Even on first appearances, Tom Tyler’s CIFERAE proves to be something of a rare beast when compared to the other books in its field, with its 8.5 inches square format and its cryptically allusive title. Add to these features the striking cover image of a photographed front-facing open human left hand — each digit indexed to a circular graphic containing a silhouetted outline of an animal of distinct morphology: gastropod (clockwise from the thumb), bird, land mammal, insect and crustacean respectively, and what starts to become apparent is that this book is less a metaphorical beast than a literal bestiary — one ‘in five fingers’ as the subtitle informs us. For all that these visual and textual signifiers leave to the reader’s imagination upon first encounter, it is soon evident on reading CIFERAE that the title is no more wantonly cryptic than the cover image is merely cosmetic, but in fact both are allegorically illustrative of what transpires to be the book’s stated aim: a critique of the specious simplifications and classifications of animals in Western thought.

The cryptic appellation ‘CIFERAE’ is actually an elaborate multilingual pun, from the Medieval Latin ‘cifra’, meaning ‘cipher’ and ‘ferae’, meaning ‘wild’, the first syllable playing on the Roman numerals ‘CI’, by means of which one gets ‘101 beasts’ (CI ferae) — or as Tyler puts it, ‘101 indexical instructors’ (p.46) — as well as drawing on the Sanskrit ‘śaya’, meaning ‘empty’ and ‘ṣij’, the Arabic symbol for ‘zero’ or ‘nought’. Wordplay is a regular feature of CIFERAE and it actually turns out to be both instructive and funny — refreshingly devoid of the contrivance that so often stymies academic attempts at ‘humour’. Furthermore, this plurality of playful allusions belies a serious point: non-human animal species have served mainly as nebulous ‘cipherous beasts’ in the course of Western thought. While there are some exceptions — Arthur Schopenhauer, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Friedrich Nietzsche, Charles Sanders Peirce and Jacques Derrida notable among them — they largely prove the rule that generalization, simplification and reduction have predominated in philosophy’s encounter with the animal. One also finds a fascinating non-modern exception in the arcane yet pedagogically rich depictions of animals inspired by the Medieval Bestiaryum vocabulum — an allegorical store for Tyler’s own profoundly instructional enterprise.

Tyler mobilizes his wordplay as a corrective, pitting the plurality and precision to be levered from ‘ciferae’ against the unhelpful haziness of Western thought’s ‘ciferae’. In the process, he seeks to radicalize the philosophical and critical understanding of indexicality as the sole preserve of the human by pressing philosophy and theory in the service of alternative conceptual models. The aim here is not to upend the evaluative distinction between human and non-human animals, but to conceptually afford animals of all different creatural dispositions the opportunity to ‘de-cipher themselves’ (p.30). Among the fascinating examples CIFERAE gives is Schopenhauer’s ‘porcupine dilemma’: on ‘a cold winter’s day’, a group of porcupines huddle together to preserve warmth, only to feel the pricks of the one another’s quills and move apart (p.34). While the dilemma is a parable of human society’s need for compromise, for Tyler it is indexical because the example is specific to the behavioural dispositions of the porcupine.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that anthropocentrism is the main target of CIFERAE’s own critical and pedagogic impetus and, in particular, the tendency of anthropocentric epistemologies to police what they designate as the borderlands between the putatively sovereign species homo sapiens and all other creaturely beings. Consider Sigmund Freud’s ‘A Case of Infantile Neurosis’, aka the case of the ‘Wolf Man’, and in particular Freud’s willingness to simplistically conflate domestic dogs and wild wolves in the service of psychoanalysis’s Oedipalization of desire: ‘Keen to demonstrate that wolf means “father”, he neglects not only the possibility that it might not mean anything at all but also, more seriously, the specificity of the particular animal in question. Freud does not draw our attention to any characteristic of wolves qua wolves, that leads him to his discovery’ (pp.34, 38). Another illustration concerns Heidegger’s philosophical sleight of hand, or specifically, his sleight of handlichkeit [handiness], whereby manual dexterity signals the establishment of ‘a hierarchy or chain of being, from the summit of which humanity gazes down on lesser creatures’ (p.21).

Another key target of CIFERAE’s critique is representation — perhaps best understood here in the epistemic sense propounded by Michel Foucault in his ‘archaeology of the human
In fleshing out his objections to representationalist regimes of thought, namely the hylomorphic and, in CIFERAE, predominantly anthropomorphic distinctions that get drawn between concepts and the material character of that to which they’re applied, Tyler draws a threefold epistemic distinction of his own – between realism, relativism and pragmatism – by means of which he tracks Western thought’s anthropocentric proclivities. For example, he shows how Kant’s valorization of scientific knowledge as realist and his privileging of human apperception as relativist effectively rely on the human a condicio sine qua non. Tyler’s critique is underscored by that other notorious ‘relativist’ Nietzsche, most notably his methodological ‘perspectivalism’, from the Genealogy of Morality: ‘the more affects we allow to speak about a thing, the more eyes, various eyes we are able to use for the same thing, the more complete will be our “concept” of the thing, our “objectivity”’.¹

On the basis of Tyler’s threefold conceptual distinction, Nietzsche’s privileging of perspectivalism also makes him a pragmatist, while his affective revaluation of ‘objectivity’ means he can hardly be classed as realist. These philosophical descriptors take the reader over some well-trodden ground regarding the longstanding debates surrounding the overdetermined epistemological character of these thinkers’ concepts, yet the purpose to which Tyler puts them underscores their ongoing relevance. In the process we discover that, while not entirely averse to the anthropocentrism that accompanies representationalist regimes of thought, pragmatism proves the most amenable to non-anthropocentrism of the three epistemological approaches – its practical aspects and its privileging of the ability to conceptualize a given problem in situ apt for making non-anthropocentric sorts into the disputed creatural borderlands.

Tyler’s approach proves serviceable given his aims and mobilizes an array of sources that cross the increasingly tenuous ‘Analytic’ and ‘Continental’ ‘divide’. One thereby finds sources in CIFERAE that rarely feature on the rosters of critical and cultural theory, including the behaviourist philosophy of Daniel Dennett and the evolutionary biology of Richard Dawkins, explored here in terms of their own admixtures of realism and relativism and the implicit pragmatic potential to be found in their ideas. Tyler succeeds in showing how these thinkers introduce novel approaches to the theorization of life that offer potential store for a non-anthropocentric thinking of animal specificity. For example, we encounter Dawkins’s concept of evolutionary memetics and its take-up by Dennett, which the author informs us allows in principle for a pragmatic and non-anthropocentric thinking of human culture as a product of evolutionary processes.

Tyler imaginatively connects these theories of memetic mutation to the contingent epistemic shifts described by Foucault in his concept of ‘discursive formations’, in The Archaeology of Knowledge, a connection drawn by the author to point up the limitations of the concept of memetics as conceived by the aspiring realists.² There are some problematic issues implied by these throwbacks to the 1990s ‘science wars’ vis-à-vis critical and cultural theory, namely that Dennett and Dawkins effectively disabuse ‘humanist’ cultural theorists of the valid thesis that these discursive formations crosshatch in relation to other historically problematic formations, while invoking cultural figures and tropes to make their ‘scientific’ points – issues with Foucauldian resonances that are biopolitical as well as archaeological.³ Consider how Dennett’s unequivocal dismissal of ‘deconstructionists and rhetoricians’ (pp.84–5) is belied by his description of ‘memetics’ using the cultural trope of ‘Diaspora’. In a similar vein one finds Dawkins deriding ‘cultural relativists’ (pp.84–5), while in his articulation of the concept of memetics having recourse to the cultural example of ‘Rule Britannia’, whereby the addition in performance of a ‘susurrant s’ – ‘Britannia rules the waves’ – for Dawkins constitutes a ‘mutation’, rather than, say, a symptom of British imperialist identifications (p.185).⁴ Thankfully, Tyler’s own sensitivity to the overdetermined character of culture means that these partisan sources don’t impede the arguments presented in CIFERAE.

It is in fact Foucault – along with Nietzsche – who provides the book with its most positive philosophical voice. For Tyler, the ultimate stakes of his overhauling of Western anthropocentric epistemologies amount to the potential opening up of new ways of conceiving life as a heterogeneous collective creatural play in perpetual transformation. Nietzsche and Foucault’s thought is apt to keep pace with the inevitable epistemic shifts that will accompany such a radical rethinking of animal specificity. Foucault’s notorious attempts to avoid subjective positioning, to ‘have no face’ and to write himself, ‘with slightly feverish hand’ into a ‘labyrinth’ beyond classification in The Archaeology of Knowledge are nothing less than an early example of Foucault’s affirmation of ‘the future formation of a “we”’ – a ‘we’ in epistic
flux that admits of unforeseen, non-human-centered becomings (pp.215–16), and it is here where the questions that preoccupy CIFERAE most powerfully and presciently dovetail with those facing cultural theory regarding the biopolitical stakes of contemporary thought.

CIFERAE is an ambitious project that largely succeeds in what it sets out to achieve and in the process covers a great deal of philosophical and theoretical terrain. That said there are some other tantalizing connections that might also conceivably be drawn that would doubtless require a further instalment to unfold in any detail. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s appeals to ethology and their concept of ‘becoming-animal’ spring readily to mind. One also wonders what the relatively recent translation of Estonian biologist Jakob von Uexküll’s A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans (published in the same series as CIFERAE) might add. Given the preeminence of hands and indexes here, it would also have been interesting to learn more of the role that technology might play in the articulation of animal specificity, not least given the recent Anglophone take-up of the work of French philosopher Bernard Stiegler regarding the ways in which technology qua technics – not unlike animals – has been conveniently and tellingly ‘forgotten’ by the Western philosophical tradition that has nevertheless so heavily leaned on it since antiquity. While we do read about tool-use and tool-bearing as so many features of species border policing, it would certainly be valuable to learn more about the specific character of technology as a key factor in the assignation of creatural dispositions.

For all that a further instalment proves a beguiling prospect, it is perhaps CIFERAE’s greatest accolade that its singularity makes the idea of a sequel very hard to conceive. In an age when proper name-driven commentaries are seemingly winning the battle for academic shelf-space in the theoretical humanities, such singularity is no mean achievement. Were it another book I might describe it as standing on its own two feet. In an effort to heed its many pedagogic lessons, however, I will limit myself to extending its author, slightly feverishly, a hopefully none-too anthropocentric hand in acknowledgement of a standout book.

Notes

4 A similar issue has been recently remarked upon by the Belgian philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers with regard to Dennett’s distinction between scientific ‘cranes’ and metaphysical ‘sky-hooks’, in the context of the work of the so-called ‘speculative realists’, cf. Isabelle Stengers, ‘Wondering About Materialism’, in The Speculative Turn: Continental Realism and Materialism (Prahran, Victoria: re-Press, 2011), pp.368–80: ‘Dennett would say that [Cultural Studies] is saturated with skyhooks because [it] tries to take seriously what [for Dennett] should be eliminated, reduced to the working of evolutionary cranes’ (p.370).