

Book Review

Why We Are in Need of Tails

Maria daVenza Tillmanns with illustrations by Blair Thornley

Iguana Books (Toronto)

35 pages

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Review by Sergey Borisov

A wonderful philosophical book with a mysterious title "Why We are in Need Tails" lies before me. The book is a short story by the philosopher Maria daVenza Tillmanns, accompanied by illustrations by the artist Blair Thornley.

Maria teaches philosophy with children in a program developed in collaboration with the University of California at San Diego. In 1980, she enrolled in a Teacher Trainer workshop in Philosophy for Children conducted by Matthew Lipman. In 1998 she received her PhD in Philosophical Counseling and Teaching under the guidance of Maurice Friedman (a world-renowned Martin Buber scholar). Thus, the author of the book I am introducing is an accomplished professional philosopher with her own distinctive and unique style. For Maria, philosophy is an art form and she likes to "paint with ideas" (p. 35). A talented artist Blair Thornley embodied these ideas in her illustrations. Blair is an award-winning illustrator with publications in *The New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, *Washington Post*, and others. She has also illustrated the books of writers Peter De Vries and James Thurber.

So, what's this book about? How did its author manage to put big philosophy into one small story? To understand this requires basic philosophical training, but even without it, it greatly appeals to the imagination. The characters of this amazing book—Huk and Tuk—are used to expressing their friendship through their tails. Friendship is a strong ties-tails that binds people together. These ties, though strong, enhance freedom. Besides, these ties should be organic; they should be natural, not artificial. It is a pity that we rarely have that magical "tail" that connects us to one another's presence in our lives, even as we are busy with our daily activities.

Over time, many artificial devices for the convenience of our lives made the tails unnecessary, and they gradually disappeared. And only then the scale of the catastrophe became clear, which was

that people lost direct tail-contact with each other. Communication lost its intense subtlety and precision. People began to compensate for the lack of communication with the help of language. But if previously only the tail was enough to communicate, now it takes hundreds of words to convey or express something. However, we still cannot always achieve our goal. *We can be heard, but we are not understood.*

Without tails, we cannot pass on to the Other the full depth of our feelings and thoughts. We can be there for each other, but there's something missing; we feel disconnected, distant from the Other somehow. But the author of the book knows the cure for this awkwardness. We are helped by metaphors, images, i.e., everything that is contained in wonderful fairy tales. And understanding becomes possible. An allegory, a metaphor, a figurative vision, connects us with our invisible tails and our invisible roots. Through this subtle subconscious connection we feel unity with each other, because through these tails-tales we are all rooted in culture.

On the other hand, invisible connections are everywhere. For example, as the author of this beautiful story claims, string theory is a kind of tail-theory. Invisible strings permeate the Universe, forming space-time gravitational fields. Everything is connected with everything through this intertwining of tails-traces left by our physical interactions and the course of events. It's all about keeping the world in balance. Everything is intertwined and present to each other in different ways, much like Yin and Yang. Therefore, in everything there is its opposite—a condition of transition and change creating a dynamic and pulsating whole.

By losing our tails and thus losing a direct connection with the world and with another person, we lose a connection with ourselves. The magic is that to feel connected to myself, I must be connected with the Other. Connecting means that I feel the Other as myself and I feel like the Other. If I don't feel the Other in me, I may not see, let alone think about how my desires will affect others and the world at large. I end up living "in the void," wishing for something that cannot be. This becomes the root of my forever-unfulfilled dissatisfaction. According to Protagoras, "man is the measure of all things." Maybe we should include the Other in our "measure" of all things.

The lack of connection to the Other makes me assertive and arrogant. Without feeling a real connection, I can consider my thoughts to be the thoughts of another, and project my desires onto the desires of another. Reality becomes vague and distorted, and the uncertainty this creates, makes me more assertive and arrogant. My knowledge of the world without my deeper connection to the world makes this knowledge not only arrogant, but foolish and essentially completely unnecessary. The only way to keep in touch is to be able to listen to the Other so that it is always on, as the author of the book writes, stereo listening mode. Unlike the mono mode, which implies only our agreement or disagreement with the speaker, stereo mode implies understanding the thoughts of others as the thoughts of the unique Other, in all their dissimilarity and identity. When several voices are present in our consciousness at the same time, this creates a more complete and richer sound of reality. Listening to these voices clearly means being able, through understanding, to transform the cacophony of individual sounds into a symphony of unified reality that resonates in people's hearts and souls and becomes part of our individual and shared consciousness.

We need to be able to properly connect the sounds you hear. If you don't have this skill, you will only know music, but not be able to perform it. It's knowledge without understanding. It becomes technical knowledge without reaching the soul. What does our lovely book say about that? For example, we may know a tree as a source of wood (building material) or as an object that creates a shady spot in a park. But understanding wood is a different thing. A tree can give us an understanding of the many connections that make everything around us "from small to great," an understanding of the visible and invisible, the essential and the secondary, the living and the inanimate. To understand a tree is to understand many things that make it possible to be a tree itself, which makes it unique, firmly rooted in reality; its branched root system with its tails-roots provides a connection to the earth, and its crown with its tails-branches, connecting it with the atmosphere. "And so it is with everything else that was once connected and now so often lies fragmented and forlorn, not able to be part of the warp and woof of life" (p. 17). Polyphonic listening provides an opportunity to penetrate deep into things that are inaccessible to superficial knowledge, which provides little understanding of reality.

Often we know that there is something, but we don't understand how or why it is. We may know phenomena, but we don't understand how they are interconnected. We may know the patterns, but we don't understand where they are and where they are not. We may know something about the world or about people, but we don't understand what that knowledge is for. Only understanding makes us wise and receptive, able to be perceptive, i.e., to see the essence of things. Understanding makes me rich in what I will never lose. It is a wealth of meaning that is immense and inexhaustible. And most importantly, the acquisition of this wealth depends only on us and no vicissitudes of fate can take it away from us. Understanding is an opportunity to reach out to everything with your tail-reason, and to establish a connection.

The vast body of the Earth is entwined with numerous roads and paths. All these winding paths, from wide highways to narrow footpaths in the forest, are like the tails that people have left trying to meet each other. These people are no longer there, and their tails are left behind. On the scale of the earth (or maybe the universe), all paths, wandering and crossing, will lead you sooner or later to the same place—back home, home in this universe. So on a cosmic scale, it is not so important what road to take.

Another beautiful philosophical discovery that awaits the readers of the book are the tails which create the possibility of meeting in the "in-between". Since, according to Martin Buber, being is a relationship, tails are a wonderful way to establish and maintain that relationship. Thus, it is not language, as Heidegger thought, but the tail that is the "home of being". Huk and Tuk don't have to explain this; they always knew. You have to enter into a dialogue with reality and through a tail-relationship the true nature of things is revealed. The tail-relationship brings the "I" and "You" to life in all things.

According to Buber, as the author of the book claims, it is possible to establish a relationship "in-between" only in your whole being. Again, the metaphor of the tail makes it clear, because the tail is inseparable from us. Of course, the loss of the tail will not endanger life, just as the loss of memory does not take away a person's consciousness. But there is an acute sense of disconnection from the world, of lack of reliance, of separation. This feeling cannot be compensated for by artificial means.

The thirst for a new, modern, advanced way of being in this world has led us to lose our tails. But did the Age of "Post-Tail" make us happier? Have people become kinder? Has society become fairer? Have people gained the desired freedom? I'm afraid that each of these proposals is followed by a question mark's tail. "We become just beings to be used for the sake of another being's utility. We have to imagine we have tails in order to become whole again." (p. 29)

Huk and Tuk give us good advice on how to reestablish the lost connection in today's world. Huk and Tuk point to a love of the miracle of life, a love so deep it transforms into a deep trust, knowing that you belong to this world and that you are already home! (p. 34)

What else can I say here ... After this tail-multipoint it remains only to thank the author of the book for an unusual and exciting journey into the world of big philosophy.

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