

# Nature's Harshness and Man's Compassion

By ALEXANDER F. SKUTCH

THOSE of us who practice mercy and forbearance in our dealings with the living world, and sometimes make gentle efforts to bring others to our point of view, are often reminded, with amused tolerance or with scorn, that Nature is "cruel." These critics of our compassionate attitude point out that merciless competition is the rule of Nature, that everywhere the strong take what they want without regard for the feelings of the weak, that man is part of Nature, and that if we are to continue to survive we must follow Nature's law. Compassion, they may further assert, has its place in the relations between man and man, but hardly applies to man's dealings with the rest of the animate creation.

This alleged cruelty of Nature deserves our most careful consideration, for our whole attitude toward the living world will be profoundly affected by our view of it. In general, the philosophers, who cast a coldly appraising eye upon Nature, have taken a rather gloomy view of its harshness. One recalls Herbert Spencer's opinion that torturing parasites outnumber in their kinds all other organisms, and Schopenhauer's vivid word-pictures of the sufferings of life. But naturalists, who

gratefully recall their many happy hours in the woods and fields, have a strong tendency to adopt the opposite view, to emphasize the joys and satisfactions in the lives of free animals, to minimize their sufferings, and often to glaze over the disagreeable facts of the natural world. Probably the truth lies somewhere between these two extreme attitudes.

Before we attempt to settle this question, we must have clearly in mind what we mean by "Nature," and what by "cruelty." A characterization applicable to Nature looked upon as a personality directing the affairs of the earth and its inhabitants may become wholly inappropriate if we hold some other concept of Nature. In the present discussion, we shall mean by Nature the totality of the processes that have created and maintain the physical world and all the living things it supports. Nature may be something more than this impersonal aggregate, but for our immediate purposes this definition will be adequate. Turning now to cruelty, it is necessary to distinguish clearly between mere callousness and the infliction of suffering for the pleasure or amusement it affords the spectator. The carter who applies the goad without mercy to his overloaded oxen is probably callous rather than cruel in the narrow sense of the word. His motive is to get his cart up the steep slope rather than

to make his beasts suffer. On the other hand, the boy who tortures an animal to see it writhe, or the spectators who flock to a bull-fight because they enjoy a bloody spectacle, are cruel at heart.

Of cruelty in this narrow sense, there appears to be little in Nature, apart from man. The cat's play with a

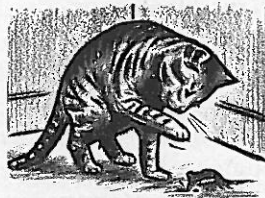
mouse is a favorite example of the inherent cruelty of animals; but I doubt whether she finds pleasure in her captive's fear and pain, or even thinks about it. The skillful execution of an in-



stinctive act seems to be the source of her gratification, and the mouse's feelings probably do not enter into her picture of the world. The great majority of predatory animals appear to capture no more victims than they need to satisfy their hunger, and to kill with no deliberate elaboration of the act. On the whole, the death of creatures devoured by predators is far swifter and easier than that of the millions of unretrieved victims of gunshot that hunters each year leave to the horrors of festering wounds and slow starvation. Yet the death of animate prey is not always so sudden and merciful as we like to imagine it. Hawks sometimes calmly proceed to pluck all the feathers from a captive bird that is far from dead; and carnivorous animals, no less than savage men, at times tear the flesh from a living victim.

If we add to the countless thousands of animals that each day give up their lives to fill the maws of other animals, the myriad more that die slowly and horribly from bacterial and protozoan infections, and all those that are gnawed, punctured and lacerated by an innumerable horde of parasites of the most diverse sorts, I believe we must agree that the amount of carnage and mutilation

in Nature is incalculably vast. How much pain and suffering accompanies all this disease and death is another question, and one far more difficult to answer. As every amateur in scepticism knows, pain, like pleasure, is strictly demon-



strable only when felt in our own person. It is just here that the naturalist-writers who like to hide the disagreeable aspects of Nature try to profit by our ignorance. They can not deny the obvious fact that there is much carnage in Nature, but they often maintain that it is effected with far less suffering than we naively imagine, citing, perhaps, the well-known story of the explorer



Livingstone, who felt no pain while actually in the lion's jaws.

It is most difficult for us to assess either the joys or the sufferings of beings, including men of alien cultures, whose heredity and background are different from ours. At times I have been amazed by the number of kicks, each hard enough to kill a man, that a horse will take without seeming to mind them; yet a horse with a disordered stomach gives every indication of the most acute distress. But since suffering and happiness are correlative states of consciousness, if we diminish the capacity for experiencing one we must in all consistency reduce in the same measure the capacity for the other. If animals can be lacerated and killed without feeling much pain, it would seem that they must live without experiencing much happiness; and we are reduced to the Cartesian theory of animal

automatism, or something closely approaching it. Therefore we divest the pageant of animal life of most of its significance, and this is just what the naturalist-writers on the whole seek to avoid.

For my part, I frankly admit that the animate world, from the lowest protozoon up to the highest vertebrate, is full of strife and carnage, which is to all appearances accompanied by a volume of suffering inconceivably great. To me, Nature is always interesting and often beautiful, but at the same time terrible—so terrible, in fact, that many of those who ecstatically contemplate it through a roseate haze could hardly bear the vision if the mist were suddenly blown away to reveal the natural world in its stark nakedness. Those of us who write or teach about Nature should look upon it as our duty to point out its terror no less than its beauty and interest. Only so shall we guard against the future bitter disillusion of those whom we influence.

But this harshness of Nature, far from invalidating human compassion, gives it all its significance and grandeur. What would be the use of compassion in a world so ordered from the beginning that strife could not arise among its creatures, in a world where pain and misery are intrinsically impossible? It is just the presence of suffering that imparts value to compassion; and the more strife and pain the world contains, the more precious compassion becomes. It will be recalled that Buddhism, often called "the religion of pity," never denies the fact of suffering. Quite the contrary, its whole doctrine is founded upon "the truth of suffering," the first of the Four Noble Truths enunciated by its founder in his first discourse to his disciples. Just as an optimistic philosophy is but a flimsy doctrine if it has not squarely faced and assessed all the disagreeable truths that pessimism proclaims, so a compassionate attitude toward the living world is of little value if it deludes itself as to the magnitude of the world's sufferings.

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What, then, is the origin of this compassion which, so far as we can know with certainty, shines forth only here and there in a world of conflict and pain, like a feeble ray of light in the blackness of a vast subterranean vault? Only two alternative explanations seem possible: either it is a development of Nature itself, or it was implanted in man by some Agent that stands above and beyond Nature. If the latter, then it would appear to possess the highest possible authority, so that to spurn or disregard this sentiment within us would be sinful

and irreligious. But to take the contrary view, and regard it as a natural development, by no means divests it of its sanctity and claim to our respect.

Everywhere in the natural world we detect compensatory trends that prevent the upsetting of the natural order by an unopposed process and preserve the balance of the whole. Water, for example, contracts

and sinks as it cools, with the result that in winter lakes and pools grow progressively colder through their whole volume. In freezing weather this would result in their conversion into solid masses of ice, with the immobilization of all the life therein, did not a contrary process set in at a temperature a few degrees above the freezing point. Further cooling expands rather than contracts the water, the ice floats on the surface instead of sinking to the bottom, and in deep rivers and lakes the great bulk of the water remains fluid and capable of supporting life. The widespread presence of compensatory trends in physico-chemical systems is recognized by the Theorem of Le Chatelier, a principle of almost universal application, which states that if we bring an additional force to bear upon a system in equilibrium, the point of equilibrium will shift in such a direction as to diminish the effect of this force.

I believe that in the growth of compassion we have an example of an analogous process in the living world, which is essentially a system in dynamic equilibrium. On every side we behold the uninhibited exploitation by living things of other living things, with no consideration for the feelings or purposes of these exploited creatures. But the exploiters have at best a low degree of intelligence, so that they can use these other creatures only in certain ways determined by their own hereditary organization; and in most instances the relations between exploiter and exploited, between predator and prey, have through countless generations of mutual interaction reached an equilibrium that permits the continued prosperity of both, as species if not as individuals.

But after long ages, a new force springs up in the world in the form of an animal far more intelligent than any which preceded it—an animal able to devise countless novel, ingenious, and often diabolic ways of exploiting its fellow animals. The equilibrium between

the forms of life, the whole system of Nature, might be overturned or utterly destroyed by this more cunning animal, did not a new factor come into play as a principle of limitation. The very intelligence that makes this animal so much more efficient as an exploiter admonishes it that it is wrong to press its advantage over other forms of life to the utmost limit. Its spontaneous feelings rise in revolt against the merciless exploitation of other animals. An inhibition springs up from the inmost depths of this intelligent animal and tempers its cunning with mercy. Compassion is born. This newly springing sentiment seems to represent Nature's effort to mitigate the strife that results from her own teeming fecundity, to outgrow the crude methods of the primal ages and bring a milder dispensation upon the earth. And if, in the manner that I have perhaps too hastily sketched, we view compassion as a higher development of a natural process, to which all the preceding stages of life are foundational and preliminary, it seems to me just as sinful and recalcitrant to scorn or smother the first

faint glimmer of this new light in our breast, as when we look upon it as implanted there by some higher Power.

For a more detailed account of the natural origin of compassion, I can recommend the interested reader to a voluminous work by the Australian naturalist-philosopher, Alexander Sutherland. In *The Origin and Growth of the Moral Instinct*, he traced in great detail the development of moral attitudes from the relation of the parent animal to its young. Parental sympathy expands until, in modified form, it embraces not only unrelated individuals of the same species, but, at last, those of distinct species; and compassion is a product of this sympathy. Thus we seem to behold a sort of rudimentary compassion at work in the behavior of those birds which feed and sometimes even brood the nestlings of other parents, perhaps of distinct species, and of mammals which suckle the young of some other animal. But a developed compassion, conscious of its purposes, seems possible only where imagination is more powerful than it appears to be in non-human animals. Compassion is the flowering of a highly endowed mind, as cruelty is its foul perversion. As only a rational animal can talk nonsense, so only an animal capable of compassion can be deliberately cruel.

One further question sometimes troubles those who view with compassion the multitudinous creatures

around them, and are eager to do the little they can to diminish the sufferings and increase the joys of all things that share with them the boon and the burden of life. When we contemplate the exceedingly complex interrelations among living things, we often wonder whether some intended kindly deed will not on the whole bring more suffering than happiness into the world. We see an ant drowning in a puddle and are tempted, like the

dove in the fable, to hold forth a straw to which it can cling and be saved. But we reflect that the ant is a predatory animal and if it continues to live will kill other tiny creatures, so that in saving its life we doom other beings to death. Or we hesitate to brush aside the beautifully symmetrical web that a spider has spun across our path, yet recall that if we walk around instead of pushing through it, many a hapless fly or moth will fall into the snare. Or we are moved to return a fallen birdling to its nest, but remember that it will devour many an insect and many a worm. On the other hand, recalling a speculation of Erasmus Darwin, we might argue that by kill-

ing some large animal, even a man, we actually increase the sum of happiness in the world by providing subsistence for the innumerable maggots and other organisms that batten in the carcass.

To attempt to apply such a Benthamitic calculus to the pleasures and pains of the whole creation can lead us only into a hopeless muddle. It is very doubtful whether such a summation of pleasures is possible even within the far narrower bounds of a human society. By what scale shall we measure the agonies of an ensnared moth or the delights of a dining spider? All that the compassionate man can hope to do is to examine his acts in their more immediate effects, without groping to follow their repercussions to the remotest shores of life. The question he must ask is not "What can I do to diminish the sum of pain in the world?" but "What can I do to reduce the suffering for which I am directly responsible, or that which comes immediately to my attention?" When we perform a spontaneous act of charity, or refrain from some course that brings destruction to living things, we cultivate and satisfy a sacred impulse within us; when we take the contrary course, we thwart and violate this impulse. It is not our fault if the world is so constituted in its multitudinous interactions that nothing we can do will lessen by a single twinge the sum of its pains, or add a gleam to its aggregate happiness. Per-

haps fortunately for our finest impulses, we can never know this of a certainty. We can only hope that by lightening a burden here and providing a small joy there the total amount will be favorably affected, as in all probability it is.

But it is not so much by their positive acts as by their restraint that men most benefit other forms of life. It does not follow from this that the man who does most for the living world as a whole is the most passive and indolent. It is far from my intention to advocate such a doctrine of inactivity. As Gandhi taught, only the truly courageous man can succeed in the practice of non-violence. To desist from some cruel amusement in which all our friends indulge, to refrain from the use of some common article because its production entails great suffering to men or animals, often requires a degree of fortitude far from commonplace. To simplify our lives, to find modes of satisfying those of our basic needs which involve less destruction of living things, demands careful thought and an active inventiveness.

If I have touched in this paper on the sufferings of life as a whole, it is not because I believe it wise or wholesome to devote much time to brooding over them. The great systems of spiritual culture have generally had scant use for pity. They have taught men to bear with equanimity their own disappointments and inevitable pains; and what would be the use of this strenuous self-discipline if we were to be upset by all the miseries we can not help but see whenever we look around us? Such sights would agitate that calm and serene mind which it has ever been the goal of the wise to cultivate. Compassion is still at root a passion, or passive affection of the mind; and from Buddha to Spinoza, the great doctors of the spirit have recommended the subjugation of the passions. But when instead of brooding over suffering we do something to alleviate or remove it, we are no longer passive but active; and such activity is consistent with the highest nobility of the mind. This was the course of the Stoics, who deprecated pity yet cultivated the most effective philanthropy of the Classic world, and were largely responsible for the "golden age" of the Antonines. It is far better and more worthy of us to

perform one smallest act of kindness than to spend a lifetime brooding inertly over the woes of all the world. And by such active measures we diminish the distress that the sight of suffering causes us, no less than the suffering itself. I believe that the wisest course is to pay attention to just so much of the world's distress as we can somehow alleviate. To distract our minds with the remainder is futile.

Thus when those of us who know compassion are reminded, sadly or mockingly, that Nature is "cruel," let us freely grant the contention. We may even allow the hard-bitten "realists" to paint the harshness of Nature in the blackest colors at their command; their portrait can not alter the quality of the original that it purports to represent. But it will be useless for them to deny the reality of compassion; we have felt it in our own spirits and there is excellent evidence that other men have felt it for at least 3000 years, and probably a great deal longer. Then let us ask our critics whether they regard this compassion as a natural evolutionary development or as a sentiment implanted in the human mind by a Power that stands above Nature and directs its course. If the latter, then they have invested this sentiment with the very highest sanctity, and even to speak disparagingly of it is impiety. If the former, then we must see in compassion an effort of Nature to transcend the crudities inseparable from the earlier stages in the development of life; and as such, too, it would appear to be authoritative as the latest and highest product of that aeonian movement which made us what we are. If it is still weak and of sporadic occurrence, we recall that all great things had small and unpromising beginnings; and against the background of possibly a thousand million years of life on this planet, human compassion is of very recent birth. If it has not yet sprung up in the spirit of our critics, or is still so faint that they can not detect it there, it is evident that, due to the unequal development so frequently observed in members of the same species, they are no less than one hundred generations behind the most advanced type of mankind—for which they, too, seem to deserve our compassion.