

Hive Mentality



Drone bee or male bee with bee worker

by Theodore Dalrymple

It is said that there is a world shortage of bees, but it has not so far affected our house in France, where most summers, when we return, we find a swarm that has constructed a nest between one of the windows and its shutters.

They are magnificent and elegant constructions, these nests, and they make you wish that starchitects had been born as insects rather than as mere men. They, the insects, have more talent for building than such architects.

Most years we have to call the local beeman, who comes with an artificial hive to recover the swarm. To our surprise, he wears no protection; he says that he is used to stings, and in any case if you make no sudden movements, bees do not often

sting. Not having previously known much about bees, or having had any experience of them, I was surprised to discover that he was right: Watching him closely in his work, and in the midst of clouds of bees, I was not stung even once.

The beeman stupefied the bees with smoke, which he directed at them with a tin contraption stuffed with lighted hay. It occurred to me to wonder what would be the result if he used marijuana instead of hay. No doubt it has been tried somewhere and the results published; all I can find is that bees are not susceptible to the drug because their nervous system does not have the neuronal receptors necessary for the drug to have an effect on their behavior. On the other hand, it is known that they become more active when given a little caffeine.

The beeman said that recovering a swarm like ours was the most difficult task that he was called upon to perform in all his work. The essential thing for successful transfer of a swarm is to transport the queen, but that is not guaranteed. Without her, or without another queen raised in another hive, all the bees, many thousands of them, would die within a few days.

Considering how essential bees are to human existence, I am ashamed of how little I know of them or their biology. For example, when I told the beeman, as if I had made a great discovery, that I had noticed that the windowpanes attached to which the bees had constructed their honeycombs were warmer (once the ambient temperature had dropped) than the other panes, he told me that the bees maintained the temperature of the nest constant at 33 degrees Celsius, much as a human body is maintained as 37 degrees. In a sense (and this is far from an original thought), the swarm could be considered a single organism rather than as an agglomeration of thousands of individual organisms, an individual bee having the same relationship to the swarm as a single cell has to a human body.

When we contacted the beeman to tell him that the bees of the

swarm seemed particularly agitated, he told us that it was because it was very humid and they were trying by means of their agitation to concentrate the honey they had made that day by evaporation of its water content. My total ignorance of bee conduct was once more revealed to me.

When the beeman detached the honeycombs from the windowpanes, they dripped with liquid honey. We tasted some, and it was of a different order of deliciousness from any other honey (all of it bought) that I have ever tasted.

The beeman did not find the queen straight away, and he therefore left the bees to indicate where she was by clustering around her. It turned out that she had fallen to the floor beneath the window, and there a vast pyramid of bees assembled in the next 24 hours. Once more, the beeman stupefied them with smoke, and with a wire brush coaxed and swept them into the hive that he had brought. I was a little surprised by the matter-of-factness with which he did so: Were they not, after all, living beings? Yet he swept them much as a cleaning lady uses a brush and pan.

By the time he had finished, there were a couple of hundred left, forming a small pyramid where the much larger one had been. He told us, as he left without accepting payment, that the pyramid would dwindle, and that within three or four days the bees would all be dead.

He was right, he knew his *métier*. But I observed in myself as the little pyramid dwindled something rather strange: I began to feel a real sorrow for the bees that remained, as if they were clustering together in their reduced numbers in doomed defense against approaching death. Thus, I anthropomorphized bees, endowing them with conscious feelings.

It is not all forms of life that I anthropomorphize. I did not do so with the trails of ants that appeared the moment there was spilled honey. They emerged as if they had been waiting

for that very moment, anticipating that it was coming. For *them* (though they are of the same order of insects as bees) I felt nothing but disdain and dislike. We do not live by rationality alone.

There were closer biological relatives of bees for which I felt not merely no compassion, but active hostility, namely hornets. These creatures also build beautiful nests and pollinate plants, but do not make honey. I have no compunction in destroying them, however; I do not consider that they can have feelings like my dying bees.

The beeman taught me how to distinguish between the European and Asiatic hornet, the latter having recently arrived, like Covid, from China. The Asiatic hornet is smaller, flies slower, has a reddish head and an orange abdomen. I can justifiably feel hostile to it, not because it is Chinese, but because it systematically feeds on, and devastates, honeybees, entering their nests and devouring the larvae. Like Chinese honey (much of which is actually artificial and which is now imported into Europe in large quantities), the Asiatic hornet threatens the livelihood of Western apiarists. If I find a nest of them in a tree—they can be very large—I am supposed to call on the local council to destroy it, secure in the knowledge that I am thereby doing a good deed. Asiatic hornets arrived while the beeman did his work.

Discussing Asiatic hornets with the beeman, I mentioned the *pyrale du buis*, a moth that sometimes undergoes huge explosions of population that feeds on box shrubs, devastating them for a time. The moth is rather attractive individually, white with gold or silver fringed wings, but less attractive by the million. It, too, has arrived recently from China.

“Ah yes,” said the beeman, “globalization has not had good effects only.”

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