Fly

Little Fly
Thy summer's play
My thoughtless hand
Has brush'd away.

Am not I
A fly like thee?
Or art not thou
A man like me?

WILLIAM BLAKE, "The Fly"

Prelude

—What is your aim in philosophy?
—To shew the fly the way out of the fly-bottle.

LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN, Philosophical Investigations

A fly-bottle is an item of laboratory equipment used in the study of fruit flies (Drosophila). It is not especially sophisticated, and in fact half-pint milk bottles were often used in the early days of research. The science writer Jonathan Weiner has suggested, nonetheless, that this humble bottle is “one of the most significant legacies that the science of the twentieth century bequeaths to the twenty-first.”1 He describes how, by studying fruit flies, early geneticists first began to fathom the complicated connections between a creature’s genes and its behavior. A mutant fly, bred in one of these makeshift bottles by the biologist Thomas Hunt Morgan early in 1910, marked the first success in a lengthy experimental process that would finally discover the basic elements of inheritance. The fly-bottle is, Wiener argues, “a great gift and disturbance that human knowledge conveys to the night thoughts and day-to-day life of the third millennium.”2

Ludwig Wittgenstein saw his work as a kind of therapy. Philosophy has a propensity to generalize, to draw false analogies, to misuse everyday words, and to abuse language in colorful but ultimately fruitless ways. By diagnosing the range and subtlety of this mistreatment, Wittgenstein hoped to ease the “mental cramp” that it so often engenders.3 Only by untangling the misconceptions that lie behind seemingly intractable questions can we hope to move forward, to relieve ourselves of endless internal conflict, to free the fly from the bottle. Socrates, Wittgenstein suggests, was prone to just such a generalizing weakness. In his dialogue with young Theaetetus, he sought to examine the nature of that gift and disturbance that is human knowledge. Wittgenstein’s complaint is not with the stated objective of Socrates’ inter-

2. Ibid., 7.
rogation, but with the means by which he carries it out. “When Socrates asks the question, ‘what is knowledge?’ he does not even regard it as a preliminary answer to enumerate cases of knowledge.” Indeed, Socrates explicitly rejects Theaetetus's first attempt to provide an answer by specifying particular examples of knowledge, such as the sciences of geometry, astronomy, harmony, and arithmetic, or the practical crafts of the cobbler and carpenter. Examples will never manage to convey what knowledge itself is, Socrates says, and are, moreover, “an interminable diversion.” He encourages Theaetetus to propose, instead, succinct definitions and considers, in turn, the suggestion that knowledge is a matter of perception, that it can be equated with true belief, and finally that it is true belief with the addition of an explanatory account.

Theaetetus is persuaded that each of these possibilities is wanting and, though the exchange clarifies for him the paucity of his understanding, no conclusions are reached. Despite the older philosopher's help with his labors, we can only imagine that Theaetetus's cramps remain.

At the dialogue's close, he is left buzzing round an epistemological bottle of Socrates' making, as the latter sets out for the courthouse to answer charges of corrupting the youth and failing to worship the Athenian gods.

Socrates' own target in the early part of the Theaetetus is the sophist Protagoras. Only fragments of Protagoras's work survive, recounted in the writings of later commentators, but it is clear that he opposed realist accounts of knowledge, Platonic or otherwise, and subscribed to a form of relativism or, perhaps better, pragmatism. The opening words of his lost book Truth comprise his most famous assertion: “Man is the measure of all things.” Socrates takes exception to the crude phenomenal subjectivism that Protagoras seems to imply. “I don't see why he does not say . . . that a pig or a dog-faced baboon or some still stranger creature of those that have sensations is the measure of all things.” Protagoras's precise meaning, presumably elaborated in the full text, has been the subject of much discussion, but his basic thesis has endured, thrived even, down the centuries. The contention that humanity cannot know the world except by means of human aptitudes and abilities, that human being will inescapably, unavoidably be the measure of all things, has been formulated in a variety of captivating ways, by a good many philosophers, thinkers, and theorists. It is with this claim, regarding the nature of knowledge and of human being, that we will be concerned.

4. Ibid., 20.
5. Plato, Theaetetus, 146c–d.
6. Plato, Theaetetus, 147c, as translated in Chappell, “Plato on Knowledge,” §5.
7. πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον ἐστίν ἀνθρώπος, cited in Plato, Theaetetus, trans. Fowler, 152a; see also Sextus Empiricus, Outlines of Pyrrhonism, 131 (1.32.216). On translating ἀνθρώπος (anthrōpos), which is perhaps not quite as gender neutral as he suggests, see Schiappa, Protagoras and Logos, 131n4.
9. For example, Aristotle, Metaphysics, 1678 (11.6.1062b); Sextus Empiricus, Outlines of Pyrrhonism, 131–32 (1.32.216–19); Versenyi, “Protagoras' Man-Measure Fragment”; Schiappa, Protagoras and Logos, 117–33.
Is one obliged to assert, as has so often been suggested, that humans are stopped up, as if within a bleak, restricting container, unable to access the wider world except through the translucent but necessarily distorting sides of their prison? I wish to examine the presumed inevitability of this Protagorean perspective, this epistemological anthropocentrism, and to enquire whether it derives from elements that are intrinsic to the writings of these diverse philosophers or is, rather, an extraneous, incidental prejudice of those already inclined to hold this position.

Unlike William Blake’s thoughtless hand, the fly-bottle represents a concerted effort to curtail the fly’s play. Philosophy has long maintained an ambiguous relationship with animals. On the one hand, the animal frequently confronts philosophy as a problem. This is “the animal that philosophy loathes,” disrupting all manner of categories and concepts, a troublesome beast that refuses to fit in. On the other hand, though, philosophy never quite seems to manage without its animals. Time and again, we find a multitude of brutes and beasts crowding into the texts in which they are supposedly unwelcome. We will return in the chapters that follow to the animals who appear under both of these complementary, thoughtless hands. We will meet J. L. Austin’s fish and Arthur Schopenhauer’s porcupines, Augustine’s eagle and Sigmund Freud’s wolves, inferred swans and mice, self-absorbed lice, tautological camels, licentious gulls, and many more of philosophy’s overlooked or neglected creatures. Like language, these philosophical animals often find themselves subject to casual or unwitting abuse. Wittgenstein’s intention was to free his fly, however, and we will follow his example, or, better, his many concrete examples, by attempting to treat our own, particular, individual animals with compassion. There are many ways that we might interrogate the question of humanity’s measure-

10. Krell, Daimon Life, 68.
ing, but it is with the help of these marginal ani-
mals, the flies and pigs and dog-faced baboons,
and all manner of still stranger creatures, that
we will approach it. We would do well, then, to
allow them a free hand, and to indulge that play,
mischievous though it often proves, for which
they are known.

The first chapter is concerned with the
concept of anthropocentrism and the problems
raised by employing animals to address it. I
examine Georges Bataille’s assertion, illustrated
by means of goshawk and hen, that humanity,
unlike eternally immanent animality, cannot
help but transcend the world, always positing
distinct, durable objects. In discussing Martin
Heidegger’s account of disclosive demarcation,
denied to the lizard and effected only by means
of the unique human hand, I go on to distin-
guish an evaluative anthropocentrism, conceived
in spatial, hierarchical terms, from the temporal,
“first-and-foremost,” epistemological anthro-
pocentrism with which we will principally be
concerned. Four hazards are identified for any
undertaking that would put animals to philo-
sophical work. Like Jean Buridan’s hungry ass,
they are often retained as mere ciphers, place-
fillers who sustain an argument but remain face-
less and interchangeable. Alternatively, they can
be found subsumed under an amorphous Ani-
mal, an abstract, generalized chimera that lays
waste to rigorous thinking. On the other hand,
in treating of specific, individual animals, phi-
losophy runs the risk of anthropomorphism—
consider Aesop’s fickle fox—an alleged disservice
to both human and animal. Finally, these same
individuals, as didactic exemplars, are in danger
of becoming stereotypes, dulling fresh thinking
by habitual repetition, as Roland Barthes’s edu-
cative lion demonstrates. We must be wary, in the
chapters that follow, of all these careless modes
to taming the animal and attend, where possible,
to the unsubstitutable singularity, and indexical
import, of disruptive individuals like Jacques
Derrida’s indecisive but determined cat.

These potential stumbling blocks noted,
the task remains to enumerate cases of knowl-
edge, or rather cases that have been made for
knowledge. How, then, might we best grasp the
tangled questions of epistemology and their
supposed anthropocentrism? How should we
take in hand Protagoras’s claim and marshal the
diverse writers who have given voice to it, or,
more often, have assumed or implied it, in their
discussions of knowledge? Before capturing the
Marathonian Bull, or venturing into Hades, the
Greek hero Theseus undertook a series of six
labors. Setting out from Troezen to Athens, he
freed the road from the bandits and miscreants
preying on those who used it. He dealt with each
in the manner in which they had terrorized trav-
elers: he hunted and slaughtered the man-eating
Crommyonian Sow and the hag, Phaia, who kept
her; Sciron the Corinthian he kicked into the
sea, where swam a monstrous turtle; and so on.
The last of the bandits was named Procrustes, and he had a peculiar means of dispatching his victims. Having offered a night’s hospitality to unsuspecting travelers, he would compel them to lay down on a special bed. Those who were too short he would stretch or hammer to fit it, and those too tall he would cut to size. Theseus saw to him as he had the others, though it is not recorded whether he had recourse to a hammer or a saw. In attempting to broach the question of the measure of all things, of knowledge conceived in its broadest sense as perception, true belief, an explanatory account, or something else again, I will employ a frame or schema, perhaps a little rigid like Procrustes’, of my own.

In examining the work of the varied epistemologists who populate the following chapters 2 through 4, we will fit their thoughts and theories into three paradigms, under the headings realism, relativism, and pragmatism. Further, these writers can be understood as conceiving their accounts and formulations according to three related qualities of knowledge that cross these paradigms: they have concerned themselves with the ontology of knowledge, which is to say with what it is; with the utility of knowledge, which is to say with what it does; and with the validity of knowledge, which is to say with what it claims. Thus, the works we will discuss explore or exemplify some property of knowledge, addressing it as mediated representation or as concrete practice, as explanation of the world or as the interpretations of a worldview, as transcendental truth or as partial perspective. The schema here employed is a means of charting a course across uneven ground, of clearing a path, as did Theseus, through treacherous terrain. Any such schema or system inevitably does violence to its subject matter; every schema is ultimately a prescriptive, Procrustean frame. The benefits of such an approach are best measured by their effectiveness in facilitating the progress of an undertaking. The challenge, then, will be to ensure that our frame ultimately works for us, as did the bed for Theseus, lest we find ourselves in thrall to our own invention, as happened to Procrustes.

The second chapter addresses the characteristic concerns of epistemological realism. Prompted by those who would claim that “things outside of us” have no more certain an existence than the gorgons and harpies of legend, G. E. Moore was anxious to provide a proof of the external world. His personal attempt to address this scandalous assertion was carried out with his own two hands, though he ended up taking advantage of the several animals who populate his discussion. Karl Popper, meanwhile, characterized objective knowledge as a shared endeavor, produced, refined, and consumed by a busy, bustling community, like the honey of a beehive. Friedrich Nietzsche, however, in his early critique of human knowledge, denied the

very possibility of transcendental truth, whether arrived at by individual or collective means. Dis-
simulating and self-deceiving humans share
with the lowly gnat the pathos of believing them-
selves to be the center of the universe, forgetting
that, like the bird, the worm, and every other liv-
ing thing, they create for themselves an entirely
subjective structure. Human conceptions are cast
forth onto the world with the same necessity as
the spider spins her webs, neatly arranging it like
the compartments of a dovecote. In its efforts
to reach the original essences, humanity grasps
after the impossible, attempting to hold fast to
the back of a tiger. Given Moore's unwitting an-
thropocentrism and Nietzsche's critique of truth,
then, I explore in this chapter the possibility that
realism's conception of knowledge always entails
a Protagorean perspective.

The third chapter examines epistemologi-
cal relativism. The same disquiet that troubled
Moore had earlier been expressed by Immanuel
Kant, and it is to his transcendental idealism that
we turn. Concerned to avoid mistreating a goat
in his own pursuit of truth, Kant argued that a
specific form of sensibility and understanding
enables and determines human thought and
experience. This digestive system of the mind
ensures access only to phenomena, never to
noumena: one encounters and can know the ap-
pearance of a dog but not the underlying “thing
in itself.” Kant described man, the sole being
on earth in possession of reason, as the “lord of
nature,” and his Copernican revolution seemed
to place the human subject center stage, but he
discusses too the varying material and mental
composition of reasoning extraterrestrials liv-
ing on Mercury, Mars, Venus, and elsewhere.
His representationalism exhibits an implicit,
if ultimately capped, relativism. Ferdinand de
Saussure’s ox and his bœuf, meanwhile, as well
as the dogs who bark quite differently in French
and German, help demonstrate the arbitrary
and immaterial nature of the linguistic sign.
The reciprocal delimitation of thought and
sound within diverse languages, exemplified by
sheep and mouton, here moves us closer to a true
relativism. Finally, an amorous raccoon and an
ill-spoken sparrow permit Benjamin Whorf to
argue that languages determine experience. De-
spite Whorf’s faith in a fundamental humanism,
the Hopi pōkko, who may be a dog or may be an
eagle, points finally toward a radical linguistic
relativism. Given Kant’s accounts of human and
alien minds and Whorf’s hope for a universal
human brotherhood, then, I consider in this
chapter the possibility that relativism’s concep-
tion of knowledge rests always on an epistemo-
logical anthropocentrism.

The fourth chapter explores the prop-
ties of pragmatism. The Theban Sphinx chal-
lenged the truth seeker Oedipus with a deadly
riddle, whose single answer accorded closely
with Protagoras’s concern. In contemplating her
demand, however, the Sphinx taught Nietzsche
to reconsider her questionable questions, and we find that there is, in fact, more than one answer both to her riddle and to the question of truth. Nietzsche pursues in his mature work an evaluative perspectivism, eschewing the lowly outlook of frogs and dusty scholars and seeking always to renew his opinions, like the snake who sheds the skin she has outgrown. During his solitary rambles in the mountains, William James is confronted with a riddle of his own, this time propounded by an elusive squirrel, and he is later shown the way out of the woods by a herd of absent cows. His interest in the practical consequences of one's explanation of the world, in the expediency of one's theories and conjectures, is echoed by Ludwig Boltzmann, whose intention in his own work is to muddy the metaphysicians’ ascetic waters by slipping a pike into the complacent carp pond of philosophy. Prompted by a discourteous gesture, once employed to provoke Wittgenstein from his dogmatic slumbers, we next consider Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, but as a meme, a cultural practice shaped and impeded by environmental pressures. It was not his infamous finches but commonplace pigeons who allowed Darwin to demonstrate the malleability of species, whilst communities of enterprising passerines—thieving bluetits and voluble saddlebacks—today exchange memes of their own. Given the riddle of the Sphinx and the suggestion that human minds are composed of memes, then, I examine in this chapter the possibility that pragmatism's conception of knowledge depends on a first-and-foremost anthropocentrism.

The writings we will consider in these three central chapters thus provide particular examples not of knowledge but of properties of knowledge as it is conceived by three epistemological paradigms. The fifth and final chapter turns to the human being on which matters of anthropocentrism ultimately rest. Heidegger complained that the question, “Who is man?”—a vital, preliminary enquiry before any investigation of “humanization”—has rarely been adequately asked, let alone answered. Michel Foucault, however, suspicious of the supple contradictions of the humanistic theme, insisted that issues of identity are never prior to the formulation of one's questions. Consistently refusing to align or ally himself, he wrote instead to excavate fresh, untraveled tunnels in a Minotaur's labyrinth of his own making, to unearth, in fact, a new “we.” And so, we examine that distinctive, distinguishing organ, the hand, characterized in the writings of teleologist and evolutionist alike as a mark of human exceptionalism. Charles Bell dismissed the inferior analogues that are the monkey's dextrous tail and the elephant's grasping trunk, whilst Galen laughed at the ape’s ludicrous hand, an inadequate, preposterous homologue. Despite the inexhaustible eulogies of Aristotle and Kant, of Anaxagoras and Frederick Engels, however, we
find that the perfected human hand, the instrument of instruments, is in truth a rather primitive organ. Considerations and classifications of \textit{anthrōpos} need, ultimately, to take account of heterogeneous, incongruous, even heteroclite modes of narcissistic identification, and we discover, in closing, a new, encompassing, more-than-human “we.”

In this philosophical investigation into Protagorean presumption, we will gain no small benefit from the assistance of animals. The creatures put to work by philosophers and thinkers, though they ordinarily go unnoticed or ignored, will, in the pages that follow, nudge their way back into view, all insisting on their own distinctive, individual contributions to the task at hand. In this five-fingered bestiary, no animal will be brushed away. On the contrary, as we seek to unstop our chosen bottle and free the many prisoners from within, we will find that, as Blake suggested, we have more in common with the little fly than is oft supposed.