



— SPEAK EASY ! —

PHILOSOPHICAL JOURNEY

BY DAVID LOWE

Sometimes when you are sitting in a train on a long journey, you start to think in a funny philosophical way: "The runaway train went over the hill and she blew." Why am I here? Where am I going? The SNCF ticket collector could give you a rather simplistic answer to this last question. He'll tell you where you are going and even at what time you will arrive, but on arrival you will still have these unsettling questions floating about in your head. The metaphysical equivalent of "Did I lock the car?"

Sartre took 700 pages in *L'Être et le Néant* to arrive at a sort of answer. Peggy Lee took three minutes in the song "Is that all there is?" Peggy Lee's conclusion was "so let's break out the booze and have a ball" – something which, in a roundabout way, the announcement from the person running the bar on this TGV has almost certainly asked you to do already. If Sartre were on the train, he'd most probably be in the bar having a drink with Peggy Lee.

My Peggy Lee moment came just a few weeks ago when I held a female baby gibbon called Betty in my arms – it was for a TV programme. I looked into her eyes and she stared back into mine with a look that seemed to see right through me into my soul, if I had one she seemed to infer. It provoked in me a feeling of *vertige existentiel* – it sounds better in French, just like *tartine beurrée* sounds better than *slice of bread and butter*.

Betty's look caused me a moment of self-awareness, just as when a high-speed train going the other way flashes by and the sudden rapid shock strips you naked. The naked ape, which leads me from Betty the gibbon to Darwin. The latter is the bald, bearded man on the back of the British ten pound note: quite appropriate for the author of *The Origin of the Species*, or rather, as it is known across the Channel, *De l'Origine des Espèces* [*espèces* also being French for cash]!

In a word, Darwin's theory of evolution explains why your index finger is just the right size to fit into your nose and why, despite the fact that even though the males of certain religious persuasions have been

circumcised for the last few thousand years, the males are still born with a foreskin.

Life apparently started a few billion years ago as a form of microbic jelly in the sea. It is reassuring for an Englishman to discover that we started with the dessert and even more reassuring to discover that the dessert was jelly. We share 99% of our DNA with gorillas, but at the same time we also share 75% of our DNA with cucumbers. We are of the same family as vegetables – not close enough to invite them to a wedding, of course, and distant enough not to feel guilty about eating them.

Man is so to speak sitting on the end of an evolutionary branch of the tree of all living things, and on this same branch, nearer the trunk, is Betty the gibbon staring at me. The answer to the enigma of the "gibbon stare" that I would like to suggest is that for Betty I was the equivalent of the ticket collector, and Betty the gibbon, although she was on the same train as me, had no ticket. She knew that even though I was holding her in my arms she would get thrown off at the next stop. Bon voyage.

