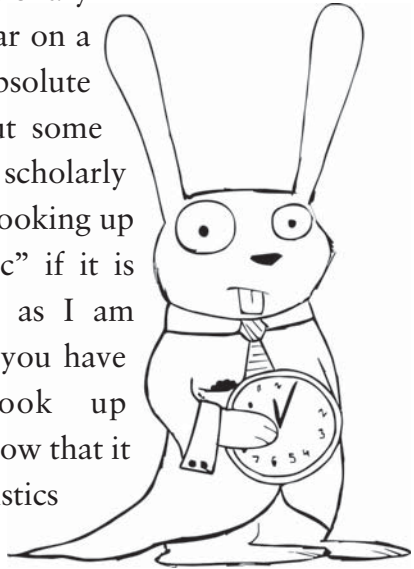


# Bee Line

I wonder if your teacher has had the time and opportunity this school year – in between lining you up in rows, making you spit out your gum, and fashioning dunce caps out of paper cones – to have a long and serious discussion with you on the important subject of dictionaries. If she has, I expect that she emphasized the fact that not all dictionaries are created equal, and explained Rule Number One of assessing the worth of a dictionary, which is this: if you can lift it, it's not a good dictionary. Rule Number Two, however, is this: still, even a pocket dictionary is better than no dictionary at all. Now, you may not believe me when I tell you that there are people so foolhardy and ill-prepared for conversational misadventure that they do *not* carry a dictionary – not even a pocket dictionary – with them at all times, but I swear on a stack of dictionaries that it is the absolute truth. It sounds mad, I know, but some people are so lackadaisical in their scholarly habits that they have no means of looking up a word such as “anthropomorphic” if it is suddenly sprung on them – just as I am springing it on you now. Perhaps you have already had occasion to look up “anthropomorphic,” and so you know that it means “to suggest human characteristics for animals or inanimate objects.”



You probably already know that when we anthropomorphize creatures, it means that we are imagining rabbits with pocket watches, and badgers wearing waistcoats, and newts going to school to learn about the importance of dictionaries. (What is less well-known is that animals do the same to us, but in reverse, since we are so reminiscent of chimpanzees when we clap, and praying mantises when we kneel, and hyenas when we laugh, and macaws when we scream. Remember this point the next time a squirrel watches you climb a tree, or a dog watches you water a bush with a hose.)

Human beings anthropomorphize animals with such regularity and consistency that we commonly use examples of specific animals as a sort of shorthand for human characteristics – wisdom (owls), intelligence (crows), marital devotion (shingleback skinks) and so on. By way of further illustration, imagine that your teacher has described you in your report card as someone who works “like a beaver.” Your parents will immediately understand that she does not mean that you have a flat, leathery tail that you use to warn other schoolchildren of danger, and large yellow buckteeth that you use to chew down trees in the playground in order to build lodges and dams. It may be an unfortunate fact that you actually *do* have a flat, leathery tail and large yellow buckteeth, but by comparing you to a beaver, your teacher is undoubtedly drawing attention to your industrious nature, and not to your habit of eating bark and marking your territory with bodily fluids. Unless you are the sworn enemy

of the beaver, being compared to one is generally a very good thing, and you might at the very least expect a pat on the head and a lollipop as a reward for good behaviour. Your parents will likely swell with pride, and there will be much talk of the acorn not falling far from the tree – meaning that you have turned out just like your industrious mother and father, and won’t everyone be proud.

If, however, your teacher describes you in your report card as being “slothlike,” your parents will not swell with pride but, rather, with bilious humours (that is, misery and irritation). You may well expect a pat on the head, but it will be an extra hard one, and you can certainly expect any lollipops that you might currently possess to be forcibly removed from you. Being described by your teacher as slothlike ensures that images of acorns not falling far from trees will be entirely absent from the conversation – unless your parents happen actually to *be* sloths, of course, in which case they might consider writing a hostile note to your teacher – but, being sloths, no such note would ever get written, as your parents would rather hang upside down by their toes from the branches of trees and let the algae grow peacefully in their fur. Perhaps your parents do this anyway, even if they aren’t sloths – but even slothlike parents would rather their children be compared to a beaver, an ant, a golden eagle, or a gazelle as opposed to, let’s say, a baboon, an earwig, a dodo, or a wildebeest. No parent wants to read, “Your child is behaving like a dung beetle in class,” even

though the negative reputations of these animals are often entirely undeserved. Mosquitoes, for example, are roundly disliked even though they undoubtedly work just as hard as beavers do – but no parents, especially yours, want to hear that you are behaving like a mosquito in class, as they will assume not that you are working hard, but rather that you are annoying others with your high-pitched buzzing, and sucking the blood out of the other students, and laying eggs in the water station. You can now fully appreciate how careful teachers have to be when they are writing comments on your report card – one false comparison, such as “orangutan” or “wombat” or “Portuguese man-of-war” can result in many an undeserved clout upside the head and is always a threat to the health of lollipop futures.

Perhaps the best example of a creature to which almost everyone likes to be compared is a creature from the phylum Arthropoda, the order Hymenoptera, and the superfamily Apoidea – a creature who provides us with honey for our toast, though it is less reliable in supplying the marmalade and jam. I probably don’t need to tell you that I am referring to bees, all of whom have a reputation for being hard workers and are universally admired for their diligence and zeal. All parents are delighted to read on their children’s report cards that their little eggheads are “as busy as bees” and understand by this that their children are on task and staying out of mischief – and not that they are obsessively sucking nectar up their proboscises and communicating with

their fellow students by wagging their behinds. Bees are held up as model citizens and captains of industry because their pollination services alone are worth billions of dollars every year (and it will be a sad day for humans should they ever decide to collect on the debt owed to them). They are understood to be uniformly content to fulfill whatever role they happen to be born into, and like nothing better than performing those tasks that Mother Nature has etched into their very DNA. Bees are diligent, responsible, fuzzy, and cute – which are exactly the characteristics that human parents wish their children to possess, and it is surprising that so few abandoned baby bees are adopted by humans, given their stellar credentials.

You will be shocked when I tell you, then, that not all bees *do* like buzzing about being busy and responsible, and I hope you won't think I'm being overly anthropomorphic when I suggest that there are some bees who might appreciate a little downtime to catch up with old friends, or to visit their massage therapist, or to attend a recreational salsa dancing class, or just to sit and relax by a roaring fire with a good book and a snifter of brandy. Bees get very little time to consider their own personal needs – very little of what we call Me time, and an excessive amount of We time – and all of it, Me time and We time, is really just a lifetime of full-time, daytime, and nighttime overtime Bee time, devoid of half-time and flex time pastimes. This is a problem for many eccentric bees who like to sew, or to operate large

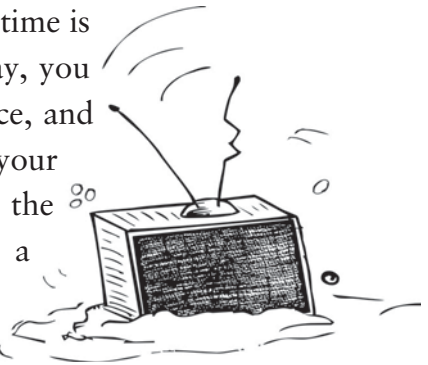
machinery, or to conduct orchestras and so on. You may not believe that such bees exist, but if you have studied genetics in school, you will know perfectly well that one bee is not necessarily like another, because bees can change due to genetic inheritance. This was proven by a scientist named Gregor Mendel, who experimented with pea plants in order to demonstrate various laws of heredity – and although I am not entirely clear on the specifics, I imagine that he began with a couple (a *married* couple) of black-eyed peas, cross-fertilized them, and noted that one of their four baby peas had blue eyes instead of black. I may be on somewhat shaky ground when I assert, as I do, that because *peas* rhymes with *bees*, the same basic scientific principles apply – nevertheless, the point is that *if* there is a mixing of genes from one generation to the next, then it is possible that one bee is *not* necessarily identical to another and, as with human beings, every so often a different kind of bee is born.

And so it happened that a different kind of bee was born in a hive only a few blocks away from where you live, to Queen Columbine and one of her many drones (possibly Sweet William, though it might have been that cad, Golden Rod, or possibly Larkspur, or Goosefoot, or one of 327 other drones who had made the Queen's acquaintance, much to their delight and subsequent horror. This is because mating is a fatal business for drones, and I think it's scandalous that nobody tells them this until *after* they've bought the flowers and chocolates and paid for the meal. At least make drones

aware of their choices, I say, and if they still want to get romantic with the Queen, knowing that it will all end in tears and a trip to the undertakers, then so be it.) Upon inspecting the thousands of larvae wriggling about in each honeycomb cell, you would never have guessed that there was any difference between them because, like all babies, they looked suspiciously like little maggots, each of whom was either scarfing down the milk (bee milk in this case), or bawling loudly for the milk to be supplied without delay. Little would you suspect that Queen Columbine had produced a larva the likes of which had never been hatched in the history of beedom. It's true that she once had a larva who became an architect (hardly surprising in a place as structurally spectacular as a hive), and one who became a florist (yawn), but never in all her years had she produced a worker bee who was, in reality, a natural-born philosopher.

I expect that you probably imagine, in your innocence, that a philosopher is someone who is logical and smokes a pipe. You might further believe that all philosophers wear berets and turtleneck sweaters under tweed jackets, and make a big to-do out of seemingly obvious statements such as "B = B," and devote their entire lives to questions of beeing (small bee) and Beeing (big bee). If you had imagined all this, however, you would be quite mistaken, because philosophers come in all shapes and sizes and sexes and species (though admittedly most *are* logical and wear tweed). The shape and size and sex and species of the philosopher-bee born to

Queen Columbine (and her deceased drone, may he rest in peace) were, in order, this: roughly oval, half a centimetre, female, and *Apis mellifera*. Her name was Beatrix, and she had, among other things, four gossamer wings, two flirtatious compound eyes with three glittering simple eyes in between, ample pollen baskets, a modified ovipositor that was now a barbed stinger (sensible for any woman who travels alone), and a delicate pink proboscis for sucking up nectar like gravy through a turkey baster. She was, in short, a great beauty – however, the real story was *not* Beatrix's good looks but, rather, her intelligence, which was unusually vast for one so tiny. Of course, as children you know well that size cannot be equated with intelligence, as is evident by the sheer number of times that you are right and your parents are wrong – about everything from what constitutes a sensible bedtime (they say 8:30, you say *either* noon tomorrow *or* when sleep overtakes you – whichever comes first), to how many scoops of ice cream should be balanced on a cone (they say one, you say one *fewer* than the number of scoops that cause it to topple), to how much TV time is desirable (they say half an hour a day, you say – rightly – that you only live once, and therefore the answer is as much as your heart desires, until such time as the television overheats and melts in a puddle). Obviously then, size is not everything when it comes to sheer

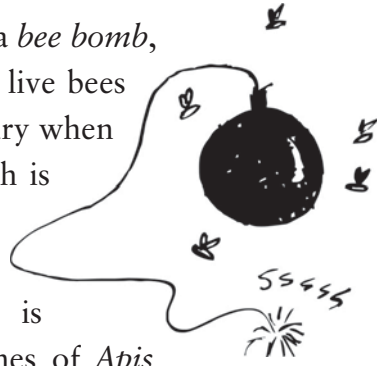




brainpower, but still let it be said that Beatrix was a bee of rare intelligence – a bee with not only a beautiful body but a beautiful mind, and if a mind could be dressed in a bikini or a ball gown and displayed in a beauty competition (as shallow and offensive as these contests may be), then Beatrix would undoubtedly have won the blue ribbon and been crowned Little Miss Whiz, or given some similar title.

At first, it was not immediately obvious that Beatrix *was* a philosopher, as she appeared simply to be lazy with a bad work ethic. Instead of collecting the pollen and gathering the nectar, for example, she preferred to lounge around the hive reading books – both nonfiction tomes with strange titles such as *Beeing and Nothingness*, as well as novels calculated to generate unrest in the female bee, such as *A Cell of One's Own*. Instead of baking the beebread and smearing the larvae with royal jelly, she preferred to attempt to engage her fellow workers in lively debate over questions such as: What exists? How ought we to live? How might we think logically about difficult problems? What can we know? How can we know that we know it? How can we know that we know that we know it? How can we . . . and so on and so forth. The answers to such abstract questions are not obvious and cannot be found in even the heaviest of dictionaries – nevertheless, these were the questions to which Beatrix was drawn, like a bee to a balm. (*Balm*, not *bomb*. Note well the spelling of *bee balm*, which is a lovely little flower highly attractive to bees and other pollinators – Latin name

*Monarda didyma* – as opposed to a *bee bomb*, which is a metal container full of live bees who are released in a swarming fury when the device is detonated, and which is therefore not in the least attractive to bees, or to anyone else for that matter, and whose Latin name is probably something along the lines of *Apis explodium tragicum*. Always keep in mind that proper spelling and pronunciation can mean the difference between triumph and tragedy, as any spelling bee can attest.\*)



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\* Again, think of the care your teacher must take when writing comments on your report card. Imagine if, in addition to comparing you to, let's say, a boll weevil, a head louse, or a blue-footed booby, she also thanked you for the excellent beer you'd supplied for Show and Tell, as well as for the collection of pistols and missiles – in addition to which she praised your report on that damned river, and went on to thank you for the jam made of quints, and explained that because you are simply as nice as gneiss can be, you will be allowed to go on the school trip by fairy to Grease and Whales (which will be specially rheumy in the off-season) where, among other activities, you will seize the serf and ride it. (So as not to interrupt the flow of the narrative, find a list of homonyms and their definitions at the end of the story, where you may peruse them at your leisure.)

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