

There Are No Flies On Us

by Theodore Dalrymple (October 2015)

Good will is necessary but not sufficient: a painful lesson in life and one that has often to be relearned because it is so easily and wilfully forgotten. Benevolence can often be useless or even on some occasions harmful and our best intentions may be misunderstood and taken for the opposite.

A pair of flycatchers nested this year in the eaves of our house in France. It was pleasant and amusing to sit on the terrace in the evening and watch the parent birds fly back and forth to feed the nestlings, having caught insects on the wing with their darting flight. The nestlings chirruped loudly for food as the mother or father bird approached, and for some reason we laughed at the sound.

Then one day a nestling fell out of the nest on to the terrace below. Although there are cuckoos around, I think it was an accident; the other nestlings continued their chirrups, and a cuckoo would have ejected them all, not just one.

The fallen nestling was quite far advanced in its development. It was covered in feathers not down, and its tail feathers were a russet brown in distinction to the rest of its body, whose feathers were grey-brown.. It could almost fly but not quite: when we approached it hopped away and seemed when it did so to keep itself suspended in the air by flapping its wings a little longer than just a hop would have enabled to do. It was like watching an avian re-enactment of the Wright Brothers' first experiments.

We at once became fond of the little bird and anxious for its future. It was an appealing creature with bright little eyes and a solemn expression. All those insects brought by mother and father bird had made him (or her) quite rotund.

We are not ornithologists, my wife and I, and therefore not well-versed in the habits of flycatchers. Sometimes the little bird would hop into the house and perch on the bottom bar of a chair, chirping not cheerfully, as it had sounded in the nest, but with something between melancholy and desperation. It wanted, presumably, to draw its parents' attention to its plight, to let them know its

whereabouts so that they could continue to feed it. (Can a bird truly be said to 'want' anything?) If it was not fed, presumably it would die quite quickly.

When we approached it, it hopped back out on to the terrace, where there was a greater chance that its parents would see and hear it. But we had no confidence in bird brains: birds perform seeming miracles such as migration across half the world, but unthinkingly, inflexibly, because, like Luther at Wittenberg, they can do no other. Faced by a new situation, such as a fallen fledgling, they are not very adaptable—or so we imagined.

We knew, of course, that Nature is red in tooth and claw and that fledglings die by the thousand or the million every season. They fall out of nests and are crushed; they are predated by snakes and rats and weasels, and even by other birds of their own species, and that therefore our fledgling flycatcher was of no special significance in the larger scheme of things. But we all live in small rather than large schemes. The abstract knowledge was entirely vitiated by the plight of this one bird, whom we at once invested with personality and suffering. As Stalin said, admittedly in another context, one death is a tragedy, a million is a statistic.

There was nothing we could do, however, to persuade it of our good intention. As in politics, so in Nature: there are no friends, only interests. Natural selection had programmed the little creature to regard all others as predators and all out cooing and reassuring words failed to change its attitude towards us. I suppose that if we were approached by a creature several hundred times our size we too would not be much reassured by its expressions of goodwill towards us, even if we could understand them.

We wanted to feed the bird so that it should not die: but on what? We thought that it was not very far from independence, so our attentions would be necessary only for a day or two, a few days at most. My wife thought we might put a shallow bowl of water or of milk before it, but I said that I thought birds did not drink, certainly not milk: milk, after all, is mammalian. She also tried scattering some muesli before it, in the hope that it might be tempted to peck at it, but I said that I did not think that flycatchers ate muesli, not even the organic variety, as this was, left behind by some guests last year who were more concerned for the state of their bowels than the aesthetics of their breakfast and feared that we did not have a rigorous attitude ourselves to the healthiness

of our diet.

Do flycatchers eat muesli? The answer appeared to be no, as I always thought it would be. Flycatchers eat flies, they don't catch flies for the sheer fun or pleasure of it. So my wife began to gather some insects, with which our house and garden are plentifully supplied. The problem is sometimes not so much to catch them as to avoid them: if you are not careful, they get in the fruit and the sauce and the wine. We feel none of the tenderness for them that we felt for the fledgling, except perhaps for the type of large beetle that somehow gets on to its back and cannot right itself: those we give a helping hand.

There are more varieties of insect, however, than of any other kind of multicellular creature (the insects, though not necessarily meek or humble, shall inherit the earth). The insects that we caught for our fledgling did not tempt it, and its beak remained resolutely shut when we held one before it, or even put one on the ground before it. You can lead a bird to a bug, but you can't make it eat. We realised that, because of our ignorance, we should have to let Nature, red or not in tooth and claw, take its course.

In fact, the parents birds seemed to take an interest in their fallen fledgling. Whether they actually fed him we could not see, because as soon as they noticed our presence they flew off, but they landed near it as they had not landed before. Perhaps the whole situation had been a normal one (for flycatchers), and not an incipient tragedy as we had assumed. Perhaps the story will end happily, with the fledgling reaching maturity thanks to continued feeding by its parents (assuming that an adult flycatcher's life is a happy one). We do not like to think of the alternative: the picture of the sweet, solemn little bird is before our eyes. At least there are no cats locally to have preyed on it.

The story illustrates how quickly and easily we may become sentimental, and how that sentimentality may lead to incontinent benevolence. I remember reading somewhere that seemingly orphaned fledglings should be left alone at least for several hours until it is established beyond doubt that they have been abandoned to their fate, for trying to help them can actually harm them and cause the very abandonment that such help is intended to rectify. But fools—ignorant, benevolent fools—rush in where angels—knowledgeable, experienced angels—fear to tread.

There are many areas of life in which this lesson is important, particularly medicine, politics, controversy and private life. The desire to help, however genuine or burning, is not the same as actually helping. Doctors, for example, grow more sceptical of their own powers as they grow older, surgeons less aggressively interventionist, all of them more aware of the harms that they inadvertently cause than they were at the beginning of their careers, when they assumed that to do something was always better than to do nothing, and that any harms were worth the price they made the patients pay. The history of medicine is full of terrible things done by doctors to patients, all with the best of intentions: serious operations for conditions or causes of conditions that did not exist, such as floating kidney or dental sepsis as the origin of psychosis. The list is long: I once reviewed a history of medicine that related that history only through the terrible sufferings doctors had put their patients through in the name of cure. Our knowledge is better-founded now than ever before, but still if you read the medical journals you find whole categories of patients treated rigorously with unpleasant drugs or risky procedures to no benefit to themselves. In other words, the urge to help should be kept under rational control, like any other urge, though not so completely that it withers all sympathy with suffering or all impulse to go to the assistance of anybody whatever his circumstances.

In politics, it hardly needs emphasis, good intentions are not enough, though naturally enough politicians always claim them and resort to them as a defence when their policies are universally accepted as having been disastrous. Credit for success, absolution for failure, that is what politicians (being human, or almost human) seek. No one acknowledges being of the Devil's party (except a few Satanists, whose concept of evil is usually very limited and even childish, confined to boiling lizards alive in darkened rooms while they, the Satanists, cast their malign but ineffectual spells and stick pins into effigies of people whom they do not like).

In controversy there is always the temptation to take the nicer side, for those who are right often seem hard and unfeeling. But to be nice is not automatically to be right, even if it were not also the case that good intentions often disguise a substratum of malice: sympathy is sometimes a veneer of sadism. As La Rochefoucauld said, there is in the misfortunes of our friends something not entirely displeasing: the truth of which one acknowledges as soon as it is one

reads it, though with a feeling of guilt. That is why doing good by causing others to suffer is pleasurable, and why malevolence in politics is always so much stronger than benevolence.

In private matters, virtues such as honesty are likewise often but a veneer for sadism, for example in telling the truth about or to someone. The tone of self-righteousness is often discernible in malicious gossip, or should I say the tone of malice in self-righteous gossip? At any rate, we enjoy enumerating the defects of others, and not for their own good either.

This is not to say that complete and sincere benevolence does not or cannot exist. Our feelings towards the fledgling flycatcher were purely benevolent, even if later in the day we dined off guinea fowl and could therefore be accused of inconsistency or hypocrisy. True benevolence is true benevolence even if it does not spread itself to the entire class of cases to which it ought to spread itself if it were to be entirely consistent. That kind of benevolence, I think, is beyond human powers, though intellectuals claim that the inevitable hypocrisy of benevolence consequent upon this impossibility more than cancels out its virtue. An intellectual is a person who prefers abstract consistency to common decency, at least in his pronouncements. (In actual life, though, he may espouse the most horrible abstract principle but act with common decency.)

There is, or should be, a constant interplay between good will and intellectual activity. It should not be a question of the good rushing in where the cynical refuse to act. Perhaps if my wife and I had known more about flycatchers, and what to do in such situations, we could have saved the fledgling's life—assuming, that is, that it was lost, an assumption that is likewise beyond our knowledge. Good intentions can no more redeem abysmal ignorance than can encyclopaedic knowledge redeem an ill will.

Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is [here](#).

To help New English Review continue to publish original and thought provoking essays like this one, please click [here](#).

If you have enjoyed this article and want to read more by Theodore Dalrymple, please click [here](#).

Theodore Dalrymple is also a regular contributor to our community blog, *The Iconoclast*. Please click [here](#) to see all his contributions on which comments are welcome.