I read Raymond Tallis' wonderful book on a train from Carlisle to London. The electrically powered, precision-engineered metal boxes sped at 100 miles an hour on endless steel tracks while I relaxed in an upholstered seat, sipped coffee brought as beans from the tropics and turned the bound pages, each with its thousands of little black symbols. Even reviewers tire, and so I turned on my Walkman and, as a laser scanned the tiny pits on the rapidly turning plastic disc, I heard Dmitry Shostakovich's eighth string quartet. The Brodsky Quartet had played it in Berlin in 1989, scraping long pieces of hair over tensioned gut and steel strings stretched across varnished wooden boxes made, if they were lucky, a couple of hundred years ago in northern Italy. The rapid, closely coordinated finger movements reproduced the intentions of a man in Russia in 1960 who had written music for a film about the city called Dresden that had been devastated by large machines flying hundreds of miles to drop explosives from the skies.

In the postmodern world, we take such technology for granted. Tallis wants to restore the sense of wonder, the sheer incredulity, that such things exist and have been made to exist. CDs and hot coffee and violins and trains are not part of the natural world. They have, however, been crafted and engineered by something that is part of the natural organic world: us.

How was this ever possible, asks Tallis, in a book he describes as taking biology to the frontiers of metaphysics, and why did none of the other species on this planet, not even our fellow apes, ever get anywhere near? His answer, simply, is that ours was the only species that developed a hand with a fully opposable thumb, nails rather than claws and an array of sensitive touch receptors that could manipulate objects with power and precision. A big brain to control that hand was also useful, but would have been pointless without the hand, that infinitely versatile sensorimotor effector, Aristotle's "tool of tools". The Hand is a complex, sometimes rambling book, and is only the first volume of a trilogy whose unpublished parts will reflect further on human evolution and its relation to action, self-consciousness and knowledge. The book tries to do many things, most of them successfully.

Purely as literature, it succeeds as few books on anthropology or philosophy or biology or evolution ever do. This paean to manipulation and dexterity is a prose-poem of playfulness, lightened and enlightened by insightful punning, autobiographical introspection and scatological endnotes. It converts the banal and the mundane into things of wonder and deeper questioning and is reminiscent of Montaigne, The Anatomy of Melancholy and Sir Thomas Browne's Vulgar Errors. And yet Tallis also has big philosophical and biological targets in sight and takes careful aim at them.

The central thesis is that the evolution of the human hand, that extremity that at first glance seems so minimally different from the five fingers of other primates, pushed humans over the threshold, which made possible self-conscious reflection through an endless cycle of us acting on the world and the world acting on us. Tallis is a self-declared "exceptionalist", believing there to be a vast gap between us and the other animals on this planet. However, he is also a practising doctor and daily observes how our unexceptional vertebrate anatomy, its relation to action, self-consciousness and knowledge. The book tries to do many things, most of them successfully.

Chris McManus applauds dexterous insight from the Sinai 

Grasp on life allowed man to dream
dexterous insight from the Sinatra school of thought

...aris...