

Kindness and Compassion for Mutual Flourishing in Post-human Worlds: Re-Imagining our Relationships with Insects

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EuropeNow

From Anthroprivilege to Posthuman Imaginaries

You can be kind and good only within the framework of possibilities laid down to you by your intellectual and cultural inheritance. We have, all of us, inherited a world-view that makes us twisted, spiteful parodies of what we might have been, and what we might become (Rowlands 2002, 195).

For most people, the dominant intellectual and cultural legacies they grow up with radically diminishes their being by insisting that they (as members of the “human” race) see themselves as being apart from—not *a part of*—broader animal worlds and more than human communities. Such detachment, and its privileging of a humanocentric world view, has long animated speciesist¹ myths of human superiority, elitism, exceptionalism, and power over all other forms of life and the earth as a whole. Springer (2022 forthcoming) terms this “anthroprivilege,” and defines it as “the social norms that reinforce anthropocentrism and confer automatic unearned benefits upon human individuals.” Over time, this imaginary has devastatingly intersected with other forms of oppression, not least capitalism, and its objectification and commodification of all life in the name of profit (White 2017). While there have always been those who seek to challenge anthroprivilege, regrettably, the liberatory seeds they seek to sow (in hearts and minds) have failed to take root. People neither listened, nor took effective action. Now, as we bear witness to an age of great precarity, of ongoing ecological and climate breakdown, of unprecedented rates of species extinction, of the terrifying rise of zoonotic diseases and so on, maybe we will take heed. A fundamental lesson is that the future of the human race is deeply bound to the future of nonhuman and more-than-human lives. If the latter have no future, neither will we.

Cudworth et al. (2021, 268) note that a posthuman imaginary “demands that we no longer see ourselves, humans, as anything other than multi-species beings co-constituted with a myriad of other beings and things and dependent upon them.” Unsurprisingly, the posthuman turn brings questions of interspecies ethics, and practical ways in which humans and other animals can share spaces *justly* to the fore (Gillespie and Collard 2015). As a “posthuman turn” gathers pace across the social sciences, particularly evident in critical animal studies (Nocella et al. 2015) and vegan geographies (Hodge et al. 2022), we hope to add to this momentum through urgently engaging with (comparatively overlooked) 10 quintillion forms of life on this planet we refer to as “insects.” To this end, we present a case for a radical re-imagining and re-enacting of our relationships with insects, one that recognizes “that...all flourishing is mutual” (Shotwell 2021, 21). This is a daunting undertaking. Despite knowing more about the similarities between ourselves and nonhuman animals, the shackles of anthroprivilege,

coupled with vested (capitalist) interests in continuing with “business as usual” as the world life support systems collapse around us, still hold strong. Thus, while a contemporary rise in veganism and vegan praxis across the world offers hope, we are mindful that, globally, humans still farm and kill 60,000,000,000 land-based animals each year; confine tens of millions of animals in vivisection laboratories, in fur-farms, in zoos, and for other selfish, exploitative ends. Undoubtedly, the dominant human relationship with insects is also almost exclusively defined by violence and suffering. It is exceptionally rare to find individuals and groups that embody ways-of-being and ways-of-living toward insects that are empathic, caring, and compassionate. Our treatment of insects is, therefore, another critical dimension of the wider wars that are being waged against other animals (Wadiwel 2015).

While it is tempting to attribute the mass devastation, despoilment, and destruction that we see in the contemporary world as being “beyond our control,” this appeal abrogates our responsibility all too easily. Here, we hope to demonstrate how vital our imaginaries and actions will prove in ushering in mutual flourishings into a “post-human” world. Therefore, as we write about adults and the insect apocalypse, children and the care for insects, and mutual flourishings, we encourage you, readers, to *consciously* recollect past, present on your own experiences with insects and insect communities, and open these up to self-analysis, interrogation, and critical reflection.

Adults and the insect apocalypse

Let us draw attention to what we know about insects and pause to reflect on some of the incredible truth that they speak to (not least as a challenge to human aggrandisement and superiority). The ongoing presence of insects on earth is quite simply extraordinary. These lifeforms first emerged “from crustaceans (crabs, lobsters and prawns) and emer[ging] onto land between 450 million and 500 million years ago” (Yeates 2014, n.p.). Pointing to dreadfully overlooked insect sentience and cognition, Lambert et al. (2021, 6) note that:

Cognition... refers to the processes by which animals perceive, process and store information An animal’s cognitive capacity has no bearing on their ability to suffer, but in the case of insects, where so little is known, understanding their intellectual abilities does offer us greater insight in this regard... Our findings show that a wide range of insects are considered capable of exhibiting cognitive capacities.

This capacity has almost certainly enhanced their remarkable rates of survival and evolution over time. Indeed, today there are about “1.4 billion insects for each one of us” (Worrell 2017, np), and few would disagree with Eggleton’s (2020, 62) opening observations that:

Insects appear to be everywhere, and they seem eternal. They are a normal part of routine life: whether it is ants raiding your pantry, bees pollinating your apple tree, moths eating your clothes, or wasps spoiling a summer picnic. Insects have been thought to be an unchanging part of our world, and so it is

with extreme urgency that recent reports have raised the alarm that everywhere insects may be in decline.

At the time of writing, we might consider our relationships with insects as rather complex. There are certainly, in the Western world, examples of insect species enjoying widespread popularity (and care-for). Examples here might include the eusocial flying insect known as the honeybee, and those insects in the macrolepidopteran clade Rhopalocera we know as butterflies. However, the positive thoughts and feelings towards honeybees and butterflies as they flutter in haste around our gardens and parks are—almost entirely—the exception to the rule. For wherever we care to look (across personal, one-to-one relations, and across larger impersonal scales), insects' encounters and experiences with adult humans tend to end badly for insects. This can be seen both *directly*: the murderous (intent-on-killing) stamping of feet as a cockroach dashes across a kitchen floor, and *indirectly*: an agricultural worker operating crop spraying machinery, as they push the button/ press the lever to unload a 4000-liter tank filled with insecticides or pesticides onto their [sic] crops.

Human society gives every appearance of having great appetite and expertise when it comes to killing. And yet, even the means to destroy and devastate other forms of life reveals a life-connection between them and us. Take Neurotoxins for example, which are toxins that are “destructive to nerve tissue causing neurotoxicity in insects...[and] *Because all animals share basically the same neurochemical systems, neurotoxins are toxic to all animals.* (Sarwar 2020, 33 (italics added)).” It is entirely predictable, then, to see the suffering that these poisons have caused humans:

Human poisoning by pesticides has long been seen as a severe public health problem. As early as 1990, a task force of the World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that about one million unintentional pesticide poisonings occur annually, leading to approximately 20,000 deaths (Boedeker et al. 2020, 2).

Life—be it insect or human—in a capitalist world is wholly expendable, if profits are to be made. It is only now that the scale of humans' devastating impact on the insect community (driven largely by anthropogenic pressures including intensive forms of agriculture, pollution, industrialization, and urbanization), is being recognized. The statistics are shocking:

More than 40% of insect species are declining and a third are endangered...The rate of extinction is eight times faster than that of mammals, birds and reptiles. The total mass of insects is falling by a precipitous 2.5% a year... suggesting they could vanish within a century (Carrington 2019, np).

The implications are terrifying, simply because it signals nothing less than the end of life on Earth as we know it. As Sánchez-Bayo and Wyckhuys (2019, 17) note:

Because insects constitute the world's most abundant and speciose animal group and provide critical services within ecosystems, such events cannot be ignored and should prompt decisive action to avert a catastrophic collapse of nature's ecosystems.

Failure to avert this “insect armageddon” (as it has been popularly referred to) does not bear thinking about.

A fundamental cause of human neglect of, and violence toward, insects can be directly placed at the door of anthroprivilege which, crucially, is learned behavior. There is nothing “natural,” intrinsic to the human condition that informs our attitudes and actions. Such a truth-claim is also important, because it allows a vista of hope and new possibilities to emerge. *If* this is learned behavior, then we can still unlearn, re-educate, and liberate ourselves in progressive ways. Moreover, it invites us to reconnect to an earlier time, perhaps, when the natural world was a constant source of wonder, fascination, and joy: a time when we had not yet fallen victim to such a spiteful and narrow worldview: a time when we were children.

Children and the care for insects

We must build a better relationship with the insects who sustain our life on this earth—not only because the life and work of these creatures inherently benefit humans, but also because they have value simply by existing. We evoke a call for instilling a child-like sense of wonder and curiosity in our relations with insects. The phrase “child-like” is sometimes used in a derogatory manner to characterize immaturity or underdeveloped intelligence—a view we vehemently reject, wishing instead to highlight the beauty and kindness associated with child-like interactions with insects. Children often approach the world around them, and the myriad creatures within it, with a healthy curiosity to learn more about the strange and unique beings they encounter. For example, a child might bring a bug inside to show their family, and while the adults may react with disgust or trepidation, the child is often exploring their curiosities around the creature. Somewhere along the way to adulthood, many children are entrenched with speciesist beliefs overtaking this child-like wonder towards insects. We implore our readers to reconnect with this child-like curiosity and compassion towards insects, the very creatures upon which our entire existence is made possible. Without this recognition, and if we continue to harm insects’ communities directly or indirectly, considering our alternative futures on this planet may become an increasingly difficult task.

Mutual flourishings

The reality is that the depth of our ignorance of insects is staggering. We have described no more than some 20% of the species that are thought to exist... We do not know whether we need many species to ensure that ecosystems function healthily, but the increasing consensus is that fewer species means poorer ecological services and a drop in human well-being (Eggleton 2000, 74).

Non-human/more-than-human life has intrinsic value irrespective of what benefits or advantages they confer on “us.” For example, there is an unprecedented interest in insects as a source of protein (which again will be underpinned by violence, suffering, and death). While entomophagy (eating insects) has been sustainably practiced in cultures for thousands of years, newer trends in Western agricultural sectors attempt to position entomophagy as a

hot new fad since approximately 2013 (see van Huis 2020, 27; Jantzen da Silva et al. 2020, 1). This both erases the history and importance of entomophagy in sustaining populations for centuries as well as positions the widespread industrial raising of insects for human consumption from a place of abuse and domination. If the farm animal industry can be of any indication, animal rights and welfare are often afterthoughts (or, not even considered at all) when raising animals *en masse* for human consumption (Matsuoka and Sorenson 2013, 9-10). Recognizing our positionality, we wish to remain sensitive to cultural traditions aligned with entomophagy and rather, instill a message of awareness about the capitalistic forces accelerating the rate at which insect speciesism has risen in Western culture.

For most of us, embracing this message entails *recognizing* and decoupling ourselves from the speciesism and human-centrism placed around our ways of thinking, and from the very moment we demonstrate self-awareness of the multiple worlds (human/non-human) we perceive around us, actively engaging with these worlds through a framework of care and compassion. The threads of connection weaving and tying us with insects have been frayed and broken but can be recovered and re-coupled by compassion. Our first appeal is for a radical commitment to fostering non-violent relations with insects (at least), and a caring-for-them attitude (at best) motivated through an extended altruism: it is simply the right thing to do. However, such a radically re-aligned relationship also offers the wonderful possibilities of recognizing the many mutual benefits these wonderful creatures bring to ourselves and the systems we depend on for our very existence. Mutual aid and coexistence with insects can be framed according to three pillars: insects as teachers, insects as workers/providers, and insects as co-travelers.

Insects as teachers

If we let them, insects have much to teach us both about ourselves, including deeply uncomfortable truths, and about how we should live well with others (Gunderman and White 2021). As Slijepcevic (2016, n.p) notes:

One thing humans already share with several species of insects is a practice known as “eusociality.” This is the highest form of social behaviour. It involves a sophisticated division of labour, with different generations working together and different individuals carrying out different jobs, including giving birth and raising children. The most notable socialists on the planet are rare species of insects (ants, termites and bees) and *Homo sapiens*.

This is not a recent development: insects have long been a positive reference point for human society. This is particularly seen in those anarchist writings that draw attention toward how human and nonhuman communities can best survive—and thrive—in the world, by successfully embracing mutual aid over mutual struggle. The work of Peter Kropotkin is probably the best known here, particularly through *Mutual Aid* (1915, 62) in which he draws on the communities of butterflies, dragon-flies, ants, and bees to call us to

... combine — practise mutual aid! That is the surest means for giving to each and to all the greatest safety, the best guarantee of existence and progress, bodily, intellectual, and moral.” That is what Nature teaches us; and that is what all those animals which have attained the highest position in their respective classes have done.

There are many other ways in which we are seeing how insects might instruct us to live better, and indeed navigate some of the most pressing crises of our time, including building a more pandemic-resilient society (see Schulson 2021). Insects also offer a mirror to ourselves and perhaps a more truthful and sobering reflection on what type of persons we are, in contrast to what type of persons we think we are, and want others to believe we are. When encountering insects, you literally have the power of allowing them to continue to live, or snuff their existence out in an instant. How do you choose to act? What have you done when you found yourself in a room with a fly buzzing around in a futile attempt to find freedom? Have you acted with compassion or with anger and resentment: how did that encounter end? If the common appeal is that “they wouldn’t harm a fly” (suggesting a gentle and kind temperament), what does that say of us, when we do?

Insects as workers/providers

Our existence on this planet is sustained by the work of insects around us. As we advance in our daily lives, they constantly perform ecosystem services that help improve our environment and support our ability to thrive on Earth (Losey, quoted in Lang 2006). Pollination services alone are estimated to have an annual value of at least 153 billion euros a year (CORDIS 2006) due to their positive ramifications on world agricultural production. These figures highlight the undeniable importance of insects as workers on our planet, whose work sustains life for the humans who inhabit the world around them (and, as we have shown, often aggressively so).

While recognizing the tremendous importance of insect productivity on our planet, we also caution readers from seeing their worth simply through a capitalist lens. Regardless of their economic benefit to humans on this planet, insects have intrinsic value that should be respected. Rather than framing insects as the steadfast workers surrounding us on nearly every inch of our Earth, a more compassionate way to frame insects may be to see them as the caring providers whose very existence allows us to forge continued human life on our planet. When seeing the insects around us as our life-providers and life-sustainers, it may make it easier to extend greater compassion towards them in our daily encounters.

Insects as co-travelers

A few years ago, I (Hannah) was walking outside between my class sessions at university and had a small bee land on my sleeve, seemingly hitching a ride during my walk. Having no known allergies or risk of severe anaphylactic shock due to a potential sting, I happily

obliged my new friend in joining me on my walk. Several minutes later, as I made my way towards the building where my next class was held, the bee gently flew off. While we can never know what exactly the bee was doing, we like to think that such an interaction was representative of insects operating as co-travelers in our daily lives. In virtually every corner of our planet, insects surround us in some form, inseparable from our daily actions and activities. As we take walks or grab a morning beverage from the corner store, ants and beetles scurry under and around our feet. Fireflies light up our surroundings in short incandescent bursts as we sit outside and take in the evening air. While speciesism often positions insects as an “other” to our lives, what if we reframed these creatures as co-travelers in our experiences on this planet? We may then begin to take joy in many fleeting experiences that allow us to view insects as companions living in parallel to us.

If we take the time to observe and ponder the lives of the insects that we encounter, as they fly or crawl around us, or land unexpectedly on us, seeking a place of rest, something remarkable becomes possible. We can learn about the wonder, beauty, and fragility of life, as we appreciate the delicate legs/wings/antennae that move purposefully and ponderously in front of us. In each of those moments, a connection can be made, and we recognize more than ever that our futures are intimately and deeply entwined on this planet.

Final thoughts: *Musca Domestica*

A few months ago, I (Hannah) forged a bond with a *Musca domestica* (colloquially known as a housefly). Walking into my kitchen, out of the corner of my eye I saw a fly desperately flying into the windowed door leading to the backyard. Walking towards the door, I sensed panic in the fly, who was slamming their body into the window trying to find a way out. As someone who has claustrophobia, I am deeply familiar with the panic felt when feeling trapped and unable to escape a situation. I gently opened the door so they could escape. As the fly realized the opportunity, a sense of calm appeared and they flew off into the morning dew.

We write with the conviction that our daily thoughts and actions work in visible and unseen ways that prefigure the worlds-to-be. It is important that we raise our own awareness, and raise the consciousness of others around us about the plight of insects. It is equally vital that this leads to action. To do nothing is to be part of the problem. At the same time, we must act prefiguratively, and bring into the world new expressions of solidarity toward insects based on caring and mutual aid. In doing so, life-affirming inter-species relations will bring positive consequences in ways that we cannot yet imagine or comprehend. While there are absolutely cases where individuals may feel negatively towards insects (due to allergies, living in an area with a risk of contracting an illness from an insect bite, traumatic experiences, phobias, etc.), we hope to instill in individuals outside of those categories the importance of having a caring and compassionate mindset towards insects. Connect with your inner child-like wonder. Do not discriminate by only helping “attractive” insects in peril. Take small daily actions that impact positively on the insects around you: pick up the snail on the path in front of you; open the window and usher the trapped fly into freedom; refrain from using

gardening techniques that may harm bees; petition and protest for the end of pesticides, etc. These small actions of mutual aid might make the difference that makes all the difference in bringing forward the flourishing in post-human worlds that we desperately desire, and need.

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¹ A term coined by Richard Ryder, which refers to the assignment of worth and value along the basis of species membership, and ignoring the suffering that a being experiences due to their species (see Ryder 2015).