

## What the universe knows

When I was a boy, I was persuaded to join a friend in swinging a plastic bat at lightning bugs in order to watch the spectacular brilliance of their death throes. These beguiling creatures are slow on the wing and make easy targets. I *think* I recall feeling a vague uneasiness over this sport, and I believe (and hope) it was a one-time thing. Now when I walk down the driveway enjoying the beauty of the fireflies' unhurried on-off performances, I almost always remember that night with mortification. This is especially so if I see one expiring in the grass, for then the light glows steadily – remarkable for the intensity of its luminance and the beauty of its color. A lightning bug on a dark night outshines any star.

Everything has its price, and the price of that sport on that long-ago night has been its remembrance again and again. As Keats wrote in a letter to a friend, "The most unhappy hours in our lives are those in which we recollect times past to our own blushing. If we are immortal that must be the Hell."

It is deflating to have a dissonant thought in the midst of so much loveliness. I take a deep breath and console myself that, after all, my remorse is part and parcel of the joy I now take in observing the natural world. When I was young, I had little interest in these things. I grew up ten miles from the Appalachian Trail and never set foot on it.

My mind was full of cultural matters and my natural destination was the city. I was going to be an artist of some kind or other. I wanted to sit up all night talking and drinking in taverns frequented by the literati and then walk lonely under the streetlamps at four o'clock in the morning and write about it.

Am I coyly praising myself with a faint damn? Am I implying that the worst I can remember about my past is the murder of a few gentle insects, which, although alive, perhaps did not *know* that they were alive? Did I do the worst deed of my life before I was morally formed?

By no means. I could confess much greater faults of callous behavior toward human beings who responded with clear evidence of painfully hurt feelings; but most terrible of all may well be unremembered faults, when my moral grossness never even impinged on my conscience. I know that I have thought worse than I said, said worse than I did, and done enough to recollect those doings with a shudder of shame. If I do not reveal these greater malefactions here, it is because confession is good for the soul and would therefore be selfish on my part, plus an imposition on the reader who has to hear it and endure my implicit self-approbation for having owned up. Curiously, however – or perhaps not so curiously – I can look back on some instances of objectively reprehensible behavior and think, "Well, there was no way I was *not* going to do that, given the situation and who I was at the time. Too bad for the person who was unlucky enough to cross my immature path; but so it goes." I shrug it off, because in retrospect, it looks inevitable: I couldn't have done otherwise. But with the lightning bugs, it seems as though maybe I could have and should have. After all, I *killed* them. I took all they had. I had to know that's what I was doing.

They are the subject of my disquisition precisely because I do experience genuine, unmistakable regret – an emotion that maybe should be spent more lavishly on greater offenses, but which I absolutely do feel acutely in this minor matter. This super-sensibility over what many would regard as a trivial matter may testify to my self-absorption or to my moral perversity; but however that may be, I am seizing upon this vivid memory as the most salient example of a configuration that I wish to investigate. Here is an act for which I feel remorse, remembered from the vantage point of a current state of being where the act is repugnant to me; and now it is difficult for me to understand how I could have done it.

From this personal moan, no doubt tiresome to anyone other than myself and somewhat so even to me, I wish to veer into the domain of theology, where my cogitations may accidentally possess some resonance for a few of my readers. I wish to examine the question of guilt and of whether I can be absolved – of whether I can atone and make restitution and obtain forgiveness – of whether my change of heart is acceptable before the Lord. The answers, if there are any, might have relevance to derelictions of greater import.

I am sorry for each death that I caused that night. But does the universe know this? And does it care?

Of course it does. / know it. And I am a cell of the universal organism. My thought is a neuron of the absolute mind.

I now care about and protect each littlest life (excepting ticks and mosquitoes, which attack me and endanger me). I love spiders and toads. I liberate houseflies, moths, crickets, wasps, even roaches and small snakes; and tiny winged insects,

almost invisible to the naked eye that have trapped themselves against the window pane, carefully catching them with a glass and a thin piece of cardboard. A Freudian or Darwinian fundamentalist assumes that this is all about my ego-ideal or an effort to make myself attractive to women of reproductive age. I know better and would repugn that libel before any jury of the earth's seven billion people.

But is this all just an act? A performance for the benefit of an imaginary audience? What if the universe doubts my sincerity?

The arising of this question betrays how desperately we project our own feeble sentience on to the universe: if the deity does not speak precisely our language and answer us in kind, we protest that the atheists may as well be right. And so we do not understand the presumptuousness of our demands upon the cosmic Intelligence.

The universe cannot doubt my sincerity because I am able to vouch for it – and in this particular matter, I have authority and could refute God Himself if He contradicted me. I know my feelings from the inside. If I am lying about my regret, trying to look better than I am, I may fool God but I cannot fool myself.

So what I think I want from the universe is present already within myself.

Am I absolved then? No. I cannot grant myself absolution – what's done is done. But absolution is beside the point. Only greedy people crave it.

But is my atonement acceptable? Have I completed my penance?

By no means. Atonement is unavailing. I snuffed out their lives. I cannot bring them back to life. The dead stay dead. My penance, so-called, is valueless.

But is it not morally creditable that I now relish each individual life of these marvelous little beings? No, because it hardly counts as *penance* to love them and be

filled with happiness by their presence. Is it to my *credit* that I feast now at the banquet of life? No. When a man does himself a good turn, do we *credit* him? Somehow my bad act has paved the way to feelings of plenitude . . . in *me*. How is that supposed to work as *restitution*?

My journey from callousness through indifference to a profound delight in these smallest of creatures nears its completion. Soon enough I too will blink out. My pangs over a thoughtless game so many decades ago shoot through me and discomfit me, but do not demoralize me, because they record one of the stages of my moral education and I am well satisfied with what I have learned. The universe in its beautiful silence accepts it all – my long-ago insensibility, my present remorse, and my cherishing each and every lightning bug that I see in my old age after a long trajectory of learning to pay attention.

The universe does not need my remorse and does not profit from it – it does nothing to acknowledge or assuage it. It does, however, answer with the beauty of the fireflies lighting up on all sides of me tonight. The notion that I should be able to use my honest remorse to certify the genuineness of my apology and so compel the universe's forgiveness puts the sentience of the Absolute Mind on a par with a broker's.

The remorse is intrinsic to my current state of grace, which is self-certifying beyond the power of the universe to put it in question. But since the remorse is the universe working by its own methods to bring me into grace, why would any question arise?

What I know, the universe knows – and what greater proof of *its* sentience could there be?