A Hornets' Nest of Morality

by Theodore Dalrymple (February 2016)

I was in bed the other night reading Chekhov, my wife asleep beside me, when a specimen of *Haematopota pluvialis* flew into the interior of my bedside lampshade and started to clatter about in it before settling down on the lamp-stand. I looked at this creature both fascinated and horrified: for *Haematopota pluvialis* is the common horsefly, the female of the species being a bloodsucker, usually of horses and cows but sometimes of men. Her bite is very unpleasant and she injects an anticoagulant into her mammalian victim, sucking up the spilled blood immediately afterwards in a most disgusting way. As far as I know, the common horsefly transmits no disease to Man, but being stung by it is unpleasant enough, where there are dairy cattle it reduces the output of milk, and a few closely-related species are implicated in the spread of disease, including a fatal disease of camels.

I observed the fly closely. From a certain point of view it was admirable. Large as flies go, its tapered abdomen was extremely neat, dark with whitish stripes. Its head, which it swivelled from side to side as if taking in the world around it preparatory to an attack, was mainly composed of large compound eyes. It (or perhaps I should say she) also had nasty-looking biting equipment on its head. It swept its forelegs over its head like a cat washing its paws, and then used its rear legs to sweep over its abdomen. I don't know how or why, but this insect gave me the impression of intelligence: unlike, say, the silly moths that fluttered round the light or tried to get into bed with me – a live moth between the sheets gives an unpleasant fluttering sensation and is surprisingly difficult to find and eject.

My splendid volume, *Insects and Other Arthropods of Medical Importance*, edited by Kenneth V G Smith and published in 1973 by the British Museum (of natural history) tells me much of interest about this group of flies, which includes 3000 species. For example they are – or at least they were then, in 1973 – believed to have evolved in South America and spread to other continents *pari passu* with ungulate mammals. The decline of the latter, together with land drainage, cultivation and soil erosion, has led to the relative decline of these flies, a decline that, notwithstanding the arrival of the fine specimen of

Haematopota pluvialis in the shade of my bedside lamp, the book suggested was likely to continue. Could anyone truly lament the decline of these flies, even as a sign also of the increasing rarity of such ungulate creatures as the rhinoceros upon which they prey? And of horseflies in general we learn that they 'follow moving objects, such as grazing animals, men on foot or on horseback, cars and even trains, up to about 40 km/h (25 mph).' A formidable beast then from which there is no point in trying to run away, whose speed is all the more surprising when you consider its size.

Though, or perhaps because, the fly seemed intelligent, as if choosing its moment to attack, I felt that I could not just let it be: it would not spare me merely because I had spared it. Respect as I might an insect that can fly at 40 kilometres per hour (for how long a distance *Insects and Other Arthropods* did not say), it was my enemy. I found an insecticide spray and directed it at the horsefly.

To my alarm the spray galvanised the creature into frantic activity for a while, flying at 40 kilometres an hour, or so it seemed, within the compass of the lampshade and making a terrific noise. Then suddenly it leapt out of the shade and dropped dead like a stone into the wastepaper basket at the side of my bedside table.

As is so often the case, a line from Shakespeare came to mind and raised a question:

> As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods;
>
> They kill us for their sport.

Was I a wanton boy who had I killed for sport rather from necessity or self-protection? It would be dishonest to deny that I enjoyed spraying the insect, persuading myself while doing so that it had got what it deserved, morally-speaking, as if it had unpleasant habits not from nature but by choice. I was protecting myself from a potential bite, but safety was not the source of my pleasure in its destruction.

Then, unable to sleep for a time, I began to examine the question of whether it was possible to be cruel to insects. The question seemed to me not quite straightforward.

Clearly I cannot be cruel, though I can be destructive, towards the inanimate objects before me at this moment. I could destroy the screen of my computer in a fit of temper, for example, but I should not have been cruel towards it. Does it follow that a being has to be sentient before one can be cruel to it? And what degree of sentience is necessary? Could one be cruel towards an amoeba, for example, that certainly moves away from noxious stimuli but surely cannot – we presume – have much in the way of self-awareness?

Cruelty, it seems to me, is an unstable mix of the intention of the alleged perpetrator and the degree of sentience and self-awareness of the object of the perpetrator's actions. The degree of cruelty depends not so much on the reality of the suffering inflicted as on the perpetrator's intentions and on what he *imagines* the object of his actions feels or is capable of feeling. One might construct a 2 x 2 table with four cells:

1. A person does not intend to inflict suffering and does not in fact inflict it;
2. A person does not intend to inflict suffering but does in fact inflict it;
3. A person intends to inflict suffering and does in fact inflict it;
4. A person intends to inflict suffering but does not in fact inflict it.

I mean by intention to inflict suffering, the infliction of suffering for its own sake, not the infliction of suffering incidental to some other purpose, such as the vaccination of a dog. Those who fall into categories 3) and 4) could be described as cruel, but not those in 1) and 2). It is therefore possible for someone to be cruel to an amoeba, though without inflicting suffering.

In practice, the world is more complex than my simple table suggests. A person who wishes the means wishes the ends (if they are known), and so an experiment on an animal can be cruel even though its primary purpose is to find something out and even though the suffering inflicted is not directly aimed at. Whether the purpose justifies the cruelty is a matter of judgment. Where wantonness begins is unclear, but is always a temptation. I remember as a student attending lectures about experiments in which baby rhesus monkeys were raised by mothers made of wire and wrapped in blankets, and it seemed to me that the knowledge gained from these experiments could not possibly justify the suffering inflicted to obtain it.

I fell asleep thinking of the intelligence of insects. The verandah on which I work is shaded by a tiled roof held up by wooden beams. I noticed three days previously that hornets had found or bored a hole in one of the beams and made their nest in it. I watched them come and go; and the fact is that no one loves a hornet.

On the subject of hornets *Insects and Other Athropods* is almost silent. The chapter on the *Hymenoptera* – the ants, bees and wasps – is very short, though it contains the interesting fact that ants have been known to bite miners 1900 feet underground. I never knew that. The bibliography at the end of the chapter includes intriguing titles such as 'The spread of a fierce African bee in Brazil,' 'Pharaoh's Ants as pathogen vectors in hospitals,' and, of most interest to me in this context, 'Fatalities caused by multiple hornet stings in the territory of Papua and New Guinea.' But of hornets in general there was nothing.

My mother communicated her fear of wasps to me for she had once nearly died of anaphylactic shock as a result of a wasp sting. Her life was saved by a doctor in Spain who gave her an injection of adrenaline (I was three years old at the time). Ever afterwards, and with good reason, she fled wasps and I became her principle defender against wasps. Reasoning that the hypersensitivity to wasp-stings might be hereditary, I developed myself a fear of wasps and even more of hornets, though not of bees.

I found a twig that exactly fitted the hole in the beam leading to the hornets' nest. I am afraid it gave me great satisfaction to imagine the consternation among the hornets trapped inside. Hornets that had been outside the nest when I blocked it, doing whatever it is that hornets do, returned home and, finding the blockage, circled for a time like aircraft waiting for permission to land. They tried to squeeze their way into the entrance but could not; then one of them settled on the twig and began to grind it with its mandibles into sawdust. Poor, pathetic hornet! At the rate it was grinding, it would take weeks to open the hole again.

The next morning, the hole was patent and hornets were flying in and out. With what must have been industrious determination, the hornets had ground away the twig. I was not to be defeated by them, however, and stuck a much stouter, harder piece of wood in the hole. The next morning it was still there, but

instead the hornets had drilled an alternative hole into the beam to join the passage to their nest. This hole I also blocked with a stout piece of wood, and this defeated the hornets. But, as the Duke of Wellington said after the battle of Waterloo, it was a damned close-run thing.

Three days later, the question I asked myself as I lay in bed after my victory over the horsefly was whether this conduct of the hornets implied some kind of intelligence. They had encountered a situation that they could not possibly have encountered before to which they adapted with what seemed like flexibility. Could they have been instilled with an instinct to behave as they did? Could every hornet's nervous system be provided with a kind of algorithm that told them that, when an obstruction to the entry to their nest is too big or hard to be ground away by their mandibles, they should try to open a new entrance? On how many occasions in the past can such a lesson have been taught, so that those hornets capable of learning it survived while those who did not failed to survive?

Intelligence, says one of my dictionaries, is the ability to learn and apply knowledge. Could these insects, then, be said to be intelligent? The dictionary definition says nothing about consciousness or self-consciousness as a precondition of intelligence, though definitions by themselves tell us nothing about the nature of reality. But does one owe any consideration, any duty of kindness or at least of non-malevolence, towards hornets?

As it happens, I was reading the story *Excellent People* when the problem of the horsefly arose. In this story, a man with literary tastes and pretensions but no talent lives with his sister, initially on excellent terms but before long in conflict because of her conversion to the Tolstoyan doctrine of non-resistance to evil. One day she says to him, 'Volodya, I've been haunted by a strange idea since yesterday. I keep wondering where we should be if human life were ordered on the basis of non-resistance to evil?' To which Voldya replies, 'In all probability, nowhere. No-resistance to evil would give the full rein to the criminal will…' I fell asleep, drowsily thinking 'And to hornets and horseflies.'

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