Working with Animals in Philosophy

How do we come to know the world but through the standpoint of human experience? When we seek knowledge, is that knowledge always in direct relation to the human? Is our epistemology always and everywhere destined to be anthropocentric? These are the questions that begin Tom Tyler’s brave investigation. *CIFERAE: A Beastiary in Five Fingers* is a beautifully executed endeavor, in which he encounters many of the nonhumans who confront philosophy, troubling philosophers’ categories and conceptions of the world. “Philosophy never quite seems to manage without its animals,” he states, even though they are not always welcomed into our conversations of knowledge (p. 3). But Tyler’s book allows them a free hand and shows how they can guide us through a critical examination of the properties of knowledge.

Central to Tyler’s work is the Protagorean claim that “man is the measure of all things.” That is to say, people cannot know the world except through their own subjective experience. This assertion has been dealt with differently by philosophers in the traditions of realism, relativism, and pragmatism, and Tyler takes up each perspective in turn, showing both its limitations and advancements. He begins with a thoughtful discussion of anthropocentrism that points the way through these intellectual traditions. In the first chapter we encounter Heidegger and the relationship between the human hand and “the word.” Tyler’s recounting of Heidegger shows the hand to be central to uncovering and comprehending the hidden properties of the world. This “anthropocentric epistemology” is the starting point for many philosophers, yet Tyler points out the curious tendency to use animals to make philosophic or empirical points. While these animals are often introduced as empty vessels used to make a larger argument, they introduce unpredictability and wildness into these discussions.

The remaining chapters of Tyler’s book detail the way animals enter into the writings of a wide range of thinkers. Tyler engages authors such as Bataille, Freud, Nietzsche, Kant, James, Darwin, Foucault, Derrida, and many more. His discussion of these authors’ works is exceptionally thorough, thoughtful, and complex, as he continually shows how the animals, often employed as simplistic examples of human exceptionalism, introduce an opportunity, unruly and unpredictable as it may be, to decenter humans’ capacities as the standard by which all things are measured.

One of the central strengths of this book is the way Tyler handles complex philosophic thought, making it accessible without simplifying the content and displaying a deep understanding of the theoretical arguments presented. Throughout the book, the reader is invited to engage with the intriguing characters, human and nonhuman, that are a part of this philosophic tradition. Thought-provoking, bold, and often funny, these discussions represent a refreshing addition to the often overly dense and inaccessible literature of posthumanism.

The progression of the chapters—from the prelude through the “five fingers” of anthropocentric epistemology, realism, relativism, pragmatism, and, finally, the investigation of who “we” are—is thoughtful and intentional. The same can be said for the book’s organization and illustrations, as well as the subtle references that appear throughout the text. Together, the book works as a deeply engaging and multidimensional text.
While others have anecdotally noted the importance of animals in social and scientific theory, Tyler’s is so far the most exhaustive and engaging text to deal with these issues. The scope of the book is considerable, but it did often leave me wishing for a more developed discussion of feminist and non-European thought and a stronger indictment of male thinkers’ centrality to discussions of science and knowledge. The same can be said of the relatively sparse inclusion of non-European perspectives on animals. While a systematic evaluation of alternative perspectives on animals and epistemology would have been powerful, Tyler focuses his efforts on engaging and critiquing the theories traditionally embraced by European thinkers. This in itself is an important and much-needed task and represents an important contribution that will advance the field of human-animal studies.

*CIFERA*E engages and pushes forward the theoretical foundation of human-animal studies. Tyler aptly develops a critique that encourages the recognition of a perspective that decenters human experience as the primary mode through which knowledge is produced. This work also has pragmatic implications, as it clears a path to understanding people’s subjective experiences as “more than human.”

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