

Metaphor and supposition: the incompetent bee

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Branches grow strange fractals against the sky. Irregular, endless patterns grown against the sky. Branches end. Branches die. Irregular, endless expressions of a random senescence. Seen as a whole, it might make sense. There might be a pattern. We never see the whole. We never understand.

My life is too painful to write except as metaphor; metaphor extended with supposition. Therefore, I will write about bees. Bees are a useful metaphor. Bees are social in a way that we might believe we are. Bees offer a social structure we might believe we also exhibit. Bees work and produce and reproduce and die. We are not bees, but the metaphor is useful.

You probably know the basic structure of the society of honey bees: Queen, Drones, Worker Bees. It is a very much simpler society than our own. The responsibilities of each is clear and unchanging. The Queen will produce the new creatures required by the hive, all the Drones and all the Worker Bees; the Drones will provide the sperm which the Queen will use to fertilise her offspring; the Worker Bees will provide food and protection for the Queen, the Drones, and themselves: for the hive. You may not know, you may not have understood from this, that the individuals in most hives—certainly hives in the wild—are not genetically identical. Although the Queen is the only fertile female, and although she will produce all the thousands of Drones needed every year, there are always many genetic

patriline within a colony. Research has shown that hives with a high level of genetic diversity are more successful, more robust than hives with little or no genetic diversity. We might regard this as a good sign for our own society.

Understanding that there is genetic diversity in bee colonies means we have to abandon a common view of the Worker Bee. The Worker Bee is not an animated automaton. It is an individual, and although each Worker Bee may seem a small cog in an unthinking social machinery, it is not. While each Worker Bee is surely motivated by love of hive, by its ever-insistent social responsibility, it is nonetheless an individual with both the advantages and disadvantages that individuality implies. Genetic diversity is good for the hive, good for the colony as a whole, but this necessarily means that it may not be good for every individual. If some bees excel, some must fail. There are degrees of competence in Worker Bees, just as there are in us.

Worker Bees communicate in a variety of ways, many of which are doubtless unknown to us, but we do know something of the way they communicate the location of food sources. This is obviously one of the most important jobs of the Worker Bees: to locate food and bring it back to the hive, and to communicate with others where the food is to be found. This is the essence of the benefit of social existence because the hive benefits from the success of the individual, but because all Worker Bees are individuals, some bees must be better than others at locating food, at communicating its location, and at interpreting the communications of other bees. Some must be hopeless at all three.

In human terms, we might suppose that the successful bees are like people who have careers, who are good at things that are valued by our society, who understand the communications of others by instinct as well as by learning. There are some people who are not good, who cannot hold down a job, who are laid off when others are kept on, who lose the partners they have married.

When is success founded? Do we know when Worker Bees begin to display their worth to the hive? All Worker Bees begin productive life as 'house bees'; young Worker Bees who work within the hive, processing the nectar and pollen of the foraging bees, attending to the domestic tasks of the hive, learning how the hive operates as a society. Do the differing talents of the house bees emerge when they are young? As house bees, they are working co-operatively and diligently, but are the skills of the competent already in evidence? Are the competent already valued above their gauche comrades?

In human society, we observe the young in schools and we can see there are individuals who are marked as clumsy, as outsiders. There are children who do not interpret, who are baffled by, the behaviours of their seeming peers. The young start together, but they separate into the various, complicated strata of the young. The strata might be unseen, but they are real. The strata are not permanent, and are not important beyond the time of schooling, but the experience of separation is lastingly affecting. The baffled never recover, never understand.

All bees have their chance to succeed. All house bees become foraging bees, Worker Bees who leave the hive to locate food, to drink nectar and collect pollen, and to return to the hive with the spoils of the territory. When they are successful and find a particularly fecund patch, they communicate the find to the rest of the hive using a special dance. The dance describes the path the other bees need to take in relation to the current position of the sun, and the distance to travel in that direction. Of course, in order to communicate this, the discoverer bee has to be able to calculate and then portray both the direction and the distance. Some bees will be better at this than other bees. Is it hard to imagine that those Worker Bees who are particularly skillful at this communication might be more highly prized within the hive than those who are less skilled? When those who are less skilled try to communicate their finds, and are unable to calculate distance or direction accurately, or are clumsy in their dance, is it hard to imagine that they might be less well regarded? Is it hard to imagine that they might, eventually, be ignored altogether?

We can see similar behaviours in the human world. Those born without the social 'knack', those who unwittingly offend because they have never understood the complex dance language of their species, those whose efforts are no less but whose achievements are far less, those people are gradually made redundant to the society. Not overtly excluded, but overtly ignored. Their position diminishes. In human society, where we are all genetically diploid, where we might all expect to reproduce and know our kind, those people are edged out of the mating game. If they find a partner, as I once did, they may find that partner losing interest

in them, losing patience with the lowly paid jobs, losing their willingness to excuse the failure to thrive in society, in the work of society: the failure to communicate in dance or understand the meanings danced before you.

Is it hard to imagine the incompetent Worker Bee feeling lonely? Not understanding the dance of others, never finding the pollen-ripe nectar fields, unless by accident? Never being rewarded for its own felicitous discoveries because of an inability to describe them? Or ignored because the description is so likely to be wrong? Lonely, surrounded by the incessant, busy, buzzing multitude and not understanding?

We do not know the ways that bees communicate, beyond a rudimentary understanding of their food dance. We know, however, that communication relies on fellow feeling, is experiential. It is likely, surrounded by the busy, thriving, valued Worker Bees, that the incompetent bee is alone in its experience of exclusion. It communicates with no other being. It can communicate with no other being. It is alone, with each experience increasingly alone, increasingly unable to communicate the experience of being other.

We think our human society is so much more complex, so much more developed than the hive. We do not see ourselves as Worker Bees, but as minor deities, each with our own pedigree and destiny, but we are all connected in our human hive. We trace our pasts in complex lines and boxes, call our genealogies a family tree and look with pride upon the branches. But branches end. Our pasts are shown in strange, repeating fractals which

may thrive or end. Some branches end. No love, no life, no
offspring shoot. Some branches end and nothing waves against
an empty sky.

It is too painful to write.