
Reviewed by Rodolfo Piskorski

The *Posthumanities* series, published by the University of Minnesota Press, once more outdoes itself by releasing another remarkable book. If Cary Wolfe, the editor, has managed to churn out one exciting and incisive new book after another, this time comes one that is unique in many ways: Tom Tyler’s *CIFERAE: A Bestiary in Five Fingers*. It starts on the right foot for being visually striking: it is square (and not rectangular) and full of pages adorned with illustrations of animals (from medieval bestiaries to Garfield). It offers a veritable update of the bestiary genre, while still providing the contemporary philosophical *Zeitgeist* that a cross-section of animal species such as the bestiary seems prone to evoke.

Tyler’s project is sizable but thoroughly convincing. He begins by the assumption that philosophical discourse about animals is first and foremost an *epistemological* question, both because of a supposed human inability of going beyond our (human) minds, but also due to the promise of a true alternative worldview in the shape of animal subjectivity. He puts forth early in the book the famous quote by Protagoras according to which man is the measure of all things, leaving an exploration of its varied, conflicting readings intentionally for the very end of the book. Protagoras’s claim may determine that one can only engage in epistemological philosophy in an anthropocentric fashion. Tyler’s stance, however, is that epistemology and anthropocentrism are two separate questions that have been entangled. Therefore, he proposes to explore the major epistemological footings (realism, relativism, and pragmatism) in order to test

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whether their core arguments are inherently and structurally anthropocentric or not – if they ascribe to Protagoras’s claim.

The book is structured in five chapters – each named after one of the five fingers from the title. Chapter 1 attempts to map the interface between anthropocentrism and animals in philosophy, via Bataille and Heidegger. Chapters 2 through 4 analyze the different epistemological paradigms – realism, relativism, and pragmatism respectively. Finally, chapter 5 tries to address the problems of attempting to define the human and the anthropocentrism that may arise from that. Tyler is clear from the onset, though, that he believes epistemology doesn’t necessarily have to be anthropocentric, and he diagnoses epistemological philosophy as one of the main culprits of “theoretical” animal abuse: “Like language, these philosophical animals often find themselves subject to casual or unwitting abuse” (3), and Tyler urges us to “attend, where possible, to the unsubstitutable singularity […] of disruptive individuals like Jacques Derrida’s indecisive but determined cat” (4).

In this quest, Tyler will find two common elements in the texts he reads, placed diametrically in their structure: hands and animals. Hands, Tyler shows, are foregrounded in philosophical texts with an obsessional regularity that is telling. Philosophers are prone, he suggests, to point at the human hand (and for most of them, all hands are human) as the mark of superiority that warrants human exceptionalism and epistemological anthropocentrism. And, on the other hand, Tyler demonstrates how a broad range of thinkers – when they’re thinking about animals or not – seem to be virtually unable to write philosophy without recourse to animals. Therefore, Tyler presents a careful exploration of epistemological philosophies by the means of a bestiary of the animals that have been put to work by the writers and philosophers he quotes, all the while keeping the engaging “question of the hand” on equal footing with his discussion of animality. Perhaps even more interesting than that, there is an underlying discussion throughout the whole book as to the possibility of actually freeing animals from discursive abuse: he includes 101 animal images in his bestiary-like treatise in order to foreground silenced animal presences, but he does not shy away from the implication that animal images are still a form of enslaving representation.

In this discussion, Tyler coins the term “cipher” in order to tackle the myriad of animals who people philosophical texts. These ciferae (to use the Latin term he often employs) are animal examples used by authors that are empty of signification of their own – they are stand-ins
for something greater than themselves (the point), and are interchangeable with many other
animals or even things. Quoting the Oxford English Dictionary, Tyler tells us that the word
cipher means “a person or thing ‘who fills a place, but is of no importance or worth’ in its own
right. The real power residing elsewhere, the cipher remains ‘a nonentity, a mere nothing’” (23).
As for the animal ciferae of philosophy, they are “symbolic characters in animal form,
hieroglyphs utilized by philosophy that a meaning might be conveyed” (28). Tyler is clearly
timorous of the fact that the philosophical tradition that is said to represent the human’s
characteristically superior rationality is in fact using and abusing animals in order to make the
very point that humans are, indeed, superior to other living beings.

But not all ciphers do their work as they’re told, and Tyler coins a second term for the
refusal of mere emptiness and place-holding: when an animal resists its interchangeability and
calls attention to its specificity, it becomes an index. An index, as opposed to a cipher,
points out what is of interest, using a quality or behavior peculiar to the animal, and is
therefore intrinsic to the philosophical argument.[…] The cipherous use, in which the
choice of creature is entirely arbitrary, stands in direct contrast to the indexical use, in
which specific traits are especially selected. (32-3)

But even an animal which is intended a cipher can display a disobedience that frees its specificity
from the laws of philosophical projects by putting its foot down and snatching the ferae from
inside the ciferae. Ciphers, then, can turn into indexes when we least expect and their passivity
and meaningfulness become a rather rebellious opacity of meaning which disrupts the
philosophical argument to which they had been enslaved: “Whenever we meet a cipher, there is
every chance that all the careful work undertaken for their master has already begun to come
undone. These animals are not content to remain mere ciphers and demand to be treated
otherwise” (29).

Tyler points out Freud as one thinker who systematically engaged in the practice of
turning ciphers into indexes, quoting his famous analyses of animal presences in his patients’
unconscious, especially the case of the Wolf-Man. But Tyler’s wording when exploring the
index resembles more closely Deleuze and Guattari, who were openly anti-Freudian and who had
a different reading of the Wolf-Man’s dreams. In A Thousand Plateaus, when discussing the
concept of becoming-animals, they write: “[Becoming-animal] disrupts signifying projects. […]
[Psychoanalysts] see the animal as a representative of drives, or a representation of the parents. They do not see the reality of a becoming-animal, that it is affect in itself, the drive in person, and represents nothing.” (2004: 257) While Freud, according to Tyler, turned ciphers into indexes by foregrounding the specificity each animal brought to the meaning-making machine of the unconscious, Deleuze and Guattari point out that animals (or becomings-animal), in fact, cannot be adequately put to mean anything, and therefore always resists symbolization and metaphoricity in some level. Although such argument can be read all over Tyler’s wording, he comes particularly near when he concedes that “both [ciphers and indexes] retain the services of animals,” (33) or when he proposes that “we must cease to understand [the animals of philosophy] as arbitrarily chosen placeholders, unwittingly serving some higher pedagogic purpose. We must de-cipher the ciphers, that is, stop treating them as ciphers altogether” (29).¹

It’s not exactly clear how animals can be actually made present by the means of the specificity of the index – one must remember that the index still conflates each animal with its own species. I sense that Tyler suspects so, and his attempt of turning his book into a bestiary is an attempt of signaling just that. After all, by writing a book about epistemological anthropocentrism and hands by the means of a discussion of animality, he runs the risk of coming up precisely with another philosophy book which exploits animals’ symbolic capital. By inserting 101 images of animals interspersed in his text, Tyler weaves an interesting philosophical text that tries to account for its nature as bestiary, and for its uses of animals as symbolic matrixes. These images function as an attempt to fight the erasure, silence, and exploitation such animals (necessarily?) suffer within the fabric of philosophical discourse, and their visibility attests to Tyler’s wish of uncovering them and revealing their legacy. In his “philosophical investigation,” Tyler wishes to “gain no small benefit from the assistance of animals, […] who nudge their way back into view, all insisting in their own distinctive, individual contributions to the task at hand” (8). Whether animal images – as mimetic representation – can count as visibility or freedom from symbolic entrapment is, in my account, perhaps the most interesting issue the book raises, even if silently.

Tyler seems to indeed consider that there is no possibility of complete freedom from symbolization for animals, for the concept of “the Animal” is first and foremost a product of symbolicity. He appraisingly explores a certain “death of the Animal”² as of way of freeing non-human individuals from the symbolic discourse of species, and arrives at a different elaboration
of his own term *ciferae*: “With the introduction of a heterogeneous array of different animals [rather than only either ciphers or indexes], we are better placed to achieve the death of the Animal, but in its place we are left instead with an *animal function*” (50). The “death” of the Animal (i.e. the end of the discourse that conflates all non-human animal life) seems to be his goal, but getting rid of ciphers and indexes, while getting us closer, still leaves us with such (symbolic) animal function. In a way, all animal presences in discursive practices are not readily cipherous or indexical, but enigmatic and require deciphering. As such, although no animal has a *determined* function within representational practices, it seems impossible for us to keep from providing them with one.

Such discursive function of the animal, Tyler suggests, is perhaps unavoidable and this book comes across as a remarkable attempt to struggle with this realization, all the while trying to achieve a more just relationship to non-human life. His insistence that the working of a cipher consists of a place-holding mechanism resonates considerably with Derrida’s openly linguistic and discursive thinking surrounding writing and the supplement. Animal ciphers stand in place for the real power of meaning which “resid[es] elsewhere”, in human concerns and signification, just as writing merely stands in for the truth of speech. Similarly, when Tyler concedes that even the species-specific meaning of the index cannot be freed from such discursive reduction of animality, he comes interestingly close to John Berger’s account of the symbolic potential in an animal’s relationship to its species:

What distinguished men from animals was the human capacity for symbolic thought, […] yet the first symbols were animals. […] Animals interceded between man and their origin because they were both like and unlike man. […] They were mortal and immortal. An animal’s blood flowed like a human blood, but its species was undying and each lion was Lion, each ox was Ox. This was maybe the first existential dualism. (1991: 9)

Berger tries to unpack the radically metaphorical relationship an individual animal has to its species in human imagination and language, to the point that it might not be possible to refer to any individual animal without recourse to the totalizing name of its species. And Tyler’s animal index, as he himself hints, is not able of escaping the symbolizing power of animality even when resisting animal interchangeability.

The harsh fact is that interchangeability, the principle of all linguistic articulation, is at the root of “the Animal” as metaphor, or of the animal function. That is why it sounds awkward
when Tyler quotes Carol J. Adams’s concept of the “absent referent” appraisingly, since it seems to conflict with his own arguments. Although he quotes many of her other admirable insights, Tyler defines the absent referent as that structure of referencing in which, “although the animals are there, they are not there as animals, that is, as particular pigs or asses in their own rights” (28). According to Tyler’s own argument, though, it’s not really clear how an animal can be made to be present. If animals work as ciphers or indexes – if they are “the Animal” or are subsumed under an animal function – they cannot present themselves. There can be no such thing as the sign as such; ciphers, like signs, are always something other than themselves. And if animals (like the sign or the trace) are “structures of non-presence” (Derrida, 1976: 84), all their (self-) presentation will always be re-presentation. Thus Tyler’s idea of writing philosophy as a bestiary (i.e. by the means of visuality and representation) is a noble and inventive strategy to bring animality in philosophy to the foreground.

Other than animals, Tyler’s other interest in the book is the issue of hands, of which he does an incredibly detailed study. From Heidegger’s Handlung to the narcissistic accounts of the opposable thumb in evolution theory, Tyler carefully unpacks the strategic ways philosophical texts employ hands – similarly, if opposite, to animals – as markers of human identity and exceptionalism. Tyler is at his finest when he is able of weaving together the many strands of interest which (I suppose) triggered the writing of the book: slowly exploring philosophical anecdotes, narratives and memes in order to show the epistemological concern that turns thinkers to hands (as apparatuses for “grasping” or “shaping” reality) and animals (as receptacles of an unknowable perspective, or of the unseeing lack of connection to the real). His philological work on the topic of hands is astounding, and the several ancient philosophical and cultural references about each finger in the beginning of each chapter are very fun to read.

A more rigorous discussion of the hand is left to the very end, side by side with a problematization of the human, which Heidegger posited had to come first of all (and which is taken up in detail). Whether true hands are in fact an exclusive province of the human is fittingly explored alongside the imposing figure of the thumb as that tool-making tool which has enabled the human to have evolved to its present state. Particularly engaging are Tyler’s discussion of less recent texts, such as Kant and 19th century authors such as Charles Bell, as he lays out how the hand is naturalized as always already part of the proper human, but always in a way outside of nature as that which enables human dominion over the technical, the technological, and the
cultural (218-9). The treatment of the hand itself as an almost techno-machinic graft into the animalistic human body mirrors the age old human self-image as a cross between a lowly ape and a godly angel, which might in fact explain the reason why the hand has gripped the imagination of so many thinkers as that which best represents what humanity “properly” is (227). If Tyler’s project with his book is convincing readers that hands are a systematic obsession among writers who have tried to establish human essence, he has succeeded admirably. The ubiquitousness of hands is indeed startling and telling.

In this last section he comes closest to glimpsing a structural reason why animals are seemingly necessary in philosophical exploration. Tyler seems to suggest that our culture finds it impossible to discuss what the human is and how it is possible to know at all without recourse to a (usually parenthetical or preambulary) comparison to the animal kingdom. Sometimes, as is the case of Bataille discussed early in the book, such foreword statements about humans’ differences compared to animals are actually acknowledged as shallow ranting – Bataille does after all admits that he treats animality from a “narrow viewpoint” (9). More often than not, the structural pillar of philosophical human essence that is animal disavowal is quickly brushed aside as a footnote and left for more serious problems, such as the nature of knowing and of human technical prowess.

Tyler shines especially when he plays with the literary overtones of his discussion, such as when he reads, after Adorno and Horkheimer, the riddle of the Sphinx as an (animal) question which demands a (human) answer – an answer (i.e. “man”) which is itself the human. According to the authors of *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Oedipus’s answer to the riddle is the knee-jerk response that the Enlightenment offers to any question – man is the measure of all things, therefore he must be the answer to all questions. (I wonder if that means that all questions are, then, animals.) The irony is that Oedipus, the symbol of the man who knows, the truth seeker, is actually blinded by his not knowing his true identity, and not realizing that the foot-themed riddle applies to him more than any man.³ Extrapolating from such limb-related questions about human essence, Tyler goes on to discuss 19th century discourses surrounding the human hand, the opposable thumb, and humans’ kinship with the apes. The answer concerning the human’s natural disposition of limbs, hand and feet as elicited by the Sphinx might as well be, for Tyler, that humans are those who only have *two* hands: “In challenging Oedipus to know himself, the Sphinx was probably closer to the mark when she focused on feet rather than on hands” (255).
By conflating human hands and human feet, and by stressing that so-called paws and feet can function as well as hands, the Sphinx argues that the human hand is not so exceptional after all.

I have intentionally left Tyler’s argumentation related to the possible anthropocentrism of epistemological paradigms for last – his writing is always very lucid and clear, and one should follow his arguments him- or herself to ascertain their validity. Suffice to say that he elegantly concludes that all strands of epistemological thought he analyzes are in no way inevitably anthropocentric, and that if they have ever come across as such was probably due to a certain philosophical lack of rigor or blatant speciesism. This conclusion seems particularly urgent if one considers that philosophical work on the knowledge and essence of humans apparently assume it’s impossible not to be anthropocentric. Tyler puts forth the lucid argument that it is perfectly possible to philosophically discuss a place for the human in the planet while still respecting animal life and acknowledging our debts to animals.

In general, I had the feeling Tyler is mostly a Continental thinker. He certainly seems to espouse Continental modes of thought – he quotes Derrida appraisingly, explicates Nietzsche with interest and detail, and defends Foucault from Richard Rorty’s criticism. However, he does seem to frame such Continental ideas in an analytical form, similar to what Matthew Calarco did in his incredible Zoographies. And he does not shy away from calling out Continental thinkers’ anthropocentrism, such as in Bataille’s usually revered work. His analytical perspective, on one hand, does help to shake the notion that Continental philosophy is immune to argumentation and is averse to logic, but it also restrains their impact. In a way, Tyler’s topic here is so absurdly important, overarching and ambitious that, by carefully arguing each point, his book could only make it justice if it were perhaps over 600 pages long. On the other hand, however, Tyler is able of producing beautiful and powerful arguments by means of his apt philosophical imagery and his ability of weaving together different strands of thought quickly and playfully. As it is, the book is a thoroughly enjoyable experiment in literary analysis and creation, a very original attempt at weaving very different themes – epistemology, animals, and hands – into a broad discussion that constantly plays with its own elements. Not only that, but his project comes across as particular relevant to those who are trying to find different ways of making philosophy while embracing animals.

Notes
1. Tyler tells us that ciphers are “philosophical beasts of burden” (28) that suffer “textual abuse” at the hands of philosophers. They are ciphered when treated like place-holding zeroes which could be replaced by any other animal or thing, in the name of the philosophical point at hand. They can “prove to be the downfall of their incautious employers”, though, for they can easily become an index, that is, “one who informs or betrays, [who] rats on his or her employer” (30). For Tyler, “indices are like finger-posts, helpfully indicating avenues of thoughts that might prove productive” (30). Thus, the cipher’s rebellious meaning should be read more structurally than as a matter of instance: any cipherous use chooses to overlook that the animal in question actually points towards other readings than just the one intended, like the animals in dreams analyzed by Freud, whose specificities and symbolic connections help reveal hidden meanings. Or, as Deleuze and Guattari point out and Tyler implies, animal symbols resist even that level of careful reading and threaten to break free of any predictable symbolicity.

2. His phrase “death of the Animal” also reminds of the book of the same name edited by Paola Cavalieri, where she gets awkwardly wrong-footed by discussions with her Continental interlocutors such as Cary Wolfe.

3. Tyler tells us that the Sphinx killed all who couldn’t solve her riddle: “There is on earth a being two-footed, four-footed, and three-footed that has one name; and, of all creatures that move upon earth and in the heavens and in the sea, it alone changes its form. But when it goes propped on most feet, then is the swiftness in its limbs the weakest” (163). Oedipus is the first and only to manage to solve the riddle, whose answer is simply “man” – humans crawl on all-fours as babies, walk upright when adults, and make use of a walking stick when in old age. In the story, however, Oedipus fits the description more than any other man, for his own name refers to his swollen feet as a baby and, after blinding himself and growing old, he uses a stick in order to walk. For Tyler, Oedipus is the prototype of the human, the one who knows, the truth-seeker, who is able to crack the riddle that cipherous animality presents (164). But paradoxically, Oedipus is ignorant of his own identity, being unaware at this point that he is actually an adopted child.

References