, wolf, fox, snail, slug, wasp, shark—that he could have chosen, but somehow only toad is exactly right.

My own attitude to toads however, is slightly different, indeed I have a soft spot for them.

A toad once had a certain influence on my intellectual development. I was on a nature ramble with my class—I must have been not more than nine or ten—when I came across a toad with something that proved to me that Nature, notwithstanding its beauties, was not altogether benign. The poor toad was being eaten alive by maggots that were consuming its head. The toad was still alive but scarcely moving; obviously it could do nothing to defend itself against this appalling attack.

I told the teacher what I had seen, and he replied that I had been imagining it: in effect that I had not seen what I had seen. Perhaps he wanted to prevent nightmares. I kept my counsel, I did not argue; in those days, one did not argue with teachers, and on the whole I think that this was a good thing.

Nevertheless, I could not bring myself to deny the truth of what I had seen, and the confident denial by the teacher taught me that authority is not always right, that one must sometimes hold fast to the evidence of one's eyes (or other perceptions or reasonings), while bearing in mind that one may also be wrong, for one's own authority may be as deceptive as that of someone else.

It was only many years later that I learned of the creature called the toadfly, *Lucilia bufonivora*, a blowfly that lays its eggs directly on the skin of toads, especially near

openings such as the nostrils or eyes, the hatched larvae then burrowing into the toad's tissues. A toad parasitised in this fashion is almost always certain to die, though I am glad to say that toadflies are not so numerous as to threaten the survival of toads as a species. Toads and toadflies live in a kind of stable equilibrium; it is not in the interest of the latter to multiply themselves at such a rate that they consume their source of food. But the overall moral of my story remains that one ought to retain a certain confidence in the evidence of what is before one's face, even against the denial of supposedly higher authority, while at the same time trying to retain a certain modesty about it and without turning oneself into the highest, indeed the only, authority.

The other toad that was important in my intellectual or spiritual development was my favourite character from *The Wind in the Willows*, namely Mr Toad, or Toad of Toad Hall. He it was who sang that hymn of self-praise that, once read, is never forgotten:

> *The clever men at Oxford*
> *Know all there is to be knowed.*
> *But they none of them know half as much*
> *As intelligent Mr Toad.*

Toad was morally instructive because he is boastful, arrogant, foolish and vainglorious—but we love him not in spite of, but because of his defects of character. It is true that he lacks malice, but even so no one would hold him up as an example to be followed: yet a world without a Mr Toad would be the poorer for his non-existence. By this means we learn a certain tolerance and come to see that virtue is not the only thing that we value in a person. It teaches us the error of puritanism. If everyone were uniformly good, the uniformity, not the goodness, would be intolerable to us.

Nowadays when I find a toad, I am inclined to pick it up and place it on an outside table where I can contemplate it more

closely. The toad, it seems to me, always has a melancholy rather than a terrified air, like someone who expects nothing good to come of this life. There is also something a bit self-important about him, like a banker lamenting the economic state of the world over a *digestif* and cigar after a copious dinner of the kind that will eventually kill him. The toad is a sad creature, perhaps aware that no one really likes it. The poison in its skin doesn't really have to be very strong: its is too ugly to be appetising in any case.

The toad, however, is possessed of one beautiful feature, as kind persons are inclined to say of otherwise ugly girls, and that is its eye, one of the most beautiful eyes in Nature. Orwell, in his essay *Some Thoughts on the Common Toad*, noticed this:

> *a toad has about the most beautiful eye of any living creature. It is like gold, or more exactly like the golden-coloured semi-precious stone which one sometimes sees in signet rings, and which I think is called a chrysoberyl.*

If I had to describe the toad's eye, I should call it an amber behind which a light is shone. It is almost as if the soul of the toad lit up its eye: and the toad's thoughts and feelings lie too deep for any other mode of expression.

Of course, Shakespeare also noticed the beauty of the toad's eye. 'Some say the lark and loathèd toad changed eyes,' says Juliet, the dull eye being in the beautiful creature, and the beautiful eye in the dull (or worse) one. And like the aforementioned kind person who notes the ugly girl's one good feature, Duke Senior in *As You Like It* says:

> *… adversity*
> *Which like the toad, ugly and venomous,*
> *Wears yet a precious jewel in his head.*

Although the toad never seems particularly put out by my handling of him—it has, after all, low expectations of the

world—I do not detain it long, but replace it carefully, if not exactly where it came from, at least somewhere I think suitable for toads. It is neither grateful nor ungrateful for this and moves away only slowly. It does not appear even to think that it has had a happy escape.

A peculiar and perhaps silly thought always enters my head when I consider closely a toad on my table, namely, 'Poor creature, it cannot help being a toad, in fact it can't help being anything else but a toad.' And this thought naturally brings me to wonder about the mystery in human life of *becoming* what we are. It is nothing to our credit that we are born human, we had no say in the matter: and, for some unspecified length of time, we had no say either in what we would become. Many things were excluded to us by circumstance or genetic endowment. We had little say in the matter of height, for example: as the Gospel of St Matthew says, Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature? And yet we are not, or do not think of ourselves as being, some kind of bacterium in a Petri dish, manipulated by an all-powerful laboratory scientist who regulates our growth by altering our chemical environment as he wishes.

Uniquely in the Universe as far as we know, and certainly on Earth, we deem ourselves in part responsible for what we are or become. Not everyone agrees. Determinists will say of us (though not unusually of themselves, unless they are trying to evade or avoid legal proceedings against them) that our own contribution to our character is of the same order as every other influence upon us, for we can influence ourselves only by means of what we are already possessed of, and what we are possessed of can be traced back causally to things over which we had no control, that is to say our genetic endowment and the circumstances into which we were born. We are thus no more responsible for ourselves than in the toad on my table. If we are prepared to say 'Poor toad, it cannot help being what it is,' we should be prepared, by the same measure, to say, 'Poor

us, we cannot help being what we are.' Cassius was diametrically wrong when he said 'The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars/ But in ourselves, that we are underlings.' If the fault is not one hundred per cent in our stars, the remainder is in our DNA. Between them, they settle our hash. For apart from genetics and environment, what else is there or could there be?

And yet this does not feel right or even realistic. It is true that in explaining someone's character we often refer to its formative influences, but we do not—because in fact we cannot, being the kind of creatures that we are—believe that the formative influences explain all, that the person had no margin of manoeuvre and was really no more animate, possessed of no more agency, than a billiard ball being struck by another billiard ball. If we did so, unless we claimed to be of a completely different order of being from that person, we should have to regard ourselves in the same light, and that we cannot do.

In general these days among philosophers and neuroscientists there is a tendency to decry or at least to discount the importance of that mysterious quality known as consciousness or self-consciousness, arguing that it is some kind of epiphenomenon, a sideshow to what is *really* going on. Of course, Freud rather did the same with his unconscious, whose workings he rather mysteriously (and uniquely in the history of the world, according to himself) managed discover in himself, without, so to speak, the assistance of another Freud to help him. There is here a parallel with Marx who, bourgeois, managed somehow to escape the otherwise inevitable deformation of thought caused by being bourgeois.

But this time, say the philosophers and neuroscientists, it is different, this time we have scientific proof that consciousness is a delusion or epiphenomenon which ought to be cut down to size (Freud wasn't a real scientist), being of no determining importance in human life. I have a number of books

that argue precisely this.

I find it all rather peculiar. Could one discover that consciousness was an epiphenomenon without the aid of consciousness? And if one could, what importance would such a discovery have? *Ex hypothesi* it could change nothing. From a Darwinistic point of view, the supposed irrelevance of consciousness is strange as well. One would have to argue that, in Man's phenomenal biological spread over the whole earth, consciousness played no part. (This is not to say that Man is the final triumph of Evolution. I think it very unlikely that we shall survive as long as the pea-brained dinosaurs.)

Well, someone might answer, what is *your* solution to the mystery of human self-creation? First, I would point out that it is not necessary to have the right answer to know that an answer to a question is wrong. Second, I would happily admit that I have no answer to this mystery, that to me it is still a mystery. I would go farther: I am glad that it is still a mystery, for if it were not, whoever had the solution would be sure to abuse it to aggrandise himself. We are creatures who are bound to seek self-understanding, but are equally bound to fail.

From this paradox I think, though I cannot know for sure, that the toad is free. Perhaps, sitting involuntarily on my table, it is descanting on its own toadiness, as Richard III descanted on his own deformity.

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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.

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