
Engaging with most if not all the usual suspects of Euro-American philosophy, *CIFERAE: A Bestiary in Five Fingers* is practically indispensable to any course on philosophy and other animals (animals other than the human). While Matthew Calarco’s 2008 book *Zoographies* is in many ways a more serious and sustained engagement with the subject, what Tom Tyler offers here is more wide-ranging, more inventive, and far more entertaining. That this work—like Calarco’s—provides a powerfully masculinist and eurocentric approach to the matter suggests, however, that any course of study on animals and philosophy should also include works outside this philosophical mainstream—feminist works and those engaged with indigenous knowledges immediately spring to mind. That said, any scholar interested in thinking about the uses and abuses of other animals in fantastic texts will find Tyler’s book quite thought-provoking.

Of course, as with most philosophers confronting the subject, Tyler is more interested in our human ability or inability to engage with other animals than he is in those animals *per se*—and this in spite of the subtitle *bestiary*:

> The contention that humanity cannot know the world except by means of human aptitudes and abilities, that human being will inescapably, unavoidably be the measure of all things, has been formulated in a variety of captivating ways, by a good many philosophers, thinkers, and theorists. It is with this claim, regarding the nature of knowledge and of human being, that we will be concerned. (3)

Mirroring the recurring question that structures the book—namely, is philosophy, realism, relativism, or pragmatism necessarily anthropocentric?—we might then find ourselves asking: Is any discussion of anthropocentrism itself necessarily anthropocentric? I will return to this in conclusion, but for now, allow me briefly to detail the often complex arguments of the book as a whole.

As its title suggests, *CIFERAE: A Bestiary in Five Fingers* is divided into five chapters, with a brief prelude to start things off and an equally brief coda to wrap it all up. The first chapter, “Surrounded by Informers and Assassins,” also doubles as an introduction; it presents the argument that both hands and language are unique to humans, distinguishes between various forms of anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism, and explains Tyler’s use of the terms *cipher* and *index*. The second chapter, “Laugh Loudly and Flip Them the Bird,” concerns itself with scientific and philosophical realism, asking in short whether realism itself is necessarily anthropocentric. The third chapter, “On the Ring Finger a Ram’s Testicles,” similarly addresses itself to whether philo-
Chapter one draws on a long roster of philosophers to make a series of distinctions important to the book’s theme. These thinkers include but are not limited to Bataille, Heidegger, Austin, Peirce, Freud, Derrida, and Wittgenstein. The first distinction is, of course, that between humans and the rest of the animals, and here Tyler focuses in particular on Heidegger’s diagnosis of an ontological gap predicated on the uniquely human characteristics of hands, thinking, and language. Tyler then distinguishes between two forms of anthropocentrism: spatial or evaluative anthropocentrism, which places humans at the center of all importance, and temporal or epistemological anthropocentrism, which places humans before any other considerations. Next, Tyler argues that philosophy has traditionally used animals as “ciphers,” literally “empty,” “zero.” In other words, it never matters which animal is used in a philosophical example; indeed, the demonstrable characteristics of particular animals are unimportant to the philosophical tradition because they are only employed for their cipherous, chimerical, nonhuman otherness. Tyler urges us to transform animal ciphers into animal indices, shifting from making a point with just any other animal to pointing other animals out in all their specificity (32), thereby freeing the wild ferae from the tame ciferae. Finally, Tyler engages in a fascinating reading of the supposed fallacy of anthropomorphism; indeed, this discussion (50-64) is perhaps one of the most useful moments in the book as it shows that the common accusation of anthropomorphism actually skips the question of what we mean by “human” and therefore succumbs to the temporal or epistemological anthropocentrism it supposedly seeks to avoid.

The second chapter asks whether realism is anthropocentric, a question that might be of particular interest to science fiction scholars. While realism comes in many varieties, Tyler takes the term “to designate the philosophical position holding that a reality exists independently of the beliefs and ideas of those who come into contact with it and that true knowledge consists in the correspondence of one’s beliefs and ideas with that independent reality” (82). For his critique of realism, Tyler turns to Nietzsche—in particular to Nietzsche’s contention that realism relies on ignoring the possibility of nonhuman perspectives. If other animals too have worlds, and if humans have no access to those worlds, how can they pretend that their knowledge represents reality? (106). Tyler concludes, however, that according to this argument realism is not in fact intrinsically anthropocentric, for a composite set of represen-
tations shared among humans, other animals, and aliens might still have some hope of getting the facts right.

The third chapter draws on the work of Kant, Saussure, and Whorf and turns to the question of whether philosophical relativism is in principle anthropocentric. While relativism is often considered the opposite of realism, Tyler argues that the two share many of the same characteristics—in particular their reliance on representationalism, the idea that knowledge is primarily about representing the world through words and concepts. This shared dependence on representationalism makes relativism susceptible to the argument in chapter two: while relativist accounts may be anthropocentric, they need not be. Indeed, Kant’s extensive reliance on the example of intelligent extraterrestrials—of particular interest to scholars of the fantastic, (especially 127-30)—suggests the interpretation that even Kant’s centering of the universe around the rational subject need not be anthropocentric, for this rational subject could just as easily be an alien.

Tyler’s fourth chapter brings the question of anthropocentrism to an epistemological approach quite distinct from both realism and relativism: pragmatism. Tyler relies primarily on William James, Wittgenstein, and Darwin to advance his argument here. Pragmatism, he suggests, maintains that the practical value of knowledge is more important than any claim to represent the truth; in other words, pragmatism is an antirepresentationalist epistemology. As Tyler puts it paraphrasing and finally quoting William James, “[i]f there is no practical difference between alternatives, if the answers we give make no difference to our actions, then those alternatives, practically speaking, mean the same thing ‘and all dispute is idle’” (177). This pragmatic approach to knowledge is obviously Tyler’s preferred one; it also happens to be the least susceptible to the charge of anthropocentrism, for other animals clearly demonstrate the practical differences between ways of knowing the world in their day-to-day engagements with it. For scholars of the fantastic, the extensive discussion of Dawkins’s “meme” in this chapter may be of particular interest.

Chapter five turns away from the question of epistemological anthropocentrism and towards the question of the human itself. What, in short, do we mean when we say “we”? To elaborate on and provide an at least temporary answer, Tyler returns to the uniquely human hand and to what he calls a “handy humanism” (226). Tracing and debunking the various attempts to distinguish so-called “true” hands from those possessed by other chimpanzees, Tyler concludes that an expanded “we” is already easily available, a “panthropocentrism” (253) or chimp-centered view that would allow us to, in Nietzsche’s words, “become what we are” (260).

At the outset, I asked whether any discussion of anthropocentrism might not itself be intrinsically anthropocentric; with CIFERAE as the example at hand, I must in conclusion answer both yes and no. While Tyler’s book does
focus primarily on the human animal, it also displaces and redefines that category—as any good discussion of anthropocentrism must. Of course, the fact that I’ve been able to provide a reasonable gloss of Tyler’s arguments in CIFERA E without mentioning any non-chimp animals doesn’t mean that those animals aren’t present, but simply that they are not very important. Indeed, if you are actually interested in other animals then this is not a particularly good place to start; if, however, you are interested in the most common and most important animal in philosophical texts—the human animal—then this book will most certainly shake your faith in the primacy of the human as a category, and offer excellent reading in the process.

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