

The Philosophy of ‘Fish’: Knowledge, Christianity, and Humanity in D. H. Lawrence’s Poem

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‘Fish’ is a poem in which the speaker’s encounter with a fish leads to questions about how we seek to understand other animals and the implications of this. Indeed, this is seen across multiple poems in the collection *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* (1923) to which it belongs. For instance, in ‘Snake’ ‘there is the same recognition of the mystery of otherness [... which] can also be found in [...] the six poems about tortoises’ (Ellis 397-398). This essay is concerned with these ideas of human and animal encounters. Within ‘Fish’ such ideas are layered because of the poem’s relation to philosophical discourses on animals, as well as its discussion of humanism and religion. This essay will argue that the speaker initially attempts to comprehend the nature of a fish in contrasting and reductive ways, leading to contemplations about core aspects of humanity and Christianity. In order to accomplish this, the essay is structured into two broad sections which address each part of the thesis in turn.

The different approaches to comprehending the ‘suchness’ of a fish

Throughout the poem the speaker utilises numerous methods in a bid ‘to get into the suchness of fish’ (Oates 655). The two main approaches the speaker uses are the dualist human/animal distinction and anthropomorphism which are contrasting in nature.

Firstly, the speaker relies on the human to animal binary. This can be seen early on when the speaker remarks that fish have ‘[n]o fingers, no hands and feet, no lips; / No tender muzzles, / No wistful bellies, No loins of desire, / None’, which describes them by their absences of human characteristics and bodily parts (Lawrence ll.24-28). There is a clear listing of human body parts that are associated with sensory feeling and experience. For instance, ‘fingers’ and ‘hands’ relate to touch, ‘lips’ with kissing and tasting, and ‘muzzles’ with smelling. The adjective ‘wistful’ evokes a state of longing and want, something frequently associated with ideas of advanced sentience. The term ‘loins

of desire' develops this within a sexual frame to connote sensual passion and lust. Understanding this, we can see how the anaphora of 'no' works to develop a negative construction around the physicality of the fish through focussing on the *absence* of what the speaker deems to be 'humanness'. It approaches the fish's physicality with a focus on what is not there instead of the presence of unique features that compose the fish. This creates a negative tone surrounding the creature's physicality and clearly establishes it in binary to the human body. Such framing is supported through the placing of '[n]one' on its own separate line. Additionally, the use of frequent caesurae creates an irregularity in the meter and forces the reader to pause after each listed item.

The speaker is therefore approaching the fish through a lens which utilises the human body as the basis of measurement. Doing so highlights the profound differences between humans and fish, adhering to the human to animal binary which sets animals as a distant and subordinate 'other'. Such an approach is in line with Michel de Montaigne's observations in his classic work 'An Apology for Raymond Sebond' (1569) where he states that '[i]t is through the vanitie of the same imagination that [Man] dare equall himself to God, that he ascribeth divine conditions unto himself, that he selecteth and separateth himselfe from out the ranke of other creatures' (Chapter 12). What he means by this is that it is with the same pride that makes humans think they are god-like, that they assign themselves the role and authority to distinguish themselves as better than other animals. Montaigne thus appreciates the power humans have given themselves over other animals through constructions such as the human to animal binary which work to 'separateth' the human from what it deems 'other'. The use of the terms 'vanitie' and 'dare' reveal Montaigne's own perspective that such an approach by humans is both narrow-minded and insufficient, and the poem also seems to promote this through swiftly moving on from such a methodology for understanding and trying other methods.

One of these other methods include the speaker's use of anthropomorphism as a means of containing the creature within a category that is familiar. This is in direct contrast to the prior reliance on the human to animal binary, displaying the difficulty the speaker is having with appropriately reasoning the being of a fish. An example of this is when the speaker describes the fish as '[a] slim young pike, with smart fins / And grey-striped suit, a young cub of a pike / Slouching along away below, half out of sight, / Like a lout on an obscure pavement' (Lawrence ll.104-105). In this stanza the speaker, being '[f]aced with the incomprehensibility of fish, is briefly tempted to dress them in human clothes [...] but to no effect' (Warehan 8). The noun 'pike' specifies to some degree the type of fish he is talking about. The speaker compares the fish's markings to a 'suit' which connotes human business attire and thus projects a sense of formality onto the fish. His use of the adjective 'smart'

plays with its dual meanings of being well presented in appearance and describing intelligence. The simile '[l]ike a lout on obscure pavement' attempts to align streams of water to pavements which are structures unique to human civilisation and, further, compares the fish to an aggressive and rowdy male. Comparing the fish in this way appeals to aspects considered more 'primal' within humans: aggression, violence, lacking social etiquette. In this way, such anthropomorphism is derogative and still contains the hierarchal elements of the ideology behind the human to animal binary.

The speaker also subtly manipulates rhythm and sound in order to reflect the way in which the fish resists the anthropomorphic approach. This is as in the first two lines there is a parallel rhythmic structure created through the use of placing of a caesura after each two-iamb description, '[a] slim young pike'/'[a]nd grey-striped suit', and emphasised by the persistent monosyllabic language. This changes however in the following lines where the placing of disyllabic words, '[s]louching along away below', breaks up such parallel rhythmic structuring and alters the pulse to land on the first foot as opposed to the second foot as was in the earlier lines. The effect of this is to suddenly shift the pulse to reflect the speaker's own shifting perception of the fish as he realises that such an anthropomorphic approach is limited and inappropriate. This shifting effect is supported by the gradual displacement of the sibilance found in the first two lines, with the creation of assonance through the repeated long 'l' sounds and open 'a' and 'ow' in the final two lines of the stanza. The rhythm and sound therefore work to unsettle the speaker's thought process.

Such an unsettling is built upon by the way that the use of anthropomorphism is quickly dispelled as an appropriate lens through which to approach the comprehension of fish. This is seen when only a line later the speaker remarks '[b]ut watching closer / That motionless deadly motion, / That unnatural barrel body, that long ghoul nose, . . . / I left off hailing him.' (Lawrence ll.109-112). Opening the stanza with the connective 'but' indicates this impending change in perspective. The adjective 'closer' implies that such an anthropomorphic approach was one taken at first glance and without consideration for greater detail. The oxymoronic phrase 'motionless deadly motion' 'catches something uncanny' (Felstiner 166) which according to Freud, whose ideas were published only a few years before the publication of this poem, can be defined as 'heimlich' (meaning familiar and tame or concealed and secretive) and 'unheimlich' (meaning unfamiliar or revealed) (Freud 232). Freud argues that '[w]hat is *heimlich* thus comes to be *unheimlich*' meaning the uncanny is what is both familiar and yet unfamiliar. (827). Such an effect he sees as being 'undoubtedly related to what is frightening – to what arouses dread and horror [... it] is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar' (Freud 825). This is certainly captured from the balancing of the anthropomorphism

with the human to animal binary, and in this section emphasised through the speaker's use of the adverb 'deadly' which positions the fish in a more threatening and *frightening* light. This is developed through the description of the fish's 'unnatural barrel body' which shows him slipping back into the distancing between himself and the fish found earlier when he utilised the human/animal binary. The speaker's use of the adjective 'unnatural' emphasises the human centric core of both of the approaches analysed so far. The noun 'barrel' compares the physicality of the fish to a cylindrical shape and object. Additionally, the description of its 'long ghoul nose' further objectifies the fish because 'ghoul' is a type of evil and demonic spirit or ghost that is monstrous. The etymology of the word reveals its roots in Arabic culture, particularly Arabic folklore and, later on, in Islam. In folklore such a creature is shape shifting and eats dead humans. In this way the fish is not only aligned with monstrous beings from a different spiritual realm, but further aligned against the western context of Christianity. This connects to the essay's later focus on the way the encounter with the fish leads to challenges to the principles of Christianity.

To summarise, the speaker approaches the fish with an anthropomorphic mindset which is quickly dispelled as an appropriate methodology for understanding fish. Despite its inadequacies, 'language condemns us to anthropomorphising' both 'the otherness of the natural world and its inhabitants' (Ellis 398). Because of this, such an anthropomorphic approach appears inevitable despite its limitations.

The implications of such approaches regarding humanity and Christianity

Though undertaken, such methods are proved to be limited in their ability to accurately capture the suchness of the fish that the speaker has encountered. It is this precise insufficiency that leads the speaker to related realisations about humanity and Christianity. Such existential considerations about the limits of human ability to gain knowledge are not unique to just 'Fish', indeed in other poems within the collection *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* this is explored, most notably in 'Mosquito' whereby the mosquito seems able to read the thoughts of humans (Ellis 399). In 'Fish' however the implications on humanity and Christianity are weaved in with one another. Because of this, it seems most appropriate to go through the key instances where points raised about humanity, and therefore inevitably Christianity, are found, and analyse them in turn. This also enables the tracking of such ideas and how they are developed throughout the poem.

The integration of Christianity into the poem's focus on the fish is abundantly clear. Even the choice of the fish as a choice of animal links to Ichthys the Greek symbol used by early Christians and the metaphor of the fishermen as often applied to Jesus and his disciples in the bible. The author's own religious views were complex, for instance in 'D. H. Lawrence, "A Passionately Religious Man"' it states that 'he rejected the Christian creed at the age of twenty-two when at university, he went on wrestling imaginatively and emotionally with the significance of Christ for the rest of his life' (Kinkead-Weekes 379). Despite this, a deconstructionist approach reminds us that we are not to assume that the speaker is the same as the poet and so should not allow this to overly influence the reading of 'Fish'.

In the poem, the speaker's encounter with the fish leads to the speaker's realisation that humans are limited in the knowledge they are able to obtain. Such observations are tied up with the poem's pondering and challenging of core principles of Christianity particularly in regard to polytheism. We can see this in an earlier instance in the poem when the speaker states 'I had made a mistake, I didn't know him, / This grey, monotonous soul in the water, / This intense individual in shadow, / Fish-alive/ I didn't know his God/ I didn't know his God' (Lawrence ll.113-116). Opening the stanza in this way creates a bluntly confessional tone, marking the speaker's recognition that things have changed and that over the course of his encounter with the fish he has undergone a journey of self-transformation. This is emphasised by the repetition of the person pronoun 'I' which highlights that his realisation about the elusive and incomprehensible nature of the fish has affected his own identity. The admission that 'I didn't know him' acknowledges the boundaries of human knowledge because of the limitations of human means of understanding. Reasoning and imagination are limited in the ability to gather a posteriori truth, which is knowledge that one must experience in order to understand. This is reflected in the later lines when he describes the fish as being 'in shadow' as it connotes darkness and a lack of clarity over its form and nature.

Such contemplations are in line with the ideas of Thomas Nagel in his essay 'What Is It Like to Be a Bat?' when he states how '[o]ur own experience provides the basic material for our imagination, whose range is therefore limited [...] if I try to imagine [what it is like to be an animal...] I am restricted to the resources of my own mind, and those resources are inadequate to the task' (438). The speaker appears to have come to the same conclusion as Nagel as he repeatedly states his absence of ability to know the fish, the absence of all humans to truly know a fish. Taking this in a more extreme line, it can be argued that such realisations edge on solipsism whereby it is believed that all that can be known is the self and nothing else.

Within the same passage, such observations about the limitations of human knowledge are followed with statements that challenge Christian ideas of animals and God. Firstly, in the speaker's description of the fish he refers to it as '[t]his grey, monotonous soul in the water' (Lawrence l.114). The notion of this fish being a 'soul' goes against the Christian belief that animals do not themselves have souls. Additionally, the speaker repeats the phrase 'I didn't know his God' within their own isolated stanza to formally emphasise both his realisation of the limits of human knowledge and also his belief that there are other gods. The possessive pronoun 'his' distinguishes between the God of man and the God of the fish. This adheres to a polytheistic view whereby there is a co-existence of multiple deities and is in direct disagreement with the core Christian belief of a single God. The conclusion the speaker reaches therefore is that because of the sheer differences between man and fish and his inability to comprehend what they are, they must have an alternative creator whom he, a human, cannot access.

These challenges and ideas raised by the speaker in regard to Christianity and human knowledge are developed as the poem goes on. This is particularly seen a bit later on when the speaker extends his claim about the limits of human knowledge to '*the one God*', seeing God as also being limited in his scope (Lawrence l.128). This can be seen when the speaker declares that '[...] I said to my heart, *there are limits / To you, my heart; / And to the one God. / Fishes are beyond me. / Other Gods / Beyond my range...gods beyond my God...*' (ll.124-129). The frequent phrasing of the speaker directing his speech to his heart using italics which seem to be the marker for more personal introspection and thoughts. In this instance it has been extended through the repetition of the '[t]o you' structure to direct his words and judgments onto God. The use of the phrase '*to the one God*' seems to direct it at the monotheistic Christian God and as such his judgement would be considered blasphemous within Christian thought by suggesting there are limits to his knowledge or capacity for comprehension.

The latter two lines, '[o]ther Gods/ Beyond my range...gods beyond my God...' utilises listing to set up a hierarchal ordering of the God of fish and the God of man. This is because of the parallel linguistic structuring, hidden by the enjambement of the 'Other Gods'. Here the speaker sets up a hierarchal binary whereby other gods are beyond his human brain, but similarly these other gods are beyond his God. He has aligned his subordinate position within the relationship between him and the other gods, with his own God in the relationships with the other gods. The use of short lines and frequent caesurae create a clipped pulse as though conveying the fragmented and incomplete knowledge the speaker believes both humans and the Christian God have. The use of ellipses toward the end display the profoundness of such a statement which is both polytheistic and establishes a

hierarchy where the God of humans remains below the God of fish, as they are 'beyond' the human God. This shows how he has therefore extended his earlier ideas of there being separate and distinct deities for man and fish, by applying hierarchy and order to their abilities and status.

The third way we see the impact of the speaker's failure to capture the suchness of a fish is in his challenge to an anthropocentric perspective. Again, such contemplations about humanity are delivered at the same time as the speaker's challenges to Christian thought, in this instance about the omnipotence of God. This is seen when he says '*I am not the measure of creation. / This is beyond me, this fish. / His God stands outside my God*' (Lawrence ll.145-148). Here we see a development in the earlier descriptions of the presence of 'gods beyond my God' as was previously analysed (Lawrence l.129). This is as, he affirms the hierarchy whereby the God of the fish is in the dominant position by positioning him 'outside my God'. This implies that the God of fish is not bound by the laws or powers of the God of humans, he is unaffected by our God. This suggests that the God exists in another realm and as such so do the fish who, though occupying the same physical space as humans on earth, belong to an alternative creator who is greater than ours.

The beginning of the same stanza further challenges the anthropocentric perspective through which we rely on in our approaches to animals. Such a viewpoint is one that exists throughout the collection to which 'Fish' belongs, with Janik even arguing that it 'is the central theme and most valuable message of *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*' (366). The speaker realises that humans are not the point from which all things are to be understood which is generally defined as a post-humanist perspective. When he states that '[t]his is beyond me, this fish' it not only shows that the fish exists outside of his ability to comprehend it, but also that its existence *means* more than its relation to humans and finds its value in things *bigger* than humanity.

This shows a recognition for the scope of existence and such a challenge to the anthropocentric viewpoint which is supported by his application of this realisation when he says '[a]nd I, a many-fingered horror of daylight to him' (Lawrence ll.157-158). Here the speaker switches the traditional perspective of humans looking at animals, through detailing his own physicality in a de-naturalising way. The simplistic phrase 'many-fingered' works to bluntly confront the strangeness of the human body which is often unseen through the process of naturalisation. Furthermore, 'horror' demonstrates how humans themselves can be viewed as scary beings and reminds us of the earlier instances in the poem when the speaker utilised the uncanny in his descriptions of the fish's physicality.

Challenging humanity's tendency to use humans as the reference point for the rest of the world in this way adheres to the ideas of John Berger in his essay 'Why Look at Animals' (1977). In this, he

reminds us that when animals look at man, man 'too is looking across a similar, but not identical, abyss of non-comprehension [...] when [man] is being seen by the animal, he is being seen as his surroundings are seen by him. His recognition of this is what makes the look of the animal familiar. And yet the animal is distinct and can never be confused with man. Thus, a power is ascribed to the animal, comparable with human power but never coinciding with it' (Berger 14) What he means by this is acknowledging that when we look at animals, they are also looking back in a seemingly similar way; as he argues earlier the animal 'does not reserve a special look for man' (Berger 13). It reminds us that humans are not the only ones performing the role of watching and attempting to comprehend the animal.

In conclusion, the speaker initially attempted to comprehend the suchness of the fish through the contradicting methods of the human/animal binary and anthropomorphism. The discovery of the limitations of such approaches resulted in realisations and challenges to humanity and Christianity. From this analysis, it is easy to see the way the poem so greatly 'illustrate[s ... an] artistic grasp of "all aroundness" and "insideness"' (Janik 124). 'Fish' is therefore a transformative poem and in challenging the foundations of both humanity and Christianity creates an uncertainty and hyper-awareness of the difficulties of truly knowing anything in both the speaker and reader. Such uncertainty can be moulded into a fear for the unknown or freedom from the need to know. In the case of the speaker, it appears that his realisations lead him to a peaceful reconciliation with his present state and surroundings. This is captured poignantly in the poem's final lines: 'In the beginning / Jesus was called The Fish ... / And in the end' (Lawrence ll.179-181).

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