Web Sight

By Theodore Dalrymple

Is it not curious how we infuse the natural world with meaning and purpose? We think of the cuckoo and the rattlesnake as bad, but the giant panda as good. Even the sternest evolutionists often resort to language that suggests Evolution as some kind of god: Evolution decided this, or Evolution decreed that. We can't get purpose out of our minds, even when we firmly believe that there is none.

Yesterday evening, I spent an hour observing a bee that had been caught by a single thread, so it seemed, of a spider's web. It struggled to get free, but the more it struggled, the more it was caught up. It was strange that the bee, so large and seemingly powerful by comparison with the thread, should not have been able to escape. But a spider's web is the strongest material known, weight for weight; and the bee, buzzing from time to time, caught one leg and one wing on another thread.

Should I rescue it or let nature take its course? What would have been good for the bee would have been bad for the spider,

which was hiding out of sight in the laurel bush, biding its time. Bees are good, of course, being so busy, and spiders are bad, being so cunning, underhand, and venomous. And was the bee suffering, or were its struggles merely the automatic response of a mere mechanism? Certainly, it seemed by its struggle to value its own life, but that is pure anthropomorphism at its most sentimental.

And yet, supposing that we found a child picking the legs and wings off a bee, would we not tell it to desist? Why would we tell it to desist? To save the bee from further suffering? Macaulay said that the Puritans forbade bearbaiting not because it gave pain to the bear, but because it gave pleasure to the spectators; I think a similar reason applies here.

The child torturing an insect, we think, is deriving pleasure from its cruelty, and since habit becomes character, we want to nip such cruelty in the bud before it become habitual and then characterological. The fact is, alas, that there is a larva of cruelty in most human hearts, and we do not want it to develop into the imago of cruelty.

Should I have rescued the bee? I did not, though there are very few bees this year in France, and insects in general are much fewer than usual. There will be no honey this year, so our beeman tells us, so he will probably drink even more *pastis* than usual (he is at the café with the same regularity as Immanuel Kant took his walking in Konigsberg). If any in Europe read this, I advise them to buy honey futures, if such financial instruments exist, for the price of real honey—not the artificial Chinese variety that has come on the market—is bound to rise soon, as gold has risen.

As to the reasons for the penury of insects, the beeman said it was multifactorial (he actually used the word). Bees have been attacked by an invasion of Asiatic hornets, another Chinese import, which eat them. If we see a nest of Asiatic hornets, we have to call the special local official dedicated

to their elimination; European hornets, by contrast, are a protected species, and one is not permitted to destroy their nests, or even individuals, unless they pose a direct threat, which they seldom do except in the imagination.

But back to the trapped bee. I decided that one bee the less, even in these bee-less days, would make no difference, and the truth is that I found the spectacle fascinating, so I did nothing. After an hour, I went to do something else, and after another hour returned to the site: By now the bee was all but exhausted and had almost given up the struggle.

It occurred to me that the web might be uninhabited, like the houses of a town in terminal decline, but when, next morning, I returned, the spider was there. The bee was by now what looked like a charred or mummified corpse, very dry; the spider looked plump and prosperous, well-fed. Presumably it had sucked the juices from the bee once it had become motionless from poison and exhaustion.

The spider was quite handsome (for a spider). The further south you go—in the northern hemisphere—the more vivid small creatures become. I took out my spider book to identify it, the passion for identification being another strange human quirk, like that of infusing the world with purpose, and as if identification were knowledge in itself. The spider was *Aculepeira ceropagia*, which spins its webs on bushes and has a little hidden cupola in which it may take refuge until the coast is clear. It injects a venom into its prey that paralyzes it and also contains digestive juices. Oddly enough, it is an omnivore, in the sense that a quarter of its diet is now thought to be pollen, whose granules are too large to have found their way into the digestive tract of the spiders by accident. (How I admire researchers who have patiently studied the creature and deduced this!)

Handsome the spider might have been, but still I couldn’t warm to it. Its handsomeness was insidious, though not as bad as

the little white spiders we have that look like something out of Edgar Allan Poe. How I came to the sub-Orwellian conclusion that six legs (insects) good, eight legs (arachnids) bad, I do not know, but I came to it a long time ago. (I am not alone. No one ever made a movie of the *Invasion of the Giant Beetles*.) We cannot fully account for who we are and how we came to be as we are.

Should I have saved the bee? My first inclination was to do so, on moral grounds. Entrapment, after all, has a bad connotation. In Britain it is illegal, in the United States not precisely illegal, but not held in the highest esteem, either. The bee was doing nothing wrong when it touched the web's thread. On the contrary, it was spreading pollen and gathering nectar.

But the world is not a vast morality play. Over-moralizing it is as foolish as under-moralizing it. There is no alternative to judgment.

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