“A Provisional Alignment”:
Toward the Formation of a “We” (That We Are)

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This article is a review of Tom Tyler's CIFERA: A Bestiary in Five Fingers, a timely and crucial contribution to critical animal studies scholarship. CIFERA is a remarkable and careful analysis of epistemological anthropocentrism—in particular, what Tyler calls a “first-and-foremost anthropocentrism”—and the ways in which animals “figure” in the history of Western thought. Moreover, the text prompts a critique of “the human” and the formation of the “we.” As such, Tyler’s philosophical investigation or bestiary pertains not only to theories of knowledge, but it holds significant ethical and political implications.

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Animals occupy an ambiguous place in Western philosophy. Troublesome and recalcitrant, “the animal” is what philosophical thought both struggles to “manage”—in the sense of “handle” or “control”—and what it “never quite seems to manage without” (Tyler, 2012, p. 3). Tom Tyler’s CIFERA: A Bestiary in Five Fingers is a remarkable and careful study of anthropocentrism and philosophy’s animals—those creatures that ceaselessly elude the prehensile grasp, as it were, of thought as domestication, but on which thought continues to rely. Beautifully illustrated and playfully written, Tyler’s philosophical investigation questions the inevitability of epistemological anthropocentrism—the notion that knowledge of the world is inescapably human—an obstinate presumption that Protagoras’s famed assertion “Man is the measure of all things” has bequeathed to Western philosophical thought. The text begins with a timely, important, and shrewd analysis of
the concept of anthropocentrism; proceeds to analyze epistemological realism, relativism, and pragmatism; and ends with a discussion of “man,” or the human being, bringing us “back” to the start—so that “we” may, perhaps, (re)commence differently. Along the way, we encounter a diverse array of creatures that populate the margins of the text. Composed of a marvelous and eclectic selection of 101 animals ranging from the commonplace to the fantastical, the creatures that feature in Tyler’s bestiary include the bioluminescent fish, platypus, tapir, sloth, unicorn, gnat, slug, mermaid, serpent, chimera, and cow. From *Aesop’s Fables* to Disney’s *Jungle Book*, Aristotle, Aristophanes, and Lucretius to Calvin and Hobbes, T. H. White’s *Book of Beasts* to scientific articles, Shakespeare to common slang, these animals are numbered and accompanied by descriptions derived from a vast array of sources, no less diverse than the animals themselves. Similarly, the illustrations include photographs, woodcuts, engravings, paintings, medieval bestiaries, and movie stills. It quickly becomes clear, however, that Tyler’s bestiary attests not only to philosophy’s unstable relation to nonhuman animals—those disruptive creatures that are both managed and unmanageable, both ‘tamed’ and free living—but also to the difficulties that inhere in attempts to ground “the human.”

The term *cipher* derives from Sanskrit śūnya: literally “empty.” Adopted by Europeans during the Middle Ages, the term subsequently became Latin CIFRA or CIFERA (p. 23). By the 16th century, “cipher” designated that which “fills a place but is of no importance or worth” in its own right, but rather “a nonentity, a ‘mere nothing’” (p. 23). Animals invoked for the purposes of philosophical argumentation are put to cipherous use; they are interchangeable, docile placeholders. Indeed, animal ciphers are nonentities, “figurative phantoms” that function in the service of a given epistemological or metaphysical problem. Akin to Carol J. Adams’s (2000) notion of an “absent referent”, these cipherous animals are present only insofar as they are absent and serve a generalized function; they do not exist as the particular animals that they are” (as cited in Tyler, 2012, p. 28). However, in Tyler’s bestiary we not only discover CIFERA, but FERAE—free living, insubordinate, and unruly animals. Indeed, we find 101 of them: CI FERAE (CI being the number 101 in Roman numerals). These 101 creatures are no longer ciphers but *indices*, in the sense that they indicate and disclose, but also inform or betray (pp. 29–30). While the cipherous use of animals “denies significant attributes to the animal, indexical use relies on the particular traits or qualities of the specific animal” (p. 32). These indices not only betray those sovereign masters who invoke them but also expose the limits of, and thus present an insurmountable challenge to, “the animal” understood as empty, generalized, and abstract. As such, these philosophical beasts are instructive. Moreover, what is crucial is not what we might learn of them, but from them. These animals are intrinsically or ontologically neither ciphers nor indices but made to function as such; they are put to use.

The first chapter—the forefinger or “index finger”—is a subtle and careful exploration of anthropocentrism that begins with an analysis of the concept of animality in philosophers Georges Bataille and Martin Heidegger, to which the hand will be central. Indeed, the hand is one of the chief protagonists of Tyler’s text, occupying as it does a decisive and pivotal role in the history of Western philosophical thought on the human in relation to animality.
For Bataille, the relation between animals and their environments is one of immediacy and immanence: “every animal is in the world like water in water” (as cited in Tyler, 2005, p. 266; see also Marsden, 2004). Humans, as beings endowed with consciousness, can transcend the immediacy that marks animality; as such, they are capable of taking a stand, or positioning themselves as distinct from their environment(s). According to Tyler, the continuity that Bataille maintains between animal and human relies on this specific capacity of man—the ability to transcend one’s immediate environment—in an accomplished, or more complete, capacity than appears in a “merely ’embryonic’” form in animals. Thus, Bataille demonstrates a form of anthropocentrism, one that assumes both the primacy and precedence of the human perspective: “Bataille assumes that ‘we’ are, in a sense, human before we are animal” (Tyler, 2012, p. 12). While Bataille claims that the animal “opens up an unfathomable depth” toward which man is drawn, for Heidegger this abyss or chasm is to be located between human and animal (p. 13).

For Heidegger (1993), living creatures are at the same time “in a certain way most closely akin to us,” yet “separated from our ek-sistent essence by an abyss” (p. 230). The hand is central to Heidegger’s account of the abyssal difference that separates man from animal (See Derrida, 1986; Lawlor, 2007; Elden, 2006). The hand is more than “a mere organ for grasping”—the essence of the hand is intimately tied to thinking, truth as unconcealment, and language. In short, for Heidegger, it is through the work of the hand that we are able to uncover, indicate, and disclose—and unconcealment or disclosure is truth (alêtheia) (See Heidegger, 1992, 1968; Krell, 1992). Indication, or pointing out, is proper to the human hand—and it is from Latin indicare that we derive the term index. Accordingly, the forefinger or index finger could be said to indicate in both an ontic and ontological sense: It indicates the possibility of pointing at things, as well as the possibility of disclosing things or beings “as such.” As Tyler (2012) succinctly puts it, “comprehension depends on prehension” (p. 15). Moreover, the work of the hand as delimitation and indication is “essentially related to the word” (p. 15): the hand and “the word” go hand in hand in the bringing to presence and emergence of things. Therefore, there can be “no word without hand, but also no hand without word” (p. 15). It is only the human that has the hand and the word: “Only through humanity, by means of word and hand, can beings emerge from Being” (p. 16). The difference between humans and animals is an absolutely fundamental one. Animals exist in their environments in an essentially different manner than the way in which humans dwell in the world.

Tyler then describes two modes of anthropocentrism: evaluative/spatial and epistemological/temporal. The first mode of anthropocentrism holds that the human indeed occupies the “center,” implying “a hierarchy, or chain of being” (pp. 20–21). It is evaluative and spatial insofar as it judges other animals on the basis of the human’s centrality; for Tyler, Heidegger’s thought on animals evinces this form of anthropocentrism. The second mode, in line with the Protagorean claim that “man is the measure of all things,” holds that all accounts of experience and knowledge of the world can only commence from a human perspective. This second type is temporal as it assumes that “the human being arrives or appears before all else” (p. 21). Tyler thus designates this approach as “first-and-foremost
anthropocentrism” (p. 22). According to Tyler, both Bataille and Heidegger demonstrate epistemological anthropocentrism: Bataille begins with the presumption that we are “human before we are animal” and Heidegger with the presumption that “the being with the hand is human” (pp. 12, 21). It is this mode of anthropocentrism that gives rise to the charge of anthropomorphism—that is, the attribution of human qualities or faculties to nonhuman entities. However, underlying such claims is the unquestioned presumption that we know precisely what human beings are and what qualities are specific to the nature of humans. As Tyler rightly points out, “simply by employing the term anthropomorphism one has already adopted a set of unexamined assumptions about human beings” (p. 59).

Furthermore, Tyler claims that there is a kind of narcissistic danger that inheres in anthropomorphism, “an excessive love of self,” wherein one appears bound to always see one’s own image reflected back at oneself (p. 62). Anthropomorphism is thus anthropocentric; it is “the corollary and consequence” of first-and-foremost anthropocentrism (p. 63). Tyler’s intention is to question the inevitability of this epistemological anthropocentrism, which, for him, “forecloses both what ‘the animal’ is permitted to be and what ‘the human’ can think” (p. 74). This preclusion both delimits and regulates “the animal” as well as “the very thinking that addresses it” (p. 74). Anthropocentrism, then, entails a kind of domestication or taming of “the animal” as much as it involves a foreclosure of the question, “What is ‘the human’?” The following three chapters address epistemological realism, relativism, and pragmatism. Each chapter explores the inevitability of epistemological anthropocentrism through an engagement with several key thinkers of each philosophical position. The itinerant and obstinate CI FERAЕ will, of course, accompany these inquiries and act as aides.

Chapter 2 addresses epistemological realism: the position that true knowledge is the correspondence of the knower’s ideas with external, mind-independent reality. Governed by a representationalist schema, knowledge purports to represent reality and, as such, the value or worth of knowledge is judged according to its veracity. In this section, Tyler discusses the work of Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Norris. At the end of the chapter, Tyler uses Nietzsche’s work to “open” up the realist conception of the knowing subject, insofar as “each species perception emulates its environment in the same manner as does human knowledge,” even if it does so differently (Tyler, 2012, p. 107). Humans “are subjects, artistically constructing the world, just as birds, insects, and worms do” (p. 107).

Contrary to realist epistemology, relativism holds that no representation can ever “model the world as it really is” (p. 133). Rather, knowledge is partial—incomplete and biased—and thus always reflects a certain worldview. However, relativism holds knowledge to be “a reproduction or reflection” (p. 133) and therefore also characterizes knowledge as representation. Tyler questions whether Immanuel Kant’s undeniable anthropocentrism necessarily results in an anthropocentric epistemology. According to Tyler, while Kant repeatedly claims that it is solely the human mind that has the capacity for objective knowledge, Kant nonetheless “explicitly leaves open the possibility that there may be other forms of sensibility and understanding and therefore
other forms of knowledge” (p. 129). Tyler argues that this representationalist approach need not be anthropocentric; in taking the starting point of knowledge to be specifically and exclusively human, Kant exhibits a first-and-foremost anthropocentrism that his epistemology need not adopt.

Finally, unlike the first two approaches, pragmatism rejects the representationalist schema and the gap or distancing between world and knowledge that the reliance on representation seems to suggest. Rather, knowledge is embodied practice and thus part of, and takes part in, the world. In chapter 4, Tyler discusses William James, for whom “truth” is not absolute or transcendental but pragmatic or useful (p. 178), and Charles Darwin’s evolutionary theory as pragmatic—grounded in concrete practices (p. 202). The pragmatic emphasis on knowledge not as a reflection of the world but as immersive practice clearly leaves room for animal behavior within an environment to be taken as a kind of knowledge. In sum, all three paradigms, and the qualities or properties that characterize them, are not necessarily or inherently anthropocentric. The “Protagorean prejudice” that several proponents of these approaches demonstrate is thus “incidental or superfluous”; the epistemological subject is not “condemned to a first-and-foremost anthropocentrism” (p. 211).

The fifth and final chapter, entitled “The Thumb Is a Little Hand, Assistant to the Greater,” returns to the idea of the “hand” and constitutes a remarkable discussion of humanism and “the human.” Tyler provides an account of the intimate—and metaphysical—link between the hand and human exceptionalism, superiority, intelligence, and reason in Charles Bell, Aristotle, Kant, Galen, Friedrich Engels, and archaeologist Louis Leakey (p. 224). For these figures, “the hand and humanity go together, hand in hand” (p. 225). However, there is the curious issue of precedence here: On the one hand, the hand is defined as “a distinctively human organ,” and on the other hand, “only humans have true hands” (p. 226). Tyler asks: “How do we know that we should define the hand as exclusively human, or the human as the sole owner of the hand? Which takes priority here, the definition of the hand or the definition of the human?” (p. 226). In fact, the hand and the human “arise together in a mutually dependent nexus that seems to need no origin” (p. 226). The very concept of the “hand” thus separates or distinguishes human from animals. This decisive notion appears to gather its authority and force from its own ungroundedness. Moreover, the classification of “human” has proved to be remarkably difficult; naturalist and pioneer of modern taxonomy Carl Linnaeus famously conceded that he knew of no “generic character . . . by which to distinguish between Man and Ape” (p. 251; see also Agamben, 2004, pp. 23–27). For Tyler, classificatory systems necessarily delimit and subsume differences, despite the fact that individuals necessarily belong to “multiple categories” (Tyler, 2012, p. 258). Paying heed to the multiple belongings of an individual organism that are not, and cannot be, exhausted in the abstract, unified and general singular invocation of “the animal” permits the coexistence of animals as cipherous and indexical.

For Tyler, Heidegger’s “first-and-foremost anthropocentrism depends on a single ‘we,’ and thus assumes a ‘single narcissism’” (p. 259). Yet this identification with, and the invocation of, a “we,” is always uttered by an “I” and is thus open to the possibility of different identifications (p. 259). Following Foucault, Tyler argues that we must “make the future
formation of a ‘we’ possible, by elaborating the question” (p. 260). The formation of a “we” involves seeking “to discover with whom we can identify in order to affirm our identity” (p. 260). Crucially, the “we” cannot be “previous to the question,” but must be the result of it (p. 260). The force of Tyler’s meticulous and prudent account of anthropocentrism—or more specifically, the posing of the question of anthropocentrism—now comes to the fore: “I, who presume to say ‘we,’ have proposed a new genus of welcoming, hospitable narcissism . . . The new ‘we,’ that I would say, is ‘we chimpanzees’” (p. 260). The identification of “we” is temporary, a “provisional alignment”—a process that must not cease (p. 261). Moreover, as “we” have “always been chimpanzees,” Tyler argues that we “must become what we are” (p. 261).

Tyler’s question(ing) of the “we” is extremely important and constitutes a productive way of thinking about the terms of the political. How do we invoke this first person plural and to what does the “we” respond? The “we” is often a humanist one marked by a kind of anthropocentric arrogance and dogmatism that forecloses, from the start, a formation of a potential posthuman “we.” At the outset of the final chapter on “the human,” or anthropos itself, Tyler asks: “Have we approached our question backward, then?” (p. 212). Could the thumb come first? However, by the end of Tyler’s book it is clear that there is no other way to approach the question but “backwards.” More precisely, there is no longer the possibility of a linear approach. There is circularity and disruption in both questioning and response. The choice of a palindromic number of creatures thus emerges as significant, as does the “first” and “last” animal. Indeed, the first animal to feature in Tyler’s bestiary is the fly that William Blake’s “thoughtless hand” has brushed away (p. 1). The last animal is the gadfly—Socrates himself—the dissenting irritant that stirs the state (“a great and noble steed”) to life, who should not be crushed but spared (p. 263). Referencing Blake again at the end of the book, Tyler insists: “Like the poet, we flies must be careful what we do with our thoughtless hands” (p. 265). It is indicative that the book opens with the description of “my” thoughtless hand—the personal or subjective—and ends with an invocation of a “we”—“our” thoughtless hands. Of course, for Heidegger the hand is intimately tied to thought. What would it mean to be the fly we shoo away with our thoughtless hands? What would it mean for the hand to be “thoughtless”? How can we “think” the thoughtless? This is a paradoxical, yet forceful, idea. How would we render the hand itself manumissus, “released from the hand” (p. 264)? In a sense, Tyler commences with a careful analysis of epistemological anthropocentrism but ends with a gesture beyond epistemology—one is compelled, at the end of the text, to recommence—Blake’s fly recalls Socrates as gadfly, the beginning recalls the end. Strictly speaking, we are no longer asking about theories of knowledge; “we” are now what is also at stake in this very asking.

Tyler’s CIFERAE is thus a timely and crucial contribution to critical animal studies scholarship, and it is an important addition to Cary Wolfe’s Posthumanities book series. The 101 animals of Tyler’s text cannot be cordoned off, confined, detained, or sequestered. These indices reveal that there is no pure and unproblematic access to the hand or to the “human,” no proper human mode of self-indication; the index finger cannot purely disclose the human without contamination or without an element of exteriority.
Tyler’s analyses of what he terms first-and-foremost anthropocentrism or the Protagorean presumption determines not only the parameters of what “the animal” is but also what “we” think when we take ourselves as “the human.” Tyler thus points to the fact that maintaining “the animal” is often bound up with the invocation of “the human”—and therefore suspending the Protagorean assumption “frees” up, so to speak, the abyssal limit between human and animal, permitting us to think differently, more widely, more indexically instead of cipherously about both animals and “the human” that we take ourselves to be. To ask about “the animal” is thus to begin to dismantle the staunch adherence of the “we” to “the human.”

Philosophy is troubled by animals; if philosophy takes seriously the problem of animality (“our” own) and animals (and the contingency we are forced to concede in our dogmatic notions of humans), then we must pay heed, we must recognize that we are in a sense “called.” Our self-assertions are reactive and constitute responses to a more originary questioning. We respondents are a provisional category. Furthermore, we who respond, we who cannot help but respond, “we” who do not exist prior to the question: We must become the we that we are. Tyler’s conclusion thus gestures toward a questioning more fundamental than that of the anthropocentrism in our theories of knowledge: This questioning opens up the present where we “are” to the possibility of a “we” that must, as responsive and respondent, be futural. And, as Tyler proposes, this futural “we” may perhaps be best conceived of as an ethical being-with.

References