
Tom Tyler’s *Ciferae: A Bestiary in Five Fingers* is playful philosophy with a serious purpose. One imagines from his book’s pragmaticist arguments that Tyler would dispute that there is any other meaningful kind. It joins that now rapidly growing field of animal studies which is a part of thinking beyond the human-centred which Cary Wolfe’s Posthumanities series for the University of Minnesota Press has done so much to support. In hanging his bestiary from five fingers, Tyler means to release both our arguments and our nonhuman animal others from enslavement (from ‘mancipium, literally “taken by hand”’ to the emancipation of ‘manumissus, “released from the hand”’ (p264)) to the anthropocentric view which makes man the measure of all things. That the human animal’s measure is both extraordinary and a source of much pain must form a later part of the argument upon which animal studies (and posthumanism generally) has embarked.

Tyler’s book is a meditation on anthropomorphism, realist universalism, nominalism (i.e. human fictive categories) and pragmatism. Many have argued that our dexterous human hand is intimately tied to our dexterous human mind: a pragmatic and evolutionary version of mind as doing and becoming which Tyler’s arguments will broadly support; as with anyone taking ecology, evolution and our biological confraternity with other species seriously, Tyler is out to argue against the nominalist idea that reality is an unknowable thing in itself which is clothed in human fictions.

The book is hung from the human hand, and from the (as some will know) vexed question of whether or not nonhuman animals have something sufficiently like it. Noting Protagoras’s opposition to realism (i.e. the truth of mind-independent universal categories) and his claim that ‘Man is the measure of all things’ (p2), Tyler opens with the semiotics of indexes, the pointing of first fingers, and the cipher status of animals in philosophical texts. Derived from the Sanskrit *sunya* (meaning ‘empty’), ciphers are (empty) placeholders for ‘nothing’ and then, eventually, secret codes for what must not be spoken directly. As Tyler notes, ‘Although all manner of entities are fair game for cipherous appropriation, philosophers have been especially keen on animals’ (p23). Ciferae are thus both ‘meaningless’ placeholders - mathematical zeros, cifers - and also wild animal (ferae) codes which philosophers think to domesticate in the service of their arguments, but which, Tyler will argue, may run riot with uncontrollable meanings: ‘This wild side
endures in even the most domesticated beasts, and we will find that 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’ (p29).

Although Anglophone cultures (especially the scientific and worldly bits) are generally inclined to believe that the word ‘metaphor’ always has a silent ‘only’, ‘just’ or ‘mere’ before it, Tyler wants us to take both the word and its ramifications seriously. Of course, this means engaging with that arch nominalist finger-poker Friedrich Nietzsche and all his marching armies of metaphors, metonyms and anthropomorphisms. There is a long history, going back to F.W. Schelling at least, of understanding metaphor not as illusion, but as world-disclosing. Although Jakob von Uexküll, who might have served as an interesting counterpoint to Nietzsche here, doesn’t appear in the index, Tyler understands that animals have worlds, and reminds us that Nietzsche thought so too. One imagines that Nietzsche’s apparent nominalism must have been intended as something of a cattle-prod for hapless human animals overwhelmed by false humility: egotism out of its depth, as Hugh Kingsmill once said. Why, after all, if animals have access to worlds (good enough for them to survive, reproduce and thus evolve - Boltzmann’s evolutionary pragmatism is invoked here contra Kant and idealism - see particularly chapter 4: *Digito Minimo*) why should human animals be so denied? Indeed, the truth of evolution biological and cultural is something which Nietzsche himself of course acknowledged (pp106-7). Thus chapter 2 (‘Laugh Loudly and Flip Them the Bird’) closes with the observation that ‘there is no inherent anthropocentric bias to the component properties of epistemological realism’ (p108). Against the remorseless and deeply problematic anthropocentrism of human constructivist relativism, this a welcome advance aided by the march of the animals.

Chapter 3 (‘Medico Testiculi Arietini - On the Ring Finger a Ram’s Testicles’) grabs the ramifications of relativism (a bit of a balls up) ever more firmly. A discussion of Kant’s dogged descriptions of the ‘digestive system of our mind’ (p115), as Karl Popper put it, reminds us of how much this idealism has in fact influenced the very limited realism of modern science. As Tyler writes, ‘Kant has no doubt that there is something that is the ground for phenomena, but about that something we can know absolutely nothing’ (p118). Or, as science puts it, all we have are data and models. In other words, and despite the common misconception that modern science is a fervent realism, even modern scientific ‘realism’ remains strongly infected by nominalism. Kant’s own model is a labouring mechanism of computation. It is extremely unlikely that this is what either human or nonhuman animals do when they think (or arrive at ‘judgments’ as Kant puts it - as though immediate cognition, once past infancy, is a kind of ratcheting journey). Woe betide the survival of any animal with that kind of clunking cognitive mechanism at work between ‘intuition’ and ‘understanding’; the fell Cartesian doctrine casts a long
computational shadow on the modern mind. Neither human nor animal mind and thinking are overly governed by the rules of logic - or not at least logic in the narrow sense in which it is too often understood in the Western philosophical tradition as self-conscious human calculation. As Tyler notes, Foucault called this anthropomorphism of mind and world 'transcendental narcissism' (p125). Thus onwards to Ferdinand de Saussure and Benjamin Whorf. Again, the absence of von Uexküll (and, after him, Thomas Sebeok), who argued that all organisms live in signifying worlds, although only humans have language, remains a puzzling omission.

This is a cogently argued and beautifully produced (and illustrated) argument for why the persistent invocation of animals in philosophy is significant, and for why animal knowing (as Nietzsche recognized) drives a cart and horses through anthropocentrism. It was his understanding that language (and culture) is evolutionary which led Nietzsche to the charge of linguistic relativism. Both Nietzsche, and Rorty after him, think that knowing simply is activity in the world; that’s semiosis, but not reducible simply to language. Tyler rightly rejects relativism, and thinks (despite more than one mention of Peirce who was both semiotician and advocate of truth as emergent revelation over time) that realism is necessarily one-dimensional rather than (as Peirce himself thought) processual. Tyler thus comes down on the side of Jamesian pragmatism (inherited, slightly distorted, from Peirce: knowledge is doing; truth is lived rather than simply said). In fact, his own deeply interesting discussion of truth invoking the legend of the sphinx (part woman, part bird and part animal) tells us that there is more than one answer to the riddle: truth is (to put it in Peircean fashion) what will be revealed at the end of our processes of philosophical and scientific enquiry.

The observation that animals beyond only the human kind have semiotic lives and live in what are, to them, meaningful worlds, and that semiosis and meaning are universal truths beyond anthropocentric and relativist claims, should help to move both philosophy and its more earthly spawnings (in science and political economy especially) beyond the moral imbecilities which modernity has given birth to. These include, of course, our utilitarian attitude to animals, as well as to other human beings. Universalism in the hands of nominalists does, indeed, lead to totalizing catastrophe, but semiotic universalism and realism as such, as evolutionary ontology and epistemology, need not do so. That, like all other animals, we can get in touch with truths about our world - even where those truths are cultural extensions of antecedent natural patterns and forms of growth - is one of the benefits of animals studies when properly and thoroughly pursued. It is so pursued in Tom Tyler’s timely Ciferae of wild animals running riot through supposedly settled questions.