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DREAMING ABOUT ANT COMMUNICATION

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Back in the 1920's, South African naturalist Eugene Marais spent ten years watching termites and ants, and concluded that colonies may be best understood as a composite being possessed of both a group purpose and a group mind. We actually misconstrue the whole organism when we perceive individual workers as if they might be independent little insects living out their lives in a tight social context.

Consider them instead as building blocks, the ultimate communistic slaves, internally programmed to do the bidding of their queen and nothing beside. For her own part, the queen's control over her workers seems based upon some communicative mechanism far beyond our ability to explain, although some might liken it to telepathy. For example, when Marais enclosed a termite queen within a tiny steel plated prison, the colony continued to flourish. But if he killed the queen, even inside that same prison, the whole community soon ceased to work. At certain times of the year the termites would immediately set themselves to the genetic task of grooming another queen. However, at other times of the year the colony seemed quite unable to "build" themselves another queen. Inevitably, the entire hive soon died.

If another termitary grew close by, the workers soon drifted into the new colony where they apparently "swore allegiance" to the new queen, because, in fact, there was no sign of rejection. However, if these same disinherited termites were immediately brought to a nest a hundred yards away, a fight quickly led to the deaths of all the intruders. As Marais explains it:

The mysterious power which streams from the queen functions only within a limited distance. Every termite is under its power. If the two termitaries are situated close to each other, the power of each queen operates in both nests. It is through this psychological power of the queen that the termites of one nest are capable of recognizing their fellow citizens and discovering strange intruders.

When Marais waited a few days before attempting to transfer the befuddled workers to a more distant nest, he found that they were no longer attacked.

Whatever power the old queen might have possessed over her minions had evidently "evaporated". The now *empty* workers, like bits of computer memory, were available to be filled up with the program of a new hostess. But by what power does the queen hold the community together? Marais comments:

We will assume that it is something analogous to scent. Personally I do not think it is scent but something much more subtle. But if we think of it as scent it will simplify matters for we are actually dealing with something far and away beyond human sense.

In *Godel, Escher, and Bach*, Douglas Hofstadter abstracts the metaphysical findings of Marais even further, and so describes many eery similarities between a functioning ant colony and the self-aware human brain. For example, even though an ant colony is comprised of ants, its power and function can no more be apprehended as a *collection* of ants than the power of the brain can be apprehended as a *collection* of brain cells. Just as our minds can not sense the firing of individual brain cells when we think our thoughts, so the colony can not sense the movements of individual ants off fulfilling their programmed function. Yet despite this mutual inability to sense the lower level of meaning, brains and colonies both remain mysteriously unified and coordinated through some, as yet unexplained teleological mechanism. We call the sum total of all these functions, *consciousness*, as it refers to human brains. Yet harking back to Donald Griffin's complaint, there is not yet any commensurate term to describe the same process as it refers to ant colonies. Could we do any better than also calling it consciousness, although a kind of non-human version of the concept which is very alien to ourselves?

Where I live in the Pacific Northwest, thrashing ants build large mounds out of sticks and pine needles, sometimes two feet or more on a side. Each mound might contain as many as several hundred thousand ants. The ants try to keep to themselves, although they sometimes build their mound too close to my own house. When that occurs ant bodies start popping up in our sink, in dinner, and in bed. Eventually I feel bound to do something about this insect invasion before it gets totally out of hand. However, I refuse to use the standard remedy of diazinon. I don't want to destroy them, merely move them further away from my own house.

So instead, I spray gasoline on the surface of the mound and simply set it afire. Of course I am aware that this presumed communication technique probably sounds utterly violent. But wait! Try instead to perceive of the colony, *and not the individual ants*, as the conscious entity being addressed here. After all, the queen, is safely ensconced deep inside the heart of the mound, and suffers no harm. Most importantly, she indubitably gets the message, and soon directs her workers to move the colony from its present location. For some unexplained reason, the colony almost always moves *further* away from my own house. I can't explain why, although it certainly makes me feel glad.

Personally, I find myself prey to the most uncomfortable of fantasies whenever I step inside the ten foot radius of an ant colony's self-aware, personal space. Is this a case of the heebie- jeebies, or has my relationship to the colony turned me super- sensitive to the hypnotic spell being cast by a telepathic queen? I sense that the colony has tacked up a psychic signal inside the billboard of my own mind: beware you fool, inner sanctum, you trespass at your own risk. One part of my own mind seems to fear that it might actually get taken over by ant commands causing me to start jerking my head from side to side in recognition of the enemy. That enemy is, of course, myself. Furthermore, this risk is double-edged because the enemy I face is also a real-time confrontation with my own worst *fantasies* about swarming ants. What if a sudden stiff gust of wind should pick me up bodily and drop me onto the mound?

Even as I dream up this nightmare of ants as a violation of my own personal space, so the living, breathing ants insist upon going about their business of swarming outside of my own dreamt up fear of them. What irony! When it comes to human/ant relations, violation and interspecies communication are starting to sound like variations on the same theme.

Actually, my own relationship to the local thrashing ants seems more than a bit like something out of Alice in Wonderland. For example, a bewildered Alice wishes to wake up a sleeping Red King because he happens to be dreaming about her:

'It's no use your talking about waking him,' said Tweedledum, 'when you're only one of the things in his dream. You know very well you're not real.' 'I am real!' said Alice, and began to cry.

But what does that make of Alice? Or permit me, instead, to ask a really juicy question that addresses the central thesis of this discussion. Because the ants are so obviously different than either the scientific community's depiction of them as mindless automata, or my own (and possibly *your* own) anxiety about them, what does that make of any and all of our perceptions about Nature? For example, what does that make of real live ants? Hindu mythology, by way of Joseph Campbell, provides one splendid "answer" to this particular riddle.

As the story goes, Indra, god-king of the *waking world*, is furiously exploiting all the resources of the world in a vain attempt to build a huge palace as a monument to his own glory. The other creatures can not long endure this folly. Finally, they levy a complaint to the sleeping god Vishnu. It is Vishnu, who holds the ultimate responsibility for every single event of this waking world, simply because he is actually dreaming the whole thing up. Now, in an effort to mollify Indra's growing number of plaintiffs, Vishnu dreams up an army of ants to parade through the half- finished palace of the god-king. Of course, when Indra sees this nightmarish invasion of ants, he angrily hastens Vishnu's messenger, demanding an immediate explanation.

The messenger explains, "As you know, the waking world we perceive is nothing but Vishnu's dream. However, even Vishnu has to wake up once in a while, which he does about every three hundred thousand years. He flickers his eyes for a few minutes and then falls back into a deep sleep again. At that moment, all the events and inhabitants of the waking world are simply dreamed up all over again."

Now the messenger peers Indra directly in the eyes. "And of course, that is why Vishnu thought that living ants might be a far better monument to your splendour than even the most magnificent of palaces. You see, each individual ant is the reincarnation of an Indra from a unique dream of Vishnu."

Indra stares at the ants busily going about their work, and then turns very pensive. "There must be millions and millions of them," he cries in despair. "Yes," replies the messenger. "You see, the deeds you accomplish in this lifetime are the things that affect your future incarnation. Ants, for example, are the most skilled builders of palaces. In your own case, the better you get at building a palace as a monument to yourself, the better chance you have for getting incarnated as an ant in your next life."

The messenger shakes his head and watches the ants cover every surface within the palace. "As you can plainly see, the ant colony has grown very large. Literally millions upon millions of former Indras listened to this very same injunction, and then forged ahead to build magnificent handiworks. Naturally, they achieved their reward. And of course, unless you decide to stop building this palace, you too will be rewarded by turning into an ant. Somebody else is going to have to play the part of Indra, god-king of the waking world."

On that note, permit me to quietly clunk the gasoline can next to the rock while I jog back into my own house to find a pack of matches, jog over to the hose nozzle to turn on the water as a safety precaution, jog over to the wood pile to find a good stout pole, and finally jog back down to the ant mound with hose and matches and pole in hand. I jab the pole deep into the mound, stir up the insides until the ant eggs bubble up to the surface like the viscera of a rotten carcass full of maggots, pour a half pint of gasoline onto the perfect dome of their domicile, step back, and throw in a lit match. 10,000 ants are incinerated within a fraction of a second.

Later on, when the slow blue fire settles down, I sink the stick in a second time, dredging up thousands upon thousands of 1/4 inch long eggs that, this time, remind me of nothing so much as the leavings of an office paper-punch. Meanwhile, all those ants who had been out gathering building material and food start to arrive back on the dishevelled scene. Without so much as a pause to surmise the situation, they immediately set upon the task of gathering up the eggs to carry them back inside the steaming mess that was once a nest.

Reading my Marais correctly, that observation of functioning workers also signi-

fies that the queen is still quite alive and presiding over the whole operation. Is she guiding my hand as well? An hour later I return to the nest again, drop in another half pint, stand back, light a match, and watch the remains light up like a baked Alaska. Another 10,000 brain cells vanish in an instant. I lobotomized the colony one last time the next morning.

A week later, the newly constructed nest was fast approaching the size of the original, having moved a substantial twenty feet further down the hill. I watched as the mound pulsated with the bodies of black and red ants piled up on top of one another. In fact, I could barely see the mound at all through the opaque mass of tightly intertwining ant bodies. A hundred thousand organically bound beings, tending to the needs of their young, setting up ingenious transportation and communication links to foodsites, building a splendid palace as a monument to their own collective self.

Two years have gone by since that violent act of incineration. The colony has remained in the same place well away from the house. The workers continue to seethe across the landscape with a sound that doesn't seem to emanate from anywhere in particular. Likewise the colony itself continues to palpitate with an aura of consciousness like some strange alien pod from another galaxy.

And every March the colony sends out emissaries searching for new sites upon which to build suburbs, just to take some of the pressure off their overpopulated city. It also means, of course, that every March they invade my house anew. For two weeks my family endures a much more restrained invasion of fifty or so ant scouts parading across the living room floor and once in a while falling off the dining room ceiling into somebody's soup. After two weeks, these domestic explorations always seem to subside just as mysteriously as they began.

Most importantly, the queen ant's willingness to cooperate, whether consciously or unconsciously, has also helped me to overcome whatever fear I may have ever felt for them. The two of us communicated in the only way we both knew how, and so arranged a compromise. In other words, the waking world of ants has finally overwhelmed my own private dream world. I have learned the same dream lesson of spiritual ecology as channelled from Vishnu to Indra and finally, to myself.

Yet, every so often, out in the environs of this human/ant joint venture in property ownership, I discover one of their suburbs under construction too close to my own house. I always push a stick into the middle of the budding colony. And the ants always comply by moving further down the hill. At least that's my version of it. For all I know, the queen is dreaming the whole thing up quite a bit differently.

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