



Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* as a Reflection of the True Self

La vie de Pi de Yann Martel comme le reflet du Vrai soi

Stella Aslani

Abstract

Works of Canadian animal literature educate us about animals, nature and, most importantly, ourselves. *Life of Pi* is such a work. To read Yann Martel's novel means to be confronted with a reflection of one's true self. The article investigates this phenomenon of literary self-confrontation by closely analysing three persistent themes in *Life of Pi*: anthropomorphism, religion and science, and self-perception. The analysis is broadened by introducing philosophical concepts of Giorgio Agamben, Helmuth Plessner and Jacques Derrida. The final step of the article is a revisiting of the themes in the light of philosophical background examined. What *Life of Pi* teaches us is that throughout our lives we adopt multiple interpretations of our self. It also teaches us that in order to have a chance to define our true self, we must first reconcile all the different interpretations we have of our self. The novel's proposed way to do that is through the rehabilitation of spirituality.

Keywords: *anthropomorphism*, religion, science, Yann Martel

Résumé

Dans la littérature canadienne, il y a des œuvres qui nous informent sur les animaux, la nature et, surtout, sur nous-mêmes. *Life of Pi* de Yann Martel est une telle œuvre, car elle nous confronte à notre être véritable. Cet article examine ce phénomène en analysant trois thèmes dans *Life of Pi* (l'anthropomorphisme, la religion et la science) mis en parallèle avec le thème de la perception de soi. L'analyse repose sur les concepts philosophiques de Giorgio Agamben, Helmuth Plessner et Jacques Derrida. La dernière section de l'article envisage ces thèmes à la lumière des fondements philosophiques plus récents. Ce que *Life of Pi* nous enseigne, c'est que, tout au long de notre vie, nous adoptons de multiples interprétations de nous-mêmes. La spiritualité joue un rôle majeur dans ces interprétations.

Mots-clés : *anthropomorphisme*, religion, science, Yann Martel



Canadian literature has a long and venerable tradition of animal literature. Some of the most prominent works of Canadian animal literature are works by Ernest Thompson Seton, Sir Charles G.D. Roberts and Margaret Atwood. That animals always have been and will be a crucial part of Canadian literature comes as no surprise, considering that animals have been a part of human life from its very beginning. They provide us with food, clothing and company. Human lives and animal lives have always intertwined in a manner akin to how literature and society intertwine. Therefore, it is only natural for artists to combine the three. Be it fable, allegory, satire, naturalism, realism, fantasy, folk tradition or sci-fi, the story with animals in a central position serves a higher purpose – it educates us about animals, nature and, in the end, about ourselves, much in the way that *Life of Pi* does.

Life of Pi is a Canadian novel written by Yann Martel, a Canadian author with a degree in philosophy. After being rejected by several publishing houses, his novel was finally published in 2001. The rough start did not diminish its worth, and the novel won several prizes, one of them being the Booker Prize for Fiction. In 2012, it was adapted into a movie that also won several awards, among them the Golden Globe Award for Best Original Score and Best Achievement in Directing at the 85th Academy Awards.

And yet, *Life of Pi* has far more to offer than mere prizes and awards. The story it tells is, as a character claims in the foreword, “a story that will make you believe in God” (Martel 2012, XIII). Since the statement is a statement of a novel character, and not a real person, it is up to the reader to decide whether there is any truth in it or not. No matter your decision, the novel *Life of Pi* approaches the unique. Its structure, language, narrative, setting and objective are close to brilliant. It starts as a story about a boy whose name is Piscine Molitor, otherwise known as Pi, but ends up being a story about his survival of a harrowing shipwreck.

As many have commented, Pi and Parker's voyage and adventures in the open sea make the novel an adventure story somewhat similar to *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe and *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway. However, the structure of the novel is not simple; and its plot can be approached in various ways, each of which opens up diverse classifications and interpretations of the novel itself. Most people see it as an adventure story (e.g., Jordan 2002) due to the shipwreck and survival on the open sea, and such a classification is the most straightforward one. Some see it as a post-colonial novel, since it focuses on the culture and stories of India, a former British colony. This kind of classification relegates many important parts of the novel, such as Pi's growing up and becoming a man by surviving the shipwreck, which is why the novel has also been classified as a Bildungsroman (Kidd 2013). Others, who tend to focus more on how the novel was written rather than on what was written, see it as a sort of magical realism or fable-like story resembling Aesop's fables. And, lastly, many see it as allegory, or at least an allegorical narrative (Krist 2002).



In some way all these classifications are true, and yet all of them leave something out. Some focus more on the shipwreck, some more on Pi growing up and some on the fact that part of the novel takes place in India. Nonetheless, what is certain is that *Life of Pi*, although seemingly just yet another Canadian novel featuring animals, is in fact a great novel. Through it one explores society's state of mind, but that is not all; indeed, one is also confronted with a reflection of one's true self – that is to say, the self that most of us are not consciously aware of and therefore cannot describe or define. As a work of literature, Martel's novel moves towards articulating themes that have long concerned philosophers.

Life of Pi abounds with themes, both concrete and abstract ones. Luckily, in the vast scope of themes three persistently stand out: anthropomorphism, religion and science, and self-perception. These three themes will be addressed in the next section; later one, they will be revisited after a brief explanation of relevant philosophical concepts of, especially, Giorgio Agamben, Helmuth Plessner and Jacques Derrida that lead to a final interpretation of the novel. Only by firstly introducing the themes, then backing them up with short philosophical overview and, lastly, going back to themes can we truly grasp the whole picture of our being in line with views expressed in *Life of Pi*.

Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism is akin to personification, that is, attribution of human characteristics to non-human beings or things. Its history as a part of human history dates far back. It is not strange that something that has been a part of human life for so long would find its way into literature. Indeed, in *Life of Pi* anthropomorphism is one of the crucial themes, although Yann Martel himself never anthropomorphises in the novel. The first indicator of this refusal to make animals human-like is that the main character lives in a zoo and has a father who lectures him about true animal and human nature. He exhibits to his son Pi endless examples of animals fighting for their survival at any cost and thus showing their true nature, which is far from harmless, especially for man. At the end of a tour of the family zoo, Pi's father notes:

There are animals we haven't stopped by. Don't think they're harmless. Life will defend itself no matter how small it is. Every animal is ferocious and dangerous. It may not kill you, but it will certainly injure you. It will scratch you and bite you, and you can look forward to a swollen, pus-filled infection, as high fever and ten-day stay in the hospital. (Martel 2012, 50)



As we can see, Pi's father cannot stress enough that, no matter the size, every animal is dangerous. Animals cannot help themselves; it is in their nature to defend their life.

Indeed, the concerned father would do anything to teach Pi the distinctive difference between human and animal nature. Animals are not our equals, and we should never treat them as such. To make this point as powerful as it can be, he makes Pi watch a tiger kill a goat, in a scene of brutish glory:

With sudden ease the trapdoor slid open. Silence fell again, except for bleating and the *click-click* of the goat's hooves against the floor.

A streak of black and orange flowed from one cage to the next.

Normally the big cats were not given food one day a week, to simulate conditions in the wild. We found out later that Father had ordered that Mahisha not be fed for three days.

I don't know if I saw blood before turning into Mother's arms or if I daubed it on later, in my memory, with a big brush. But I heard. It was enough to scare the living vegetarian daylight out of me. (Martel 2012, 47)

Pi, who himself is a vegetarian (as Martel emphasises here), would not harm another living being no matter what. To him the very sound of the killing remains forever imprinted in his memory. This is a most frightening scene to be witnessed by a young boy, but a crucial one, according to Pi's father. By exposing him to such a violent act, Pi's father succeeds in his intention to teach Pi about distinctive difference between human and animal nature.

It is not that the father believes humans are superior; it is just that he believes that becoming too comfortable with animals and projecting your own thoughts and actions onto them can lead to catastrophe for both sides. In the end, he believes humans to be the worst kind of animal. To prove his point, Pi's father decides to perform an ongoing experiment of sorts near the entrance to his zoo:

Just beyond the ticket booth Father had had painted on a wall in bright red letters the question: DO YOU KNOW WHICH IS THE MOST DANGEROUS ANIMAL IN THE ZOO? An arrow pointed to a small curtain. There were so many eager, curious hands that pulled at the curtain that we had to replace it regularly. Behind it was a mirror. (Martel 2012, 40–41)

Through this representative act, the father not only conveys his opinion about humans, but he makes people re-think, even if only for a second, their true nature. However, the father's good intentions do not work out. Pi is still amazed with the tiger, and the tiger's having a human name – Richard Parker – does not help the father



to bring home his point that animals are not at all like humans. It is easy to attribute human characteristics to a captured animal, and an animal having a human name makes it so much harder to resist this temptation. Calling any being “Richard Parker” calls for completeness of a person and it is hard to imagine otherwise. Therefore, it is not strange that Pi, when left almost completely alone (except for the tiger!) on the lifeboat after the shipwreck, cannot but anthropomorphise the Richard Parker. The only way to survive is to make him equal and important.

The theme of anthropomorphism, thus, is a strong and repeating theme in the novel. Anthropomorphising Richard Parker did not cost Pi his life, as it could have; but it did cost him his belief: the belief that animals are our equals and our friends.

Ever since Richard Parker came to the zoo, Pi had had a special relationship with him, or at least he thought he did. Later, on the boat, the relationship deepened and deepened until it was completely shattered on the Mexican coast. It fell to non-existence the moment they got saved and “Richard Parker, companion of [Pi’s] torment, awful, fierce thing that kept [Pi] alive, moved forward and disappeared forever from [Pi’s] life” (Martel 2012, 285). Pi expected the tiger to act like a human, to make the final human gesture – the kind that one can see in the movies – but the tiger of course remains an animal, and he just continued on his own path without the slightest glance back.

The detailed process resulting in an abrupt end not only shows how anthropomorphism takes place, but also that there are two natures which can never be unified – human and animal nature. It is important to see things clearly and call them what they truly are, without adding ornaments.

Religion and science

Another important theme that stretches through the novel is religion and science. Pi grows up in a family that deals with animals and is fairly well educated about animal nature. He himself explores and investigates around the zoo and has a special bond with his science teacher, Mr. Kumar, deepening his knowledge of such matters:

To [Mr. Kumar’s] ears, when animal felt the urge to mate, it said “Gregor Mendel,” recalling the father of genetics, and when it was time to show its mettle, “Charles Darwin,” the father of natural selection, and what we took to be bleating, grunting, hissing, snorting, roaring, growling, howling, chirping and screeching were but the thick accents of foreigners. When Mr. Kumar visited the zoo, it was to take the pulse of the universe, and his stethoscopic mind always confirmed to him that everything was in order, that everything was order. (Martel 2012, 34)



Mr. Kumar's scientific way of looking at the world teaches Pi not only great names of science, such as Gregor Mendel and Charles Darwin, but most of all about a scientific approach to life in general. What is more, Pi's nickname has a scientific origin meaning nothing more than an irrational number known to most of us as 3.14. Suffice to say that science is an important part of young Pi's life and how he makes sense of his life; it is thus an theme of the novel.

However, Pi is also interested in spirituality. He explores and adopts three great religions – Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. He finds the study of religion as important as the study of science and becomes a devoted follower of all three religions throughout his life. However, his devotion to the three religions was questioned by both his parents and his religious teachers. After being pushed to choose one of the religions, Pi reacts thus: "Bapu Gandhi said, 'All religions are true.' I just want to love God," I blurted out, and looked down, red in the face" (Martel 2012, 92).

For Pi there is no real difference between different religions or even science. His only wish is to be free to explore all sides of religion and science alike and decide on his own what is true for him, be it scientific explanation or religious belief for how things came to be. The argument that rings throughout the novel is that science and religion are equal because each rests on a certain type of faith. Pi's knowledge of scientific matters helps him greatly on the open sea, especially the knowledge of animals and animal nature. Religion, however, is his place of comfort when he is low morale.

The differences between spirituality and science are often obvious, but there are similarities, even if they are harder to see. This parallel is made most obvious in a scene in which two Mr. Kumars meet – like religion and science, they are two sides of the same coin. The recurring theme of both religion and science not only points out their importance, strength and weaknesses, but it shows the necessity for the two to work together or at least side by side without diminishing each other's worth. As the novel implies, if the two Mr. Kumars can come together in observing a feeding a zebra, religion and science can also coexist.

Mr. and Mr. Kumar looked delighted.

"A zebra, you say?" said Mr. Kumar.

"That's right," I replied. "It belongs to the same family as the ass and the horse."

"The Rolls-Royce of equids," said Mr. Kumar.

"What a wondrous creature," said Mr. Kumar.

"This one's Grant's zebra," I said.

Mr. Kumar said, "*Equus burchelli boehmi*."

Mr. Kumar said, "*Allahu akbar*."

I said, "It's very pretty."

We looked on. (Martel 2012, 112)



Confronted with a simple thing like a zebra's beauty, each Mr. Kumar cannot but acknowledge it. One Mr. Kumar sees in the zebra beauty specific to equids, while the other Mr. Kumar sees the beauty of all living things – but they both see beauty, even if they translate it into technical terms (“The Rolls-Royce of equids”) and more mystical terms (“What a wondrous creature”).

Self-perception

A third theme of the novel is self-perception. It is probably the most important theme since it combines the previous two. Pi's perception of himself is related to all the most important influences in his life – the zoo, animals (including Richard Parker), science and religion.

The first thing he came to know zoo life. He played around animals all the time and came to know their nature by heart. An important part of his personality was formed under their influence since, due to the omnipresence of animals in Pi's everyday life, Pi is quick to acquire knowledge about the physical world around him, specifically, the animal world. As Pi recalls:

My alarm clock during my childhood was a pride of lions. They were no Swiss clocks, but the lions could be counted upon to roar their heads off between five-thirty and six every morning. Breakfast was punctuated by the shrieks and cries of howler monkeys, hill mynahs and Moluccan cockatoos. (Martel 2012, 18)

Later he established a close relationship with different religions – Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam. Each contributed to shaping Pi's personality and added another layer of understanding the world around him – how things function and how they came to be – onto his previously-established personality under the influence of zoo animals.

At the same time as Pi was exploring religions, he was also deepening his knowledge of science. This knowledge polished the part of personality created under the influence of zoo animals, even as it overlapped with the aspects of Pi's personality shaped and informed by spirituality. Science and religion merge to create a unified layer in Pi's personality, giving him a unique way of perceiving and coping with the world around him and, in the end, himself.

These layers and their mixture are important later in Pi's life, especially when he finds himself lost not only on the open sea, but also lost to the world and himself. The horror of the shipwreck and survival took its toll on the young Pi and he was left to re-evaluate his perception of who he is. Some parts of him seemed forever lost, but



he, his persona, so to speak, managed to survive thanks to the presence of Richard Parker. Richard Parker stood for all the zoo animals Pi grew up with – the very first layer of Pi's personality. The need to tame the tiger stood for the scientific knowledge Pi had – the second layer of Pi's personality, which was, yet again, interlaced by Pi's need for a deeper explanation of things that stood for Pi's interest in religions and spirituality – the third layer of Pi's personality. Thus, the greatest immediate danger was simultaneously a source of inspiration and survival.

The theme of self-perception occurs throughout the novel, dressed in different guises, depending on the need of the story. Regardless of its appearance, the self-perception theme is a very strong one in the novel, especially since the novel could be viewed as a Bildungsroman. By telling his story, Pi not only related a tale of a great shipwreck and even greater survival. He told a story of a young man's growth, his ups and downs and his perception of himself. He pointed out that the way we perceive ourselves – be it through religion or science or animals – is in the end the most important element. As shall be evident in the next two sections on the novel's philosophical background, it is according to our self-perception that we create our life. For that reason, a fairly lengthy overview of things philosophical is in order.

The philosophical background to *Life of Pi*?

Considering what we have seen regarding the themes of the novel, the most important theme in *Life of Pi* is self-perception. To further explore its meaning in the novel, it is crucial to recall some of the leading thinkers of our civilization and their concepts of being. In order to be able to perceive oneself, one first has to exist. This is why the next section of this article covers different theories of being, from Aristotle's and Descartes's to Agamben's, Plessner's and Derrida's. What is more, the short overview not only recalls the crucial aspects of different theories of being, but is also later closely linked to *Life of Pi* and what it teaches us about our being.

The famous quote "I think, therefore I am" written by the French philosopher René Descartes in his work *Meditations on First Philosophy* not only proves that if one thinks one must certainly exist, but is based on a theory of categories of being that reaches far back even before Descartes's time and has had a strong impact on the way society today perceives the world: dualism. Yann Martel himself might have based his novel on this theory either intentionally or unintentionally. The theory is irretrievably interlaced with our society and history, or as Pi puts it while describing father's ticket booth performance:

we look at an animal and see a mirror. The obsession with putting ourselves at the centre of everything is the bane not only of theologians but also of zoologists. (Martel 2012, 41)



Dualism is the position that advocates the dual existence of man. Mind and body are two separate parts of man and they are by no means identical. Body and mind are two fundamentally different components.

Dualism has existed at least since the time of Plato and Aristotle. In their oeuvres, both Aristotle and Plato state that the human mind and soul cannot be identified with the physical body. Descartes later reinforced this concept of dualism known today under the name of Cartesian dualism. Admittedly, his line of thinking was not entirely unprecedented, but his mechanical view of the world in which animals are nothing more than a mere body without a soul that follows its instincts and laws of nature, while humans consist of both body and mind and are therefore higher on the hierarchy tree, is still very influential and present in today's society.

For Descartes, animals are without a soul and, therefore, unimportant. But how does Aristotle categorise different entities (in the sense of living beings)? In his work *On the Soul* Aristotle focuses on the nature of living things and their different operations. According to Aristotle, plants have only a nutritive soul of growth and metabolism – the minimum for any living being. Animals, on the other hand, have this minimum plus a perceptive soul of pain, pleasure and desire but they lack the third and the most important – the faculty of reason. It is intellect and reason that distinguish humans from other animals, that distinguish Pi from Parker.

Dualism and the modern world

Aristotle's view on dualism is fairly simple and straightforward, and dualism seems to be the leading philosophical concept even today. We perceive both body and thoughts; it is only the way we explain their relation to each other that differs. Nonetheless, the division into the two remains and the concept delves into the roots of both science and religion.

Aristotle's hierarchy of souls takes a new direction because of the theory of evolution. According to the theory, plants appear slightly earlier on the evolutionary tree than animals and finally humans – the highest developed form of animals known so far. However, not many are inclined to think of humans in such animal (or vegetable) terms since, in their eyes, acknowledging that humans are animals diminishes human value. The old belief in dualism that places humans high above animals is deeply rooted in society. Many still see humans as superior to animals and think of animals as less important, if not as unimportant, thus causing emergence of diverse problems related to animal rights and reestablishment of animal position in the world.

What strikes me as interesting is that the activists and artists that fight for animal rights often regard animals not only as our equals but as our other selves. This



tendency to depict animals as humans, as the human's alter ego has been present in human history for a long, long time, even before the questions of animal rights became popular. As mentioned, it is more commonly known as anthropomorphism. By attributing animals with human attributes we not only reject Descartes belief that animals do not have souls, but we also reject our superiority and acknowledge the animal in us. This is very much in line with Jean-Paul Sartre's stance that the self exists only in relation to others; thus, our human self exists only in relation to the animal self. We define our self, our being, according to animals, but we also define the self of animals, their being according to us. Such reasoning is circular and calls for a new way of reasoning, a new way of defining our human self.

The limit between the animal and the human

The distinction between the animal and the human self has been a growing subject of many contemporary philosophers as well, such as the German philosopher Helmuth Plessner, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben and the French philosopher Jacques Derrida.

In his work *The Open. Man and Animal*, Agamben rethinks a classic topos of Western metaphysics: the relationship between man and animal. He rejects any kind of censorship regarding the question of the relationship between man and animal, because he thinks that censorship does no good. Censorship will actually do more harm and produce irreducible indistinctness between man and animal. The solution for Agamben lies in overcoming the anthropological machine, the anthropological machine being "a description of the dichotomy between man and animals in the form of a working entity, the machine" (*Thrown into the World* 2013). Agamben even states that there are two types of anthropological machine, one modern and the other pre-modern. The modern one creates the non-human by zoomorphising the human, while the pre-modern one creates the non-human by anthropomorphising that which is animal (Agamben 2001, 113). In the end, both are unacceptable to Agamben and he finds that only overcoming the anthropological machine will stop circular reasoning and free man and animal alike from mutual captivity (Agamben 2001, 114). By disabling the differentiation between animal and man, man is saved from the dichotomy between the animal and the human as well as from the dichotomy between heavenly and earthly nature.

In contrast, Derrida, in his *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, does not go into specific details about the distinction between man and human, though he does address the problem. He asks himself who he is after he is seen naked by his cat. To him the



cat is not inferior but is animal-other with its own point of view. In his own way he breaks with the Aristotelian tradition of the animal by rethinking the limit between animal and man and suggesting that new words should be used when addressing this problem. Like Agamben, Derrida sees no solution in deleting lines between man and animal, as many other activists do. He sees the solution in multiplying them, making “limitrophy” – i.e. limits – his subject. Derrida protects animal-others from anthropocentric homogeneity, but also from the reduction to Descartes’s “animal machine” (Bruns 2008, 416).

Plessner’s work, meanwhile, does not deal so much with how to solve the problem of the limit between man and animal, as he actually defines levels of the organic and speaks of the human dichotomy between heavenly and earthly nature. Though his stance is somewhat in conflict with Agamben’s and Derrida’s, it came first and rests on Plessner’s innovative principles of philosophical anthropology – “the study of the nature of individuals through their experiences” (Britannica 2015).

In his theory of existence he differentiated humans from animals. For him, plants have utterly open self-expression and they have no ability to express their preferences regarding their environment. Animals, however, know their own borders and are pressed back within them, thus constantly limiting their expression. Finally, humans alternate between open and closed intentionality. We have these borders and we are these borders.

The question of man

Plessner’s theory of existence and his whole philosophical anthropology lies on the specific socio-politic ground of the 1920s. Both Plessner’s and Max Scheler’s philosophical anthropology was created as an expression of the crisis of the bourgeois world, its culture and its philosophy (Plessner 1981, 441). However, intriguingly, Plessner breaks with the Platonic-Christian tradition as well as with the Cartesian tradition of understanding of the world and man.

It seems that Plessner’s philosophical anthropology was created at the very beginning of breaking with classic philosophical theories, but also the very beginning of efforts to bridge the institutionalised gap between science and philosophy. This is why Plessner started rethinking the philosophical, scientific as well as human pasts (Plessner, who was born in 1892 and died in 1985, lived in a highly science-oriented society, so it is not entirely strange that he took this difficult task upon himself.

The problem itself is still relevant even today, as we have seen Agamben’s rethinking of limits between man and animal. However, at the root of the controversy between the humanities and science lies a more relevant question: the question of man. Who



is he? How can his being be defined? This is an old question that has existed from the beginning of our time. Philosophy tried to answer the question as well as religion did and later science, but it seems that every philosopher, every religion and every scientific theory has its own answer to the question.

Themes (revisited)

This section, as mentioned before, closer look at the themes will take place, linking them, and the short above overview to, *Life of Pi*. The themes – anthropomorphism, religion and science and self-perception – brought up interesting issues *Life of Pi* deals with. The short overview provided a specific philosophical background for the issues and the following section investigates the connection between themes, philosophical background and *Life of Pi*.

Both dualism and the theory of evolution have a special place in *Life of Pi*. The distinction between mind and body is present throughout the novel mainly as a basis for the evolutionary approach to the division between man and animal, but also as a basis for each of the three religions present in the novel. The criticism of dualism is therefore never direct, but conveyed through the criticism of the traditional man-animal division, the criticism of anthropomorphism and, finally, the criticism of the distinction between scientific and religious self-perception.

Life of Pi shows a great understanding of the theory of evolution and the hierarchy presented through it. It is this knowledge that allows for the criticism of the traditional superiority of man and inferiority of animals. As we have seen in the overview of the novel, Pi's father knows very well the nature of each and every animal in his zoo. In his tour of the zoo, Pi recalls a scene in which his father used the guinea pigs, the only other animal besides the tiger to have been starved at his orders, to show him that:

“You see these guinea pigs?”

“Yes, Father.”

The creatures were trembling with weakness as they frantically nibbled their kernels of corn.

“Well...” He leaned down and scooped one up.

“They're not dangerous.” (Martel 2012, 50)

The guinea pigs make for a humorous example, but they are also a way of softening the lesson the father is giving Pi (or, perhaps, contrastively showing the dangers represented by the other animals). That said, every joke has an underlying hidden truth. What the guinea pigs joke teaches us is that every being, be it human or animal, has its own nature. Animals and humans alike differ among themselves.



Unlike most visitors and people around him, the father treats animals with respect, acknowledging their nature as their deserved right and nothing out of the ordinary. This is partly because of his knowledge of the theory of evolution and partly because of the fact that animal-others, if we borrow the term from Derrida, are our fellow animals, neither superior nor inferior to us. The other reason Pi's father acknowledges the animal-others as he does is because of the fact that he does not look the other way when it comes to human nature. He knows that we are also animals and that we are capable of great brutishness. What is more, Pi's father not only acknowledges animal-others nature and sees human nature as it is, he is also aware of the fact that most people do not see this as such and that because of this denial of our nature, we are the most dangerous animal of all:

We [zookeepers] commonly say in the trade that the most dangerous animal in a zoo is Man. In a general way we mean how our species' excessive predatoriness has made the entire planet our prey. (Martel 2012, 38)

By acknowledging animal-others' nature and respecting it, and by stating the obvious yet neglected fact about deepness of human brutishness, Pi's father went against the traditional superior position of man.

Another strong criticism in *Life of Pi* mentioned before and revisited here in light of the articulated philosophical background is the criticism of anthropomorphism. As we have seen, anthropomorphism serves as a special way of defining our human self. However, this kind of reasoning leads to circular reasoning, diminishing the importance and value of animals and their nature.

Pi's father conveys the same criticism of anthropomorphism and warns Pi about the possible danger of approaching animals in such a manner. Although he speaks openly about human brutishness, he also speaks and respects animal "brutishness". His stance is that what is animal remains animal and that it will always act according to its nature, and we would be misguided to think otherwise. Forgetting animal's real nature and attributing it with a human one is dangerous both for us and the animal, especially because we are attributing it with a human nature we ourselves are incapable of accepting for what it truly is.

Pi's investigations of three different religions and his ever-growing love for any kind of spirituality gives us a fair insight into another machine of self-perception. The theory of evolution is one machine and spirituality is another. Through spirituality Pi discovers the human possibility for greatness and love. Spirituality teaches us to strive for the best – to strive to live according to, as Aristotle would put it, superhuman virtue rather than brutishness. It shows us the side that we, as humans, have always been too afraid to explore on account of its utter greatness.



In today's society this way of thinking about the human self is generally discarded as overly traditional and outdated, but *Life of Pi* speaks of both the religious, traditional concept of man, and modern, scientific concept of man. By doing so, it not only teaches about two different approaches to such concepts, but builds a basis for the criticism of the distinction between science and religion.

In dual self-perception lies the answer to the ever-growing gap between science and religion. *Life of Pi* teaches us that there are two ways of defining our human self, and each has its pros and cons. That is why some middle ground between the two is necessary, according to *Life of Pi*. If we truly want to perceive our human self in all its greatness, then we must accept both approaches.

Science teaches us about our body, how it came to be, what it is capable of and how it affects our behaviour. In contrast, religion teaches us about greatness and how we should always strive for it. The two seem irreconcilable, but Pi takes both and combines them into his unique perception of his human self. Being strongly grounded and acknowledging the wide span of human nature – but at the same time seeing that there is more to human nature than pure genes and animal instincts – is what frees us and gives us long lost freedom of open life. As Pi notes after having landed on the coast of Mexico:

I was truly alone, orphaned not only of my family, but now of Richard Parker, and nearly, I thought, of God. Of course, I wasn't. This beach, so soft, firm and vast, was like the cheek of God, and somewhere two eyes were glittering with pleasure and a mouth was smiling at having me there. (Martel 2012, 383)

The criticism of dualism through the criticism of the traditional division between man and animal, the criticism of anthropomorphism and, finally, the criticism of the distinction between scientific and religious self-perception all lead to the conclusion about the true position of man and his human self. It is the position that lies halfway between a scientific and a religious approach to self-perception.

However, this position is the position that Plessner finds problematic. According to him, this middle position is the position that leaves a man without a home, or, put differently: man is forever lost between two worlds. His self is elusive to him. The position is problematic to Plessner since, according to him, man is trapped between two worlds, paralyzed – though if we look at this trapped-ness as Pi does, it is not problematic at all. To Pi we are not trapped between two worlds. The worlds are part of us, both of them. The position is not so much between the two worlds as it is the point at which the two worlds collide – the contact point.

Philosophers see the answer to this in combining philosophy and science. In applying a philosophical approach where the scientific one reaches the dead end. This way of



thinking can be extended to the humanities in general – to reconcile the growing gap between the sciences and the humanities in order to gain a fuller understanding of the world around us and our self. Therefore, it is not strange that Pi advocates the reconciliation of science and religion.

Yann Martel said, when asked about his intentions of writing *Life of Pi*, that reality is not only one, and that according to this there are also different interpretations of reality, or, as Pi puts it, “The world isn’t just the way it is. It is how we understand it, no? And in understanding something, we bring something to it, no?” (Martel 2012, 405).

Science is one interpretation of reality, philosophy another, and religion a third. And these are not only interpretations of reality; they are also interpretations of our self. If we want to break the anthropological machine as Agamben stated, we first have to reconcile different interpretations of our self. Only by doing that will we get a chance to define our self and this is exactly what *Life of Pi* teaches us through its rehabilitation of spirituality.

Works cited

- Agamben, Giorgio. *The Open: Man and Animal*. Trans. Kevin Attell. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004. Print.
- Aristoteles. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. Robert C Bartlett and Susan D Collins. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. Print.
- Bruns, Gerald L. “Derrida’s Cat (Who Am I?)” *Research in Phenomenology* 38.3 (2008): 404–423. Print.
- Derrida, Jacques. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Trans. David Wills. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008.
- Descartes, René. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Trans. Donald A. Crees. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1960.
- Ghosh, Shubhobroto. “Nature in a Box: Representations of Zoo Animals in Canadian Literature.” *Montreal Serai*, December 28, 2011. Web. April 25. <http://montrealserai.com/2011/12/28/nature-in-a-box-representations-of-zoo-animals-in-canadian-literature/>
- Jordan, Justine. “Animal Magnetism.” Review of *Life of Pi*, by Yann Martel. *The Guardian*, May 25, 2002. <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/may/25/fiction.reviews1>. Accessed April 23, 2017.
- Kidd, Paul T. 2013. “Interpreting the Meaning of Richard Parker and the *Life of Pi*.” *Paul T Kidd’s Blog*. September 8, 2013. <http://paultkidd.blogspot.com/2013/09/interpreting-meaning-of-richard-parker.html>. Accessed April 23, 2017.
- Krist, Gary. 2002. “Taming the Tiger.” Review of *Life of Pi*, by Yann Martel. *The New York Times*, July 7, 2002. <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/07/07/books/taming-the-tiger.html>. Accessed April 23, 2017.



Martel, Yann. (2001). *Life of Pi*. Edinburgh: Canongate Books Ltd., 2012. Print.

Plessner, Helmuth. *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch: Einleitung in die philosophische Anthropologie*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1975. Print.

———. 1994. *Conditio humana: Filozofijske rasprave o antropologiji*. Zagreb: Nakladni zavod Globus: Filozofski fakultet u Zagrebu, humanistične i društvene znanosti – Zavod za filozofiju.

“Helmuth Plessner.” Last Modified February 2. <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Helmuth-Plessner>

Sandlos, John. “From Within Fur and Feathers: Animals in Canadian Literature.” *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 4 (2000): 73–91. <http://topia.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/topia/article/view/87/81>

“The Anthropological Machine.” *Thrown into the World*. August 4, 2013. <https://thrownintotheworld.wordpress.com/2013/08/04/the-anthropological-machine/>. Accessed April 23, 2017.

STELLA ASLANI / graduated from the Faculty of Arts at the University of Ljubljana in 2015, having earned a Master of Arts in English and Philosophy of Culture. In 2016 she received the Faculty of Arts' Prešeren Award for her interdisciplinary Master's thesis and enrolled in a PhD programme in Philosophy. Her current research is centred around art, human nature, epistemology and ontology, with a strong emphasis on critiques of contemporary society.

e-mail: stellaaslani@student.uni-lj.si