The Protagorean presumption and the posthuman: *Ceci n’est pas un calmar*

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Through readings of Tom Tyler’s *CIFERAE: A Bestiary in Five Fingers* and Vilém Flusser and Louis Bec’s *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis: A Treatise*, this paper considers possible ways in which one might address that which is posthuman. Exploring the place(s) of various nonhuman animals within the philosophical canon, animals are here engaged with as ciphers, indices, fables, mirrors, phantoms, and as feral singularities. Further, this paper interrogates Flusser’s claim to have escaped both idealism and anthropocentrism, and in so doing considers, with Tyler, the necessity or otherwise of anthropocentrism in theoretical discourse.

**Keywords:** posthumanism; animal studies; continental philosophy; Nietzsche; anthropocentrism; ciphers; fables

Trajectories, or a question of method

No matter what advances one makes, the posthuman emerges as a necessarily paradoxical figure. Indeed, even the expedient of the definite article cannot simply be assumed. How, then, might one address that which is posthuman? Two books published by the University of Minnesota Press, Tom Tyler’s *CIFERAE: A Bestiary in Five Fingers* and Vilém Flusser and Louis Bec’s *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis: A Treatise*, attempt to answer just that question. Among other things, these two very different texts offer concise explorations of method, together tracing certain trajectories that, from the most dogmatic of realisms to the most cynical of relativisms, ultimately collide over issues of scientific objectivity. Moreover, both texts mark important contributions to the potential founding of a posthuman pedagogic bestiary.

So, then, how to address, perhaps even to dress, the posthuman? For their part, Flusser and Bec invite us to ‘harrow the hell’ that is to experience the world of a giant vampire squid, several individuals having been recently caught somewhere in the Pacific Ocean (p. 43). Tyler, meanwhile, demands that first of all the very notion of the ‘we’ must be rewritten, replacing its exclusivity with an open and affirmative inclusiveness. One way or another, then, we begin with the hell of other people.

Part one: the Protagorean presumption

*Ceci n’est pas un calmar*

Beginning with *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, it quickly becomes clear that Flusser’s subject is not, in fact, the vampyroteuthis. Rather, the vampyroteuthis is both a heuristic

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fabrication geared toward helping humanity make sense of its current historical situation, and a device for deciphering possible posthuman futures. Unfortunately, however, the choice of futures appears limited to either utopia or technocratic dictatorship.

To understand this somewhat millenarian prospect, however, it is necessary to enter into a game built from funhouse mirrors. Certain aspects of the human Dasein’s base structure, writes Flusser, are clearly reflected in the structure of the vampyroteuthis’ Dasein, whereas others appear ‘utterly distorted’ (p. 9). Consequently, he suggests, it becomes possible to construct the vampyroteuthis through its oppositional relation to the human. Furthermore, the playing of such a ‘reflective game’ ensures that one will not fall prey to the transcendental delusion characteristic of scientific objectivity, as it offers an analysis of humanity taken strictly from the perspective of a co-being. Indeed, at its most straightforward, Flusser suggests that we ‘simply’ exchange the vampyroteuthic viewpoint for our own. While ignoring some rather obvious ‘chicken-and-egg’ questions, he argues that such an exchange offers a deep-sea dive into the uncustomary, its defamiliarization enabling us to apprehend anew the human condition otherwise shrouded by habit.

Central to Flusser’s project, therefore, is the mirroring of the human and the vampyroteuthis. More precisely, their mutual reflections bear an analogical relation, reflective analogy functioning throughout as organizing principle in both theory and practice. Here, however, the term analog must be understood in at least two ways: firstly, as a narrative trope, in this case centering upon the genre of the fable; and, secondly, as a specific term from evolutionary biology referring to parts of differing organisms that share the same function, if not necessarily the same organ (homologs, by contrast, share the same organs, if not necessarily the same function). Hence, and to take an example from Tyler’s book, an elephant’s trunk is in certain respects analogous to the human hand but, given its different phylogenetic origin, it is in no sense a homolog. For Flusser, then, the vampyroteuthis is both moral mirror and human analog, allowing him to thus sketch the evolution of the vampyroteuthis simply by constructing a photographic negative of the human at various evolutionary stages. Such a negative history inevitably supplies a barrage of analogous pairings that would seem to illuminate the human from any number of angles.

Indeed, Vampyroteuthis Infernalis is vertiginously reflexive: the model is a production of the text and the text is a production of the model. In this dizzying exchange, moreover, resides the value of the fable for Flusser, that is, as a code for deciphering the future. As such, he argues, its methodology is superior to anything currently practiced in the hard sciences.

In spite of these claims, however, Flusser’s method presents us with a number of difficulties. Put simply, inasmuch as Flusser starts with the human as the positive against which a negative model can thence be constructed, we clearly do not arrive at an analogical relation in the sense of having a different phylogenetic root. Rather than a biological analog, then, we find instead only a narcissistic image reflecting an inherently reductive anthropocentric optics that cuts itself off from the infinite realm of entanglements at and between every scale of being, advancing instead the illusion of an essential, fixed position based upon a mirroring of sameness.

Somewhat surprisingly then – and here our vertigo can only increase – Flusser himself goes on to suggest that, as a method, reflection is indeed limited, restrictive, and tending toward stasis (p. 46). Moreover, he then argues, not only is conceptualization – and thus conceptual reflection – strictly a human prerogative, but also that it is precisely our concepts that actively prevent us from discerning ‘phenomena for which
we have not already established a model’ (p. 47). There is, however, no reason to despair as, according to Flusser, the vampyroteuthis will, *by way of an analogical reflection of concepts*, teach us humans a thing or two about escaping from such an all-too-human methodology. If this is not perplexing enough, the pedagogic value of this vampyroteuthic figure resides entirely in her apparently nonconceptual existence – an existence determined in advance by her role as photographic and philosophical negative (human Dasein is conceptual, *ergo* vampyroteuthic Dasein is nonconceptual). In the midst of such a dizzying funhouse of mirrors, it becomes easy to lose one’s footing, as well as one’s grip, as we shall see. Ultimately, it will become necessary to ask not only whether Flusser actually encounters a ‘co-being’ or not, but also whether such an approach might not, in fact, prohibit such an encounter from ever taking place.

Clearly, Flusser’s ‘squid’ is never (simply) a squid. Is, then, the fabulous figure of the *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* merely an example of anthropomorphism in perhaps its most problematic form? Does not the exploitation of the vampyroteuthis as exemplary signal an otherwise muffled anthropocentric hubris that presumes the possibility of reducing animal figures to the simple, remainderless anthropomorphisms of moral education – one more to add to that immense list of muzzled animals that litter the philosophical canon?

**Pointing the finger: deciphering anthropocentrism**

We can ask this question another way: is it the case that, ultimately, the human being is indeed ‘the measure of all things.’ This infamous dictum of Protagoras is generally taken to mean that all knowledge and understanding is already, and only, determined in advance by the specificity of the human perspective and, above all else, the genre of the moral fable typifies just this Protagorean presumption. In turn, this leads us directly to *CIFERA*E, wherein Tyler sets out first to consider whether the traditional priority given to the human animal is ‘intrinsic, incidental, or entirely extraneous to a diverse range of epistemological outlooks’ (p. 209) and, second, to identify and, if not necessarily rescue, then at least recognize and perhaps release the feral potential of philosophy’s litter of muzzled animals. Hence, in Tyler’s five-fingered bestiary, it is no coincidence that the index finger points squarely to a critique of anthropocentrism – the indexical, the *indice*, being that which stands opposed to the production of thoughtless ciphers.

Cipherous animals, writes Tyler, can take one or more of three different forms: non-specific placeholders, codes awaiting interpretation, and symbolic characters. Exemplary of all three forms, Tyler recalls the paradoxical tale of Buridan’s ass: a hungry ass stands exactly equidistant from two identical bales of hay and, unable to find a reason to choose between the two, consequently starves to death. Here, the first sense of the cipher is clear: the ass is a mere placeholder insofar as the animal need not be an ass – any animal would do. Second, insofar as she has been ‘employed “in other than the usual sense,”’ Buridan’s ass is coded in the form of a didactic fable awaiting interpretation (p. 28). Her position, in other words, requires a decipherment that has no need of recourse to the specifics of her existence. Finally, she is cipherous in the sense of being a symbolic character utilized as a ‘hieroglyph’ so as to ‘convey esoteric, philosophical arguments that are intelligible to the initiated’ (p. 28). As symbols, in short, cipherous animals refer only to exemplary epistemological or metaphysical speculations.

Tyler’s first point, then, is that, in all three cipherous forms, the animal is not there in her own right, but rather ‘derives its meaning from its application or reference to some entirely unrelated endeavour’ (p. 28). As such, actually existing animals are
rendered ‘invisible, figurative phantoms’ (p. 28). More than this, however, by pointing out these instrumental ‘uses’ of other animals, Tyler also points to their possible overcoming. Hence, in addition to ceasing to treat animals as ciphers in the future, it is also necessary to de-cipher the animals of philosophy so as to disclose their _ferae_, that is, their indexical specificity. To release the feral animal from her cipherous shroud – the _cipherae_ or _ciferae_ – is, argues Tyler, to both disrupt the complacency of habitual philosophical practice and to recreate a pedagogic bestiary along entirely new lines.

What, then, of the vampyroteuthis? Is he a mere cipher, or does he take his place as an individual, nonsubstitutable entity in his own light?\(^4\) Certainly, the vampyroteuthis is no mere placeholder: Flusser’s complex and detailed analysis focuses explicitly upon the plane of the particular. As regards the second form, meanwhile, _Vampyroteuthis Infernalis_ is, with equal explicitness, posed as a didactic fable and therefore a code for deciphering the (post)human future. However, it is more difficult, if not impossible, to say whether the vampyroteuthis is being employed ‘in other than the usual sense.’ Similarly, despite being a code the decipherment of which aims at disclosing the human Dasein, one cannot say, given that the vampyroteuthis Dasein provides the contours of the analysis, that this decipherment has no need of recourse to the specifics of vampyroteuthic existence. Nonetheless, _Vampyroteuthis Infernalis_ is also a fable in the most traditional of senses, expressly instructing its reader to put herself in the place of the vampyroteuthis and, in so doing, identify with an ‘animal’ in order to follow the course of its normative lesson. Lastly, is the vampyroteuthis a symbolic character in animal form, a philosophical hieroglyph? Without doubt, he figures exemplary epistemological problems but, given that he is an imaginary Borgesian beast, have any _actual_ nonhuman animals suffered injury in being transformed into instrumentalized phantoms? And, if not, is the vampyroteuthis therefore indexical? Clearly, and as Tyler is quick to point out, the complex cipher-index relation is never that of a simple opposition.

In order to further clarify vampyroteuthic practice, and given Flusser’s claim to have liberated the vampyroteuthis from traditional anthropocentric constraints, we turn now to consider his location in relation to the two traditional modes of anthropocentrism: the _evaluative-spatial_ and the _epistemological-temporal_. In the evaluative-spatial mode, writes Tyler, there is the ‘bald belief or supposition’ that the human species is of greater value than all the others (p. 20). Here, anthropocentrism is spatial insofar as it places humanity center stage, and evaluative insofar as it is ‘judgmental and disparaging’ (p. 21). Epistemological-temporal anthropocentrism, by contrast, is marked by the ‘Protagorean presumption’ (p. 74) that ‘man is the measure of all things.’ Here, as we have seen, anthropocentrism is temporal insofar as the human ‘arrives or appears before all else,’ and epistemological insofar all knowledge presupposes an inescapably human perspective (p. 21).

**The anthropocentrism of disgust**

Evaluative-spatial anthropocentrism, writes Flusser, inevitably falls prey to vulgar anthropomorphism, the basis of which is _disgust_. The greater the distance other life forms are from humans, he argues, the more disgusting humans will find them. Hence, the most disgusting of all are the mollusks, the ‘soft worms’ (p. 11). Furthermore, insists Flusser, this hierarchy of disgust ‘reflect[s] a biological hierarchy,’ a mirroring that results in our species-specific conception of ‘life’ as a slimy stream leading unfailingly to its ultimate _télos_: the human (pp. 11–12). Half-serious and half-parody, this hierarchy of disgust nonetheless discloses for Flusser both the cause and the emptiness
of evaluative-spatial anthropocentrism: humans rationalize their subconscious disgust into classifications that allow all other living beings to be categorized as either ‘incomplete humans’ or ‘degenerate humans’ (p. 12). Our biological criteria are therefore entirely anthropomorphic and narcissistic.

Concerning epistemological-temporal anthropocentrism, Flusser, like Tyler, focuses on the ‘problem’ of objectivity, given the inescapability of a human perspective. This problem, he suggests, is largely solved by distance: the ‘further removed a phenomenon is from its describer, the more objectively describable it is’ (p. 16). Astronomy, therefore, is ‘very objective,’ whilst psychology is ‘less objective’ (p. 17). Objectivity, in other words, is quantifiable, allowing ‘a hierarchy of objectivity’ to be established (p. 17). There is, however, a catch: ‘the farther away something is, the less interesting it is’ and further, given the taxonomy of disgust, the more disgusting (p. 17). Presumably, then, by interesting ourselves in the distant mollusk that is the vampyroteuthis, we take up a position balanced between interest and disgust, and so need not disclaim objective knowledge entirely.

Here, at least two problems are immediately apparent. First, Flusser claims to ‘solve’ the temporal hurdle of ‘first and foremost’ anthropocentrism by organizing the external world according to a spatial model based upon proximity to the human. This, however, changes nothing as regards the possibility or otherwise of objective knowledge, but only further highlights the problem. Second, Flusser equates objectivity with disinterest, while admitting that nothing objective can be entirely disinterested, as in that case the object simply would never have been discerned in the first place. Moreover, an objective hierarchy presumes the identity – and thus dissolution – of humanity within its species-being, while nonetheless allowing for something akin to a transformative, transcendental Heideggerian boredom at the level of the entire species. And, even then, Flusser’s human species still remains inside the vicious circle of the Protagorean presumption.

Handling humans

In their respective discussions of the hand, both Flusser and Tyler have recourse to Heidegger’s famous tool analysis in Being and Time (1962). Only Tyler, however, takes the necessary step of deflating such misplaced anthropocentric pride centered upon the hand’s apparent uniqueness, noting not only that the hand is ‘a rather archaic appendage’ insofar as increasing specialization ‘manifests as a diminution in the number of digits’ (p. 231, 233), but also that these archaic instruments are in fact possessed by large number of diverse creatures, including pandas, frogs, and chameleons.

Meanwhile, in an uncanny presque-vu of Bernard Stiegler’s multivolume Technics and Time, Flusser moves along a very different track. Everything, he insists, the very structure of the world, begins with the hand. Thus, it is in order to free the hands that the proto-human first walks upright, a distancing of head from ground that results in a Cartesian sense of the three-dimensionality of space and, ultimately, in the neocortical development that makes language possible (p. 37). Further, argues Flusser, this same freeing-up of the hands occasioned the division of time into past, present, and future, these regions being understood as that which we have passed by, that which we bump into, and there where we are going and that which we desire (pp. 37–38).

It is here that Flusser offers his idiosyncratic reading of Heidegger’s tool analysis. That which is present-at-hand (Vorhandensein), he writes, constitutes ‘the future (of the hands)’ understood as synonymous with nature, whereas that which is ready-at-hand (Zuhandensein) constitutes ‘the past (of the hands)’ or culture (pp. 36–37). For Flusser,
the difference between *Vorhandensein* and *Zuhandensein*, and thus between nature and culture, can be judged entirely according to an evolutionary schema: the present-at-hand represents nature’s as-yet ‘un-handled’ store that awaits humanity’s future ‘grasp,’ a handling that, in rendering the unknown known, transforms nature into culture. Further, he argues, against Heidegger, that this teleological transformation is the very *raison d’être* of the hard sciences, which thus throw humanity into its future through an ever-broadening ‘grasp’ of external reality.

On this, however, Flusser offers little to support his claims. Why, exactly, does an upright carriage cause (or create) both temporal perception and a perception of temporality and, further, why should this temporal discrimination be uniquely human? The answer, I suggest, concerns Flusser’s ‘unanalytic’ – that is, narcissistic and reflective – conception of language. Put simply, Flusser seems incapable of conceiving of ‘language’ as anything other than Greco-Latin written language, with its horizontal structure reflecting the division of time. However, the fact that Flusser also attributes chromatophoric and bioluminescent languages to the vampyroteuthis suggests an odd, contradictory blindness as far as nonhuman animals are concerned.

Of course, we must remember throughout that the vampyroteuthis is very much a human fabrication, not only as a figure in a book, but also as the mirror image of an originating human figure that both precedes and delimits the ‘emergence’ of the vampyroteuthis. Ultimately, with the world as ‘simply a pole of human Dasein’ (p. 38), Flusser clearly remains in thrall to a ‘first and foremost’ anthropocentrism that is as much Kantian as it is Heideggerian.

As humans, he writes, we inevitably encounter our vampyroteuthic mirror-image as an object. Unfortunately, however, Flusser makes no attempt to address the various complications this raises in respect to the interest-disgust continuum and the quantification of objectivity. Instead, he simply states that human animals are capable of recognizing themselves in this object and, as such, are also able to recognize what they are not (p. 38). Indeed, in this same reflection of light and dark, claims Flusser, resides the very possibility of reconstructing the vampyroteuthic Dasein and to ‘see with its eyes and grasp with its tentacles’ (p. 38). Hence, by crossing the surface of the mirror in a manner allegedly metaphorical but not transcendent, we apparently ‘relocate’ ourselves in the world of a co-being. It is this, moreover, which renders his text a fable, rather than a theory. Objectivity, then, would seem to demand that we move out of the real world and into a fabulous one, a movement of exchange requiring a metaphorical vehicle that nonetheless holds fast to its worldly tenor. If nothing else, such a demand bears heavily on questions of realism and representationalism, questions that Tyler explores in detail.

**The convenience of aliens**

As we know, Tyler’s initial objective concerns the epistemological necessity or otherwise of an anthropocentric standpoint. Ultimately, he reveals in no uncertain terms that, of the three dominant epistemological approaches considered – realism, relativism, and pragmatism – not one in fact requires first-and-foremost anthropocentrism, revealing the latter to be simply an ingrained prejudicial habit.

Tyler begins by examining the realist position, which holds to the existence of a reality independent of beliefs and ideas, with a correspondence between the two realms being equivalent to true knowledge. A realist epistemology thus requires three basic properties: (1) belief in the possibility of truth; (2) that knowledge is characterized as
representation; and (3) that knowledge constitutes an explanatory power. Knowledge, in short, ‘attempts to provide a representation of reality that is true and that will therefore explain things to us’ (p. 89). To demonstrate the problems with this position, Tyler turns to the almost infinite resource that is Nietzsche’s early paper ‘On Truth and Lie in the Extra-Moral Sense’ (1873). Interestingly, this same essay also functions as the hidden, encrypted text of Flusser’s oceanic depths, a text written by the vampyroteuthis in the silence of shifting colours.

Nietzsche’s (1993, p. 79) critique begins with a scathing attack – in the form of a fable – on the infantile delusions characteristic of human exceptionalism, arguing that even the smallest gnat similarly ‘feels the flying center of the universe within himself.’ Fundamental here is Nietzsche’s claim that the representation of reality is by no means the privilege of humans alone. Rather, he writes, all living beings represent reality to themselves, although such representations are necessarily skewed by the vastly diverse modes of perception specific to each species. Interestingly, while Nietzsche’s gnat is clearly a cipher in that her place can equally well be taken by any other animal, this cipherous status is itself indexical – and thus feral – insofar as her very substitutability makes the specific point that every living being, squid or gnat, human or chimp, are thus equally privileged. Moreover, continues Nietzsche, given that species-specific perceptions institute metaphorical re-presentations of reality, not only can none of these representations can therefore represent reality truthfully, but also no one representation can be any closer to the ‘truth’ than any other. Truth, in short, is unavailable, and so too are any criteria by which such proximity might be measured.

With this, Nietzsche makes clear a second target of his paper: the ‘Copernican Revolution’ of Immanuel Kant’s Transcendental Aesthetic, in which space and time are posited as transcendental forms of (human) sensibility, that is, a priori presentations that constitute the condition of every perception and affection. While Kant offers an important and hugely influential critique of dogmatic realism’s notion of correspondence between idea and thing, what he also does is place human consciousness firmly at the center of all things, and it is this to which both Nietzsche and Tyler take issue.

Tyler, on his part, shows that Kant’s revolutionary shift in fact lies elsewhere – indeed, within the heads of extraterrestrial aliens. As Copernicus shifts humanity away from an illusory center and into the cosmological periphery, he writes, so too does Kant when he allows for the possibility – indeed, necessity – of superior alien intelligence. Ultimately, it is aliens who provide Kant with the criterion for rational judgment that is otherwise lacking – the same criterion that Nietzsche correctly argues is unavailable, aliens from Venus or No.5 Against Kant, Tyler instead follows Nietzsche in arguing for the necessity of multiple, diverse perspectives and the specificity of creaturely embodiment, which together create the ‘corporeal nature of perception’ (p. 170).

Despite general consensus to the contrary, Nietzsche’s perspectivism has nothing whatsoever to do with relativism. For the relativist, not only is every standpoint necessarily a partial perspective, but also that all perspectives are of equal value. As such, standpoints exist only to be manipulated – exchanged – within a global economy geared toward the cynical accumulation of surplus value. Nietzsche, by contrast, in rejecting the duality of representationalism in favor of embodied perception, shows instead that ‘all creatures’ perspectives will be determined by their interests and values’ (Tyler, 2012, p. 170). As a result, every understanding of the world will therefore be evaluative. In other words, Nietzsche shows that all living beings are only insofar they ‘are’ mutually affective relations, and it is the relative value of these relationships that result in either a growth or a degeneration of the will to power.
Untypically, Tyler’s argument is somewhat obscure here insofar as he claims that, for Nietzsche, only *some* perspectives should be overcome (p. 171). Against this, I would argue that all value, in the strict sense, is precisely the value of revaluation, that is, of a constantly reiterated overcoming, and thus of a practice of constant openness. It is this, as we shall see, which enables us to disclose the radical potential inhering in the practice Flusser names permanent orgasm and Nietzsche calls eternal recurrence.

Rather than a representation of the world, such practice constitutes a mode of activity *in* the world. As such, writes Tyler, knowledge must be understood pragmatically as that which makes possible any such modes of activity (p. 209). Consequently, and in direct contrast to relativism, every pragmatic ‘truth’ – as “an immediate, immanent element of the environment itself” (p. 208) – must be evaluated entirely in terms of its practical ‘explanatory power’ (p. 180). Here, again, Tyler shows clearly that anthropocentrism has no claims on necessity whatsoever. Rather, to remain rigorously pragmatic is to accept – on *equal terms* – the knowledge of myriad other creatures.

More specifically here, Tyler’s analysis enables us to recognize both the feral potential, and the habitual anthropocentrism that serves only to nullify that potential, of Flusser’s phenomenological inquiry into the infernal vampyroteuthis. It compels us to ask, in other words, whether Flusser engages, in any sense, this fabulous creature upon the rigorously democratic terrain of practical knowledge, or if rather he is merely ‘polishing the mirror’ of representationalism in the futile quest for ever-more-accurate depictions. The answer can be found, already at work, even in the epigraph: *Nil humani mihi alienum puto* [‘Let nothing human be alien’]. If we are to begin, however, it is imperative that we turn things around: *Let nothing alien be human*. And so, as we move toward the anus in the second part, we begin again with Kant’s Venusians.

**Part two: posthuman futures**

**Movements of mouth and anus**

As with Kant and his extraterrestrial, Flusser must first of all separate the vampyroteuthis from the category of ‘mere’ animal, which he does by positing an arbitrary analogous relation between the alienness of the vampyroteuthis and the alienation of the human (p. 23). Indeed, Flusser’s Vamp is the very image of Kant’s Venusian insofar as the reflected vampyroteuthic ‘outside’ at once circumscribes the ‘human’ and serves as the (impossible) criterion for doing so. However, unlike Kant’s Venusian, the vampyroteuthis is not unknowable. Rather, if Flusser’s analysis is to remain ‘in’ the world of a ‘co-being,’ the vampyroteuthis by definition cannot be ‘entirely alien’ (p. 5). A large part of this familiarity, it should be noted, concerns the construction and legitimation of the vampyroteuthis as a suitably ‘proper’ (that is, nonanimal) model of the human. Hence, the distance separating vampyroteuthis from human is ‘incomparably smaller than that which separates us [humans] from extraterrestrial life’ (p. 5). Furthermore, although Flusser does not mention it, as the distance between the human and itself, this separation is also incomparably smaller than the abyssal gulf that, for Flusser, divides humans from all other animals.

Nevertheless, if we are to remain within the world, the vampyroteuthis must evolve. Sharing a common ancestor and thus a number of ‘deeply ingrained memories,’ humans and vampyroteuthis’ belong to the ‘same game’ of life (p. 6). Moreover, claims Flusser, as perfect mirrors of each other, their subsequent evolutionary paths therefore constitute, supposedly each for the other, a compressed record of evolutionary
suppression and sociopolitical repression. Here, in other words, the contours of the human emerge in contrast to an outside, the construction of which presupposes the very knowledge of the human it then claims to reveal. Put simply, the vampyroteuthis, this (other) ‘animal’ who is not an animal, begins and ends with the (same) human.

Despite this vicious epistemological circle, however, Flusser’s tale of reflected evolution nonetheless offers a number of provocative, if paradoxical, observations. Organisms, for example, as beings composed entirely from superimposed suppressions, are therefore transformed by Flusser into events of stratified memory. As a result, human personality— for Flusser the experience common to the telos of creation itself— is reducible to ‘muscle cramping and individual posture’ (p. 28).

Meanwhile, as mirrors of stratified suppressions, the human and the vampyroteuthis literally turn their faces away from one another. Taking the horizontal axis of the cipherous ‘four-footed’ animal as his arbitrary starting point, Flusser describes how the cephalopod turns ninety degrees clockwise, her face curling downwards toward her anus, whereas the human turns ninety degrees anticlockwise, her face moving away from her anus until she ultimately stands erect, liberating her hands. These trajectories, writes Flusser, reflect an evolutionary ‘choice’ between mouth and anus, that is, between digestive and nervous systems, with the proto-human ‘choosing’ the former and the proto-vampyroteuthis the latter. Later, the vampyroteuthic path diverges again, refusing a future of insectile exoskeletons in favor of a downwards ‘migration’ of the sensory and tactile organs toward the anus. ‘Cephalopods are, then, our antipodes: elevated intelligent abdomens, unelevated brains’ (p. 18).

Precisely because she is the antipode of the human, however, the vampyroteuthis must be similarly exceptional. Hence, in order to establish an abyssal gulf between her and all the other ‘unexceptional’ mollusks, Flusser has the vampyroteuthis ‘unwound its mollusk coil into a perpendicular line’ (p. 23). Like the human, in other words, the vampyroteuthis has ‘straightened up.’ Tellingly, with the very act of uncoiling into exceptionalism, the vampyroteuthis is given a hand or, at least, part of one: uncoiling, her body becomes ‘an open palm, touching and absorbing the world to fill its elevated stomach’ (p. 23). With this movement, hand and mouth become one. Moreover, writes Flusser, only by possessing these analogous hands (actually homologues) are humans and vampyroteuthis’ able to surmount their animality, a move rendering them estranged from earth and sky, respectively (p. 23).

Oddly, then, both human and vampyroteuthis have transcended evolution while also being the result of ‘the blind chance of the “game of life”’ (p. 25). Here, Flusser is attempting, somewhat desperately, to defend a reductive sociobiological understanding of life while simultaneously positing the human as ‘superbiological’ entity. Both human and vampyroteuthis are, in other words, somehow the ‘natural’ result of life’s programming and thoroughly unnatural beings (bios) defined by their shared banishment from the realm of animal life (zoē).

Flusser, meanwhile, ploughs on, further developing the mouth–anus relation. Calling on Wilhelm Reich, he argues that there exist only two fundamental attitudes toward life. On the one side, the human, bending backward to distance mouth from anus, adopts a militant ‘chest out!’ position that tends toward insectile rigor mortis. On the other, the mollusk, bending forward to bring mouth and anus closer, adopts the Buddha’s ‘belly out’ position that tends towards selflessness and softness. The human, then, is militant, moribund, and associated with death (thanatos), while the soft-bodied mollusk is libidinous, generous, and associated with love (eros).
At this point, it would seem that, as super-mollusk, the vampyroteuthis represents the ultimate triumph of love over death. However, writes Flusser, in explosively unfurling its palm, the vampyroteuthis in fact takes the further step of rejecting the dialectical synthesis of the mouth–anus opposition, that is, of rejecting ‘a state of total love in the direction of total death’ (p. 29). Consequently, and despite devouring its own anus, the vampyroteuthis thus becomes ‘the most bellicose of all living creatures’ (p. 29).

**Eating well**

As both an open palm tending in the direction of total death and the antipode of the human, it remains for Flusser to ask what, given that the negative model of total death beyond total love now exists, the analysis of vampyroteuthic Dasein holds for our human world and our posthuman futures. Two models of Dasein ‘extrapolated from the ‘same’ environment’ have, he claims, ‘come crashing together,’ and this collision ‘provides the groundwork for a dialogue’ (p. 35). Ultimately, the point of contact of this dialogue – if that is what it is – concerns the analogous touch of hand and tentacle.

First, insofar as the vampyroteuthis renders the deep-sea world visible through his own lights, his method of perception is therefore entirely different. While the earthly human realm is firm, requiring that humans ‘undergo’ it in order to grasp it, the vampyroteuthic world is fluid, requiring that they rather ‘take hold’ of the world as it flows past (p. 38). Humans, then, actively comprehend their world as static and established, while vampyroteuthic comprehension is at once passive and impassioned. Comprehending what happens upon him, as opposed to what one happens upon, the vampyroteuthis as a result has impressions in contrast to human problems (p. 39).

These analogous phenomenologies, suggests Flusser, further enable us to define their respective cultures. As problems, objects must be moved out of the way, resulting in a culture geared ‘against stationary objects’ and toward ‘deliverance from established things’ (p. 39). As impressions, by contrast, objects are free-floating entities one simply happens upon, resulting in a culture of incorporation that is based upon ‘discriminating between digestible and indigestible entities’ (p. 39). Hence, for the vampyroteuthis, ‘culture’ always concerns the literal and symbolic practice of eating well (On this, see Derrida, 1995).

As a reflection of sunlight off things, writes Flusser, the external world only appears to humans and, as such, it can deceive us. As a result, he continues, humans imagine they can and must penetrate this ‘veil of light’ so as to disclose those eternal truths otherwise masked by appearance (p. 39). As such, humans are ‘born Platonists’ who only belatedly escape the delusions of realism in becoming Kantian. The vampyroteuthis, meanwhile, in engendering phenomena by way of his bioluminescent organs, ‘irradiates’ the darkness with his own point of view, thus resulting in an external world that ‘cannot deceive because it is a self-generated deception’ (p. 39). Never the dupe of realism and of the representationalist urge, then, the vampyroteuthis is rather ‘a born Kantian’ for whom Plato only comes later.

Moreover, these are not the only philosophical alignments. As human sexual organs are only indirectly connected to the hands and eyes, writes Flusser, the human brain often receives contradictory sensory information that must be resolved into ‘empirical experiences’ (p. 40). The world, in other words, is perceived as dubious, thus rendering the human a doubting Cartesian. The sexual organs of the vampyroteuthis, meanwhile, are ‘partially located’ on the tentacles and, along with his eyes, are ‘directly connected to its brain’ (p. 40). Consequently, claims Flusser, all vampyroteuthic impressions
arrive already processed and thus unified, making contradiction impossible. Hence, he continues, the world of the vampyroteuthis ‘is not doubtful but surprising … an unbroken stream of Aristotelian shock’ (p. 40). Unfortunately, however, Flusser here sheds no light whatsoever on the question of just how such a contact might be considered ‘direct,’ given that any such connection is necessarily a mediated relation. Rather, it seems to me that, for Flusser, this contact ‘ought’ to be immediate simply because his pre-existing framework presupposes an oppositional relation to human mediation.

In short, then, information flow is explicitly and directly libidinal for the surprised Aristotelian vampyroteuthis, whereas for the Cartesian human this same information flow is habitually shrouded by conceptual distance. The human animal encounters the world indirectly, by handling it; the vampyroteuthis encounters the world directly, through sex. Passivity, as the world rushes past, is thus transformed into passion.

**Conceptual orgasm, sexual syllogism**

This ceaseless and immediate stream of creative Aristotelian shock is necessarily identical with the vampyroteuthic body, which thus exists in a state Flusser alternately describes as ‘artistic ejaculation’ and ‘permanent orgasm.’ Here, however, several problems emerge, all related to questions of time, and of vampyroteuthic temporality in particular – problems that clearly display the limitations of Flusser’s analogical schema.

Beginning with artistic ejaculation, Flusser initially argues that the unbroken stream of shock ultimately ‘overwhelms’ the vampyroteuthis, causing chromatophores in the skin ‘to contract and emit coloured secretions’ (p. 64). This moment of clenched emission is, he continues, ‘an artistic orgasm during which its colourful ejaculations are encrypted into vampyroteuthic code’ (p. 64). Our first question, then, is how might an unceasing and unbroken stream of impression(s) identical with embodiment ever give rise to an ejaculatory moment? How, in other words, given the unending nature of creative vampyroteuthic shock, can the event of orgasm be delimited? In later deeming this ceaseless stream as equivalent to ‘permanent orgasm,’ Flusser only further highlights the problem: how, in the midst of permanent orgasm, can one experience – that is, punctuate – an orgasm, artistic, or otherwise? Does vampyroteuthic Dasein consist of one long orgasm, or an infinite series of overlapping orgasms? Moreover, if one’s entire existence is orgasm, might one not also say that such an existence is, by definition, never to experience an orgasm? These difficulties are a direct result of the organisational priority of Flusser’s reflexive schema, one that ultimately requires that he shy away from producing a vampyroteuthic Being and Time.

Of course, the explicit status of the text as a fable carries with it a tendency to invalidate such questions. Fables, after all, are not supposed to be ‘realistic.’ However, the possibility or otherwise of an existence indistinguishable from orgasm is the very question this ‘fable’ sets out in all seriousness to explore. Indeed, its centrality becomes obvious once we consider that the human analogue of the vampyroteuthic orgasm is the concept.

Remaining with the question of time, Flusser argues that the movement of the syllogism constitutes the ‘time’ of the concept. Hence, given the concept–orgasm analogy, this movement necessarily implies an equivalent vampyroteuthic temporality, which, writes Flusser, is the time of copulation. The human, in other words, forms – or ejaculates – a concept through the syllogistic process, whereas the vampyroteuthis ejaculates – or forms – a color-coded orgasm through copulation. Inevitably, this creates, analogously of course, exactly the same difficulties for human temporality: given that
vampyroteuthic Dasein ‘is’ orgasm, is it therefore the case that the human Dasein ‘is’ concept? And is this one continuous conceptualisation, or its analogical opposite? Are concepts, as opposed to orgasms, punctual, overlapping, or identical? Finally, in being opposed to the orgasmic flow of artistic Aristotelian shock, is the human, whose Dasein is by definition conceptual, therefore ontologically inartistic?

With unwitting irony, Flusser argues that the libidinal durée of vampyroteuthis in fact provides a critique of reflection, and thus of a certain kind of conceptual objectivity. In contrast to the human who always conceives of the world within her own reflection, the vampyroteuthis, by emitting light, ‘delineates the darkness into rations before they are conceived,’ thus marking out vampyroteuthic reason as preconceptual (p. 47). Light-reason, in other words, precedes tentacular perception-conception. Moreover, insofar as vampyroteuthic sexual organs simultaneously function as sense organs, any concept abstracted from the ‘illuminated cones’ of preconceptual reason is thus already sexualized and gendered (p. 47).

This movement of vampyroteuthic comprehension, however, clearly requires some form of spacing or discretization as the condition for any perception of time. Such a discretization, moreover, rather than removing every contradiction, instead guarantees the impossibility of perfect immunity from potential contradiction. At the very least, the temporality of vampyroteuthic comprehension seriously undermines Flusser’s claim that the vampyroteuthis experiences the libidinal flow of information immediately, that is, in a perfectly transparent form immune to the iterative drifting of alien contexts and registers. In a further ironic twist, however, the very notion of ‘preconceptual reason’ itself depends upon an unremarked shift from one sense of the term ‘ratio’ to another (initially defined as reason, this is silently supplanted by the sense of ratio as ration).

Leaving this aside, might anything be salvaged from the notion of a prior gendering of concepts? Firstly, it is clear that gender here is always either-or, with no thought for intersexed and multiply sexed, multiply gendered bodies. For Flusser, this pregendering of concepts equates simply to a philosophy of heterosexual physicality, a corporeal dialectic with copulation as initial contradiction and orgasm as its sublation. In other words, philosophy for the vampyroteuthis is copulation while, for Flusser’s human, philosophy is the Hegelian dialectic. In once again beginning from a dogmatic dichotomy, however, Flusser here inevitably ‘discloses’ nothing more than one more simplistic mirror-image: the libidinal ‘first’ philosophy of the vampyroteuthis presupposes its mirror in human psychoanalysis, just as human philosophy presupposes vampyroteuthic history in reverse, beginning with Freud and ending with Pythagoras.

In one sense, then, Flusser follows Nietzsche in arguing that concepts are merely ‘empty husks,’ preliminary to all thinking. The difference, however, concerns the fact that, for Nietzsche, the formation of such concepts is definitive of life in general, whereas for Flusser it is the defining factor of human exceptionalism. Such is the difference between reflection and diffraction, the difference between gender as either-or and gender as the production of singular bodyings. Only with the latter might the production-undergoing of conceptualizing relations take on something of the orgasmic as, without it, gender difference can never move beyond a simplistic recognition of the fact that gender impacts upon the received sense of concepts.

**Republic of squid**

Nonetheless, claims Flusser, the vampyroteuthis tells us something very important about ourselves, namely that human evolution has suppressed the sexual in favor of the
digestive. Furthermore, this suppression of sexuality arises from the male fear of female rebellion. Hence, continues Flusser, to disclose the secret libidinal history of humanity is necessarily to challenge institutional patriarchy by disclosing masculine insecurity as the basis of societal order.

A historical conceptual arrestation, he argues, allows for an historical suppression of the female by the male who, having initially relied upon greater physical strength, thereafter institutionalizes this suppression by posting border guards at the body’s various oriﬁces, with the mouth-occupying prime position. Exploring the mouth of the vampyroteuthis, meanwhile, one learns of a gland that, by way of ‘a paralyzing poison,’ arrests the ceaseless flow of incoming information, thus allowing for a spacing that produces intelligible forms that can be communicated later (p. 51). While incidentally further confusing the issue of vampyroteuthic time, delineation, and arrestation of form is thus understood here as a poison that passes by way of the mouth. We return, then, to the question of eating well, for which the psychoanalytic concepts of incorporation, introjection, and ingestion are central.

Whereas humanity contemplates the world, the vampyroteuthis absorbs or incorporates it, a difference made manifest by mutual desire: the human desires to experience the vampyroteuthis, while the vampyroteuthic desires to swallow the human. Human reason is thus analogous to the vampyroteuthic dream, just as vampyroteuthic psychoanalysis is analogous to the critique of pure reason. To understand this, however, we must go back to the (Western) beginnings of human philosophy – and therefore into the vampyroteuthic future. Indeed, upon returning to, or arriving at, Plato’s Republic, we find an intensely dramatic portrayal that, beginning with the male fear of female rebellion, then passes through the digestive repression of sexuality and on to the institutional posting of orifical guards. We find, too, further clarification regarding the political implications of the Dasein experienced as permanent orgasm.

If the Republic is to endure, writes Plato, creaturely desire must be suppressed at source. This desire, he suggests, is characteristic of the labouring animal body, which in times of crisis comprises nonhuman animals, women, and male slaves (waged or otherwise). Bereft of reason, the members of these groups are considered incapable of bodily control, and hence always tending toward a shameless wallowing in incest, bestiality, and cannibalism. Moreover, warns Plato, should the rulers permit just one of these laboring, desiring bodies to go free, they risk loosing upon the Republic a cannibalistic animality that simply cannot be controlled.

Consequently, insists Plato, this animal body must be enslaved by the ‘best’ – the proper instrument of which is the mouth – through the force-feeding of institutional ‘Guardians.’ The mouth, he writes, is that through which the necessary enters and the best exits. The best, in other words, exits but never enters the mouth. It is never ingested or digested, but rather, in being installed through other oriﬁces, penetrates and places within the body an external guardian of the Law to act in the place of the reason that is lacking. The animal body, in short, must incorporate the Law as both foreign and determining, only ‘set free’ once the cannibalistic instinct for revolution is thoroughly subjugated. Without this enforced incorporation, writes Plato, the Republic will fall before an orgasmic rebellion pursued through a newly libidinal animal body entirely consumed by desire.

Flusser, meanwhile, restages a vampyroteuthic Republic, reversing the human ‘might is right’ origin of our repressive patriarchal socius by making the female vampyroteuthis physically stronger, and by providing the vampyroteuthis as a species with a ‘somewhat unnerving’ reproductive system, its libidinal saturation demonstrated by the
sheer number of penises, clitorises, and secondary orifices (p. 20). Moreover, writes Flusser, political freedom for the vampyroteuthis is cannibalism. Indeed, the promise underpinning the detailed reconstruction of vampyroteuthic society, history, and culture is ultimately located here, as the libidinal mirror-image of the Republic, and thus the negation to be negated.

What ‘shape,’ therefore, does an encounter with the vampyroteuthis promise? Within the watery abyss, human plane becomes vampyroteuthic volume, space becomes a realm of coiled tension, and geometric Platonic forms give way to Nietzschean mutability. As a good dialectician, however, Flusser insists that any such encounter must occur precisely at and on the surface, that is, as an equidistant sublation of the two realms. Indeed, this encounter underpins Flusser’s utopian project: just as sea encounters sky, so too the veneered Apollonian world of the human must encounter the brutally energetic Dionysian world of the vampyroteuthis.

Here, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* reveals itself as kin as much to *Star Trek: The Next Generation* as to Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy*. On the one side, we find Captain Picard’s all-too-human imperialist and rationalistic quest for experience and, on the other, the vampyroteuthis-Borg in their all-consuming quest for incorporation. This is, however, a specifically Nietzschean Borg, the Platonic geometric rigor of a cube ship having been supplanted by a fluid and ephemeral ink-sculpture.

**Artefacts and circuits**

The vampyroteuthis, we learn, possess unique forms of historicity, a subject on which Flusser’s thought once again converges almost uncannily with that of Bernard Stiegler. Humanity, argues Flusser, rests far too heavily upon its inanimate mnemonic crutches, with the result that human history can never be ‘properly intersubjective’ and hence can never be ‘genuine’ (p. 50). However, whereas Stiegler views these dangerous ‘psychotechnological’ crutches as definitive of our current information age, Flusser, by contrast, suggests that all of human history is already a failure, presumably because human history either begins with, or always tends toward, the export of information to mnemonic aids.

While Flusser’s recourse to ‘genuine’ history and ‘proper’ intersubjectivity resonates suspiciously with mythical notions of ‘oral history,’ vampyroteuthic intersubjectivity is nonetheless of particular interest insofar as the media of transmission are the glands. That said, in being opposed to human historiology, this glandular historicity additionally stages a constitutive difference that allows Flusser to reiterate human exceptionalism based upon the possession of second-order language. Paradoxically, however, Flusser also insists that vampyroteuthic displays of colour constitute an intra-specific chromatic language that gives ‘outward expression to the inner thoughts’ (p. 51). How, then, is this language not a ‘language’? And if it somehow is not, then how can ‘inner thoughts’ ever be articulated? This issue of vampyroteuthic language is further complicated by the introduction of additional ‘communication’ glands. One such gland, for example, renders the sender of a given message transparent and thus invisible to its recipient(s) – a form of transmission, writes Flusser, which inevitably reminds us of the ideological overdetermination of radio and television (p. 21).

More important for Flusser, however, is his claim that all vampyroteuthic communication comprises cognitive *rape*, a claim with clear implications for our technocratic media society. The vampyroteuthis, he writes, disseminates information by forcibly ensuring its storage within the memories of others. Moreover, this forced penetration
constitutes a continuous dialog that is synonymous with vampyroteuthic history. Consequently, the issue of memory takes center stage. Memory, writes Flusser, is the ‘central problem’ of both evolution and art, with the latter being ‘essentially a method of fabricating artificial memories’ that serve as receptacles of human memory (p. 61). Ultimately, however, the very materiality of these cultural artifacts institutes the downfall of art and history: objects, he continues, resist being transformed into memories, a resistance thereafter recorded and recoded within other artefactual memories that together make up ‘art history’ (p. 63).

Again anticipating Stiegler, Flusser decries contemporary humanity – actually the relatively small percentage that occupies the global North – for living as mere ‘functions of their objects’ (p. 63). Humanity, he writes, has forgotten that its artifacts should function simply to record and share acquired information in a pedagogical exchange that Stiegler terms a ‘long circuit’ (Stiegler, 2010). Instead, humans are ‘absorbed’ by their objects in the brain-numbing reversal of Stiegler’s ‘short circuit,’ transforming their mnemonic artifacts into barriers that rather serve to restrict human communication (p. 63).

There is, however, one more form of glandular communication open to the vampyroteuthis: the sculpting of ink. Self-portraits aside, writes Flusser, such sculptures are indecipherable to humans. And yet, he continues, despite this formal indecipherability, we must nonetheless assume that these sepia clouds broadcast information. Here, however, Flusser moves far too quickly in rejecting any comparison with human works of art; a rejection based, first, upon the ink clouds’ ephemerality and, second, upon the claim that all information communicated by these – allegedly indecipherable – ink clouds is purposefully misleading (p. 52). These reasons, however, simply do not hold. First of all, there exists a huge number of human-produced artworks that are at least as ‘ephemeral’ as a slowly dissipating sculptural form. Second, given that the formal species barrier renders any communication indecipherable, it is simply not possible to judge the exclusivity of the attempt to mislead. Further, it is similarly impossible to guarantee that every recipient will indeed be deceived.

Despite this, Flusser insists that, in fact, all the vampyroteuthis’ communicative glands explicitly ‘facilitate lying’ in addition to their forcible penetration (p. 52). Consequently, vampyroteuthic historicity and historiology constitute an artistic history and an art of deceit. Whereas the opposite of human truth is falsehood, for the vampyroteuthis, given that truth is already a lie, the opposite of truth is therefore dishonesty. Here, the vampyroteuthis clearly reveals her Nietzschean chromatics, philosophizing not to proceed from falsehood to truth, but rather ‘to lie ever more completely’ (p. 53). In this mirror-world, the entirety of artifacts and institutions thus constitute ‘a peculiar type of cryptography that is not meant to be decrypted,’ but rather to yield further deceptive encryptions that, at the most elemental level, serve to ‘mask the demonic predator’s will to power’ (pp. 52–53). In its turn, meanwhile, a vampyroteuthic decryption-encryption of Nietzsche’s ‘On Truth and Lie’ is plainly unmasked.

That said, if deceit is key to a specifically vampyroteuthic critique, then it is a critique that ultimately deceives only itself. By simply extending a suprabiological human exceptionalism to the vampyroteuthis, Flusser in fact offers nothing at all: as both the dialectical negative of the human and that the human has repressed in becoming human, we never leave the human for a moment. Nonetheless, it remains for us to consider Flusser’s specifically vampyroteuthic solution to the ‘laughable error’ that is human history.
Lessons of anthropomorphism

Firstly, we recall, the vampyroteuthis represents – if not presents – a code for deciphering our posthuman future. Secondly, on the theoretical level, the production of such a beast represents a methodology superior to that practiced in the hard sciences, as it allows an otherwise shrouded humanity to ‘recognize an art of a different sort’ (p. 63). What, then, is left to decipher of this new, post-scientific art form?

Given a humanity forever condemned to struggle against the materiality of objects, as its mirror-opposite the vampyroteuthis therefore labors under no such burden. Hence, in contrast to the mediated human artifact, vampyroteuthic art is necessarily immaterial and intersubjective, that is, transmitted immediately into its auditor’s brain. Unfortunately, while this immediacy is undoubtedly fabulous, it also marks the moment that Flusser’s text falls prey to idealistic delusion.

Put in the simplest way possible, every event of transmission depends a priori upon a material substrate. There must, in other words, be some form of physical manifestation for anything to be perceived in the first place, and any such perception must necessarily be mediated as a result. Further, in direct consequence, every perception, and thus every transmission, must have as its condition the risk of misinterpretation and distortion, even of being forgotten. Against this, the ‘new’ art practiced by our vampyroteuthic co-beings depends upon the impossible idealism of absolute intersubjectivity, an absolute that serves only to dissolve every encounter within immediate perfect identity.

Curiously, Flusser describes the immaterial immediacy of vampyroteuthic idealism in the most material and temporal of terms: experiencing the Aristotelian shock of the new forces the vampyroteuthis to reorganize his memory, a reorganization that permeates his entire body with an orgasmic cramp resulting in a chromatophoric ejaculation of varicolored secretions. This ejaculate subsequently attracts a mate across distance and time, ultimately occasioning an orgiastic coupling that is at once dialogue and information-transfer. Given these immediate temporal confusions, it is hardly fortuitous that Flusser chooses this moment to admit his present inability to account for how, exactly, new information might ‘infiltrate’ – a term already suggestive of contamination – the ‘common vampyroteuthic conversation’ (p. 64).

As we know, however, Flusser is clear as to the mode of this infiltration: rape. The vampyroteuthis penetrates his auditor so as to force him to store immaterial information. Here, the human-vampyroteuthis opposition finally turns full circle: tired of fighting a resistant materiality, now humans too have ‘created media that have enabled us to rape human brains’ – televisions, videos, and computer monitors – ‘with whose help broadcasters of information can mendaciously seduce their audiences’ (p. 67). Hence, we end as we begin: with the human.

Ultimately, then, Flusser’s Vampyroteuthis Infernalis holds true to the traditional genre of the fable, an enclosure that inevitably re-raises the vexed question of anthropomorphism. Anthropomorphism, as Tyler explains, necessarily presupposes knowledge regarding some uniquely human trait. This, however, raises two problems: first, it presumes that we know what it is to be human when we do not, and, second, it infers that any such trait is uniquely human when, at the very least, any number of extraterrestrial visitors, for example, may arrive tomorrow to disqualify every such inference.

Even more problematic, writes Tyler, is that any apparent ‘suggestion’ that another has fallen victim to the counterfeit allure of anthropomorphism is in fact always an accusation – an accusation of narcissism, in short. Things, however, are not quite so simple. In a bravura intellectual display, Tyler shows instead that, precisely because it
is an accusation, anthropomorphism necessarily performs an abrupt about-face at the very moment such a charge is uttered. Hence, rather than being an unfortunate property of those who fall for the charms of anthropomorphism, narcissism instead belongs to those who believe in the existence of anthropomorphism, and so wield it always with an implicit accusation. To propose such a charge, in other words, is already to accept the possibility of a uniquely human trait. Without this belief, any indictment of anthropomorphism simply refuses to make sense.

How, then, do we stare Flusser’s squid in the face, as if into a mirror? To do so entraps us within an infinite regress: ultimately, to condemn Flusser’s vampyroteuthis as an anthropomorphism in the hugely problematic form of a moral fable, to decry her exemplary exploitation as a reductive, cipherous product of anthropocentric hubris, is to accept the very possibility of human exceptionalism such a charge aims to disrupt. Perhaps, then, the truth of Flusser’s fabulous text rests with the two important and timely warnings it provides: first, that one cannot cease to polish the mirror so easily and, second, that radically inventive posthuman and posthumanist figures can never emerge on the heels of accusations and dismissals.

Politics and the posthuman: Utopias

Nonetheless, it still behoves us to ask what, if anything, the analysis of vampyroteuthic society offers to those animals forced into the extremities of, and by, global capitalism. According to Flusser, politics, defined as the freedom to change the ‘cultural superstructure,’ is specific to human animals (p. 58). As such, he continues, humans alone are equipped with the ability to imagine Utopias in which even ‘biological constraints are done away with’ (p. 58). In reducing political activity to a deluded attempt to change the ideological superstructure, however, Flusser inevitably leaves intact an (biologically determined) economic infrastructure, thus taking a huge step backward into the vulgar materialism of a certain early Marxist theory. Moreover, given that any such politics aimed at an epiphenomenal superstructure is ultimately reducible to the posing of an – equally epiphenomenal and thus ideological – utopia, what can one make of the fact that Flusser is himself proposing an explicitly utopian solution, albeit by way of an analogical methodology? Once again, in place of a Möbius sea-sky surface, the vampyroteuthic mirror displays only an infinite regress.

Vampyroteuthic society, writes Flusser, is a given (datum) and not a product (factum), rendering the vampyroteuthis incapable of comprehending a utopian imaginary. Consequently, vampyroteuthic politics, if such a thing were possible, could only ever consist of violent acts against their own biological ‘nature.’ But then, asks Flusser in a further dizzying twist, does this not also describe human politics: ‘Are not those who defend nature – those who defend such natural ‘realities’ as race, the dominion of mankind, even ecological balance – somehow betrayers of the human Geist?’ (p. 58). Indeed, but why, if inequalities are biologically determined, are ‘realities’ placed within scare quotes? And, if political activity is a deluded attack on the superstructure, how can this equate to the human Geist? There are numerous, proliferating confusions here, but it soon becomes clear that the purpose behind these claims is simply to provide Flusser with a backdrop against which he can propose his own Utopia as a ‘third way’ between human and vampyroteuthis.

Human political activity, he writes, is freedom as dialectic, with the individual as one pole and the needs of society as the other. The vampyroteuthis, meanwhile, has no dialectic of political freedom insofar as he is ‘biologically necessitated to recognize the
hierarchical rank of [his] brother’ (p. 58). Amid this description that is always of fraternity and never sorority (hence the gendering of the vampyroteuthis), just how this rank is established, however, is unclear in that every vampyroteuthis, according to Flusser, is one of a pair of simultaneously hatched twins. Presumably, then, both vampyroteuthis twins are in a position of lower rank toward each other, but this would in fact constitute the very undoing of both hierarchy and equality. Despite this, Flusser suggests that, for a vampyroteuthis to become free, his only option would be to dispose of biological necessity by disposing of his twin. Vampyroteuthic freedom, then, is fratricidal, anarchical cannibalism: ‘the right to devour its kin’ (pp. 58–59).

Flusser, as a good dialectician, here reaches his prearranged or, at least, presupposed goal: the possibility of positing a Utopia that, thanks to reflection, has of course been there all along. While the fratricidal, cannibalistic anarchy of the vampyroteuthis is a vision of hell for the human, it nonetheless represents for the vampyroteuthis ‘an inaccessible heaven of freedom’ (p. 59). By contrast, the inaccessible human heaven of a loving socialist utopia is for the vampyroteuthis ‘a hellish anthill’ (p. 60). What then is to be done, asks Flusser, is there not – perhaps – ‘a third possibility’? (p. 60).

Indeed there is and, moreover, ‘it is not difficult to find’ – that of ‘a Geist that is both human and vampyroteuthis’ (p. 60). Of course, this Geist is for Flusser already entirely human, his utopian third way a simple sublation of the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ sides of the human Dasein that have been brought into admirably clear focus by way of the fabulous vampyroteuthis. The vampyroteuthis and the human are, in other words, the absolute thesis and antithesis constitutive of humanity. Hence, writes Flusser, if ‘we could encounter both sides simultaneously, the question of heaven and hell, of good and evil, would be no more’ (p. 60). Indeed, it would be the end of all questions, and thus of Geist itself: such is the risk we take to encounter our hellish side and therefore ‘our own reflection, above all the reflection of our grotesque political folly’ (p. 60).

Ultimately, however, the ‘grand risk’ run by encountering the vampyroteuthis is simply no risk at all. Flusser’s ‘third way’ simply reiterates a fable of Kantian tolerance – humans, we recall, are ‘born-Platonists’ who must learn to become Kantian, the third way being simply the forever-deferred sublation of the individual-social dialectic understood as Regulative Idea. Moving along this way, all roads inevitably lead to the human: the specific point of disciplinary departure, Flusser insists, is ‘more or less irrelevant’ insofar as ‘each of these differently equipped vehicles will begin to encounter one another soon after they have submerged below the surface’ (p. 69). Confounding all previous talk of abysmal depths, the oceanic and the psychic are, finally, revealed as ‘one and the same abyss,’ reflected ‘as though in a mirror’ (p. 70).

As such, we reasonable Apollonians need not actually submerge in order to provoke the vampyroteuthis’ instinctual Dionysian emergence. In fact, depth itself must be annulled in favor of a surface equanimity. The vampyroteuthis, writes Flusser, has already emerged – ‘in the exploits of Nazism, in cybernetic thinking, in works of logical analysis, and in certain theological texts’ (p. 70) – always appearing at the surface ‘with the effect of a bomb’ (p. 70). In every case, however, it is not the vampyroteuthis who ‘annihilates our surroundings but rather the sudden release of the pressure that confines it’ (p. 71). Consequently, the vampyroteuthis must first undergo a form of depressurization synonymous for Flusser with humanization (p. 71): he must be raised ‘slowly and carefully’ to the surface in order ‘initiate a dialogue … in the clear light of day’ (p. 71).

However, as Flusser is helpless but to note, since the Enlightenment ‘unilateral efforts to “depressurize” and humanize others’ have repeatedly failed (p. 71). Perhaps,
I would suggest, such failures are in fact guaranteed by the very light of day – with everything already so weighted toward the human, should we not at least be snorkeling? Either way, this comes as a disappointingly inevitable conclusion to a text that promises so much more. How different things might have been, one wonders, should Flusser have chosen not reflection, but diffraction? Moreover, a diffraction through fabulous other animals would have no need of generic fables, given that such animals already impact upon every move.

**Animals, analogy, and pragmatism**

Questions of fables, language and diffraction neatly return us, with Flusser, to Tyler and the becoming-feral of the animal cipher in this final section. First of all, Tyler reiterates a point that simply cannot be made often and strongly enough when it comes to engaging rigorously with other animals: language cannot be reduced to the word. Bearing this in mind, Tyler returns to the important notion of the meme, as originally proposed by Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene* (1989) and again in *The Extended Phenotype* (1999). Memes, suggests Dawkins, are the replicators of cultural transmission. Ranging from hand gestures and catchphrases to clothing fashions and the manipulation of pottery, they function on the cultural level in the same way that genes constitute the replicators of genetic transmission. Such memes, he continues, spread from ‘brain to brain’ in the same way that ‘a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell’ (cit. Tyler, p. 186).

As with genes, writes Dawkins, the ‘fitness’ of a given meme depends upon three factors: longevity, fecundity, and copying fidelity. First, for as long as a particular cultural artifact is both used and recognized, it will endure. Second, if a meme is to endure, that is, repeatedly replicated, it must not only be recognized upon reception, but must also be readily duplicated. Lastly, upon reiteration a meme must repeatedly produce (largely) faithful duplications – a hand gesture, to take Tyler’s excellent example, should it ‘diverge too far from the norm is in danger of becoming no more than an ostentatious scratching’ (p. 187).

Being displaced in space and time, however, *every* replication – or iteration – of a given meme is necessarily imperfect, and it is these imperfect imitations, these mutations, which account for the cultural evolution of memes (see Derrida, 1988). Nonetheless, as Dawkins notes, the question remains as to who, exactly, benefits from any given mutation, since there must be some sort of beneficiary if we are to account for the replication of a ‘mutated’ meme in terms of ‘fitness’ – and which in no way, as Dawkins is quick to point out, bestows upon a mutated meme ‘some kind of survival advantage’ (p. 188). Rather, a successful mutilated meme is one that is, quite simply, ‘good at replicating’ – an ability absolutely indifferent to any benefit or risk that might accrue to its host, thus leading Dawkins to suggest that a ‘successful meme evolves as it does because it is advantageous to itself’ (p. 188). Of course, Dawkins is by no means attributing consciousness to memes but, rather, is reiterating at the cultural level his now well-known theory of the selfish gene. Hence, ‘just like genes, memes can be considered ‘selfish’ replicators in the sense that they compete ‘ruthlessly’ with one another in the ‘meme pool’ that is their environment’ (p. 188). With this interpretation, however, we abruptly find ourselves once again dependent upon a ‘natural’ genetic model based upon the naturalistic fallacy of a universal struggle for survival, of the *bellum omni contra omnes* [war of each against all] – a schema all too often employed in support of theories of human exceptionalism.
This is hardly surprising, however, given that the relation of gene to meme is therefore that of analogy – a methodology, as we have seen, fraught with problems of unthought presumption. Indeed, in Dawkins’ later Platonic formulation, the difficulty of reflection becomes plain to see: the meme, he argues, is ontologically divided between its Idea on the one hand, and its imperfect empirical instances on the other. The meme, in other words, is divided into quasi-immortal genotype and potentially infinite phenotypic effects, that is, between immortal germline and mortal cells or between perfect suprasensory form and imperfect material copies. With this move, Dawkins utterly de-claws his earlier – potentially radical – theory. As Tyler points out, we are now no longer considering the actual trait or artifact, but rather a meme-infected human individual who rather manifests the meme ‘in a mode of behavior or the production of a concrete object’ (p. 189). As such, the meme ceases to be a question for the pragmatist, becoming instead a matter of reflection. In other words, the memetic artifact now reflects (human) knowledge or competence, rather than being itself a performative practice.

Through a reading of Derek Gatherer, Tyler thus seeks to rescue memetic theory from the liberalism of its founder and so restore to it its innovative potential. Following Gatherer, Tyler argues that what for Dawkins are merely ‘phenotypic effects’ are in fact the memes themselves. The practice, in short, is the meme. Such concrete practices or functions, ‘subject to a wide range of mechanisms of replication, mutating, sifting, and selection,’ evolve as the world worlds – ‘immersive activities, developing and transforming within particular environments’ (p. 190). Such is indeed, as Tyler contends, ‘a supremely practical, pragmatically cogent understanding of the meme’ (p. 190). Moreover, it offers a great deal in terms of a specifically Nietzschean practice, this despite Nietzsche’s own – admittedly misplaced – hostility towards Darwin’s evolutionary theory.

In a superb move, Tyler then takes the survival of Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection as a ‘matchless example’ of the practice of memetic evolution (p. 191). The success of Darwinian theory, in other words, has itself ‘depended on its utility, ease of replication, and of course on the selection pressures of its environment’ (p. 202). However, as a meme-complex – and this is precisely Tyler’s point – ‘Darwin’s theory did not need to be true; it simply needed to replicate’ (p. 202). Most important, here, is the fact that the pragmatic emphasis on knowledge conceived as a practice offers an alternative not only to realism and relativism, but also to the positing of reflection in that, as practice, it already demands a diffractive methodology, inherent in the notion of perspectivism. Consequently, knowledge as practice necessarily becomes open-ended.

Moreover, diffractive memetic thinking offers a great deal to a rethinking of life and its conceptual limits. Hence, whereas Dawkins claims that memes are by and large the province of humans alone, Tyler shows that Dawkins’ own work nonetheless ‘concede[s] the existence of nonhuman memetic practices,’ most notably in birdsong (p. 206). It is here that the value of pragmatism generally, and of the meme in particular, manifests itself most clearly. With representationalism, for example, questions aimed directly or indirectly at a dismissal of the nonhuman inevitably arise: do birds know something when they sing, or is it simply mindless parroting? Here, one sees all too clearly how certain methodological frameworks serve to foreclose entire realms of potential discussion. However, as Tyler argues, the impulse to enquire after knowledge that makes a certain practice possible is a purely ‘representationalist inclination’ (p. 208), that is, an often deeply-ingrained but nonetheless entirely contingent urge to view knowledge as a reflection of the world.
All too clearly, this urge or inclination saturates Flusser’s entire project. Despite claiming initially that it was the impossibility of ‘polishing the mirror’ in the hope of revealing, or constructing, an ever-more-accurate representation of the human Dasein that provided the impetus behind his ‘new’ genre of biological fable, Flusser nonetheless remains intent on doing just that. For the realist, writes Tyler, ‘knowledge tells us about the world, the object of knowledge, while for the relativist it tells us about the worldview of the knower’ (p. 208). By virtue of its Heideggerian anthropocentrism, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* is an attempt both realist and relativist, and in this resides its contradiction – the consequence of analogical method and a priori representationalism.

Pragmatism, by contrast, has no need of knowledge understood as ‘an entity distinct from the world it represents’ (p. 208). Taking the example of memetic birdsong above, eminently pragmatic questions concern themselves not with metaphysical exclusion, nor with imaginary oppositions such as ‘nature’ and ‘culture,’ but rather with various and diverse modes of activity, that is, of practices or ways of being together within the world.

Ultimately, and this is precisely the value of Tyler’s text, pragmatic epistemology does away with the noxious productions of humanism and of all the various anthropocentric denials. It does this, quite simply, by rendering such claims irrelevant. No polemic is required, no statements of ideology need be professed, and no utopian predictions are necessary. Rather, the world is that within which beings of all size, scope and scale interact insofar as they do, and no further arguments are necessary other than those concerning how we act, that is, what we do, when it comes to our nonhuman and human others. Nor is it enough simply to extend – whether to a greater or lesser extent – the number of species who ‘count.’ Rather, for the pragmatic memeticist, the evaluative anthropocentrism underlying such extensions is not only unnecessary but, more importantly, it is simply bad philosophy or, put another way, bad practice.

**Notes**

1. Both *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis: A Treatise*, trans. Valentine A. Pakis, and *CIFERAE: A Bestiary in Five Fingers* were originally published in 2012 as part of the influential *Posthumanities* series.
2. Entirely for reasons of economy and flow, I will hereafter refer to Flusser alone as the (principle) author of *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*. Nevertheless, one should keep in mind throughout the significant contribution made by Louis Bec.
3. As readers of Plato will already realize, this reading of Protagoras is very much a ‘mis-measure.’ As Tyler makes explicit (p. 264), Protagoras rather subscribed to ‘an evaluative, pragmatic perspectivism’ according to which every living being ‘is its own measure of all things’ – a position that finds its keenest echo in Nietzsche.
4. The reasons behind this masculine gendering will become clear.
5. Of course, Kant’s willingness to allow for the possibility of intelligent life on Venus far more readily than that of intelligent nonhuman life on Earth is itself telling.
7. This reading focuses on the *Republic* VIII: 563b–564a and IX: 571b–572b & 590a–591c and *Timaeus* 75e. On this, see my ‘Plato Between the Teeth of the Beast: Animals and Democracy in Tomorrow’s Europe,’ available at https://uq.academia.edu/RichardIveson
8. In contrast to Kant’s Venesian, then, aliens here rather demonstrate the impossibility of (en) closure and of transcendent criteria.
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