A Bestiary in Five Fingers

Seán McCorry

PhD Candidate in English Literature, University of Sheffield

s.mccorry@sheffield.ac.uk

Tyler, Tom. 2012. *CIFERAE: a Bestiary in Five Fingers*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 376 pp. $ 30.00. ISBN 978-0816665440.

As a discipline and a practice, philosophy has historically relied upon the mobilisation of ideas about what a human is, or might become, and these ideas have for the most part tended towards narcissistic self-flattery. In response to the question "who practices philosophy?", the conventional response has been some variation on "we reasonable ones", and this in turn has been too-readily conflated with "we humans". The effect of this move is to install the figure of the human at the centre of all manner of philosophical projects. The human becomes at once the metaphysical centre of thought and Being (a kind of ontological anthropocentrism) as well as the sole possessor of justified knowledge about the world. This last claim, an epistemological anthropocentrism which asserts that all knowledge originates from and is determined by the human, is deftly parodied in a short story by Franz Kafka.

> For what is there actually except our own species? To whom else can one appeal in the wide and empty world? All knowledge, the totality of all questions and all answers, is contained in the dog. (Kafka 1971, 97)

The narrator of *Investigations of a Dog* dispenses with anthropocentrism and substitutes instead a form of epistemological caninocentrism, revealing in the process something of the contingency of this presumed link between the human species and the limits of possible knowledge.

Tom Tyler's *CIFERAE: a Bestiary in Five Fingers* continues Kafka's project of troubling the unthinking humanism of the philosophical tradition. Tyler's project involves returning to the "multitude of birds and beasts crowding into the texts" of the philosophical canon, paying special attention to the ways in which these unruly creatures disrupt or problematize the anthropocentric assumptions of traditional epistemologies (p. 3). This strategy is formally reproduced in the book itself, with a series of attractive

animal illustrations taken from bestiaries, natural history texts and wildlife photography (among other sources) all reproduced in the margins, pushing up against and deforming the text of the philosophical argument. He takes as his organising principle the human hand – that anatomical figure which has attested to human exceptionalism in (to give one of many possible examples) Martin Heidegger's distinction between the properly human hand and the "grasping organs" of other primates. Over five chapters – one for each digit – Tyler relocates animals from their customary habitat at the margins of philosophy, bringing them into the centre of epistemological debates. He begins with a chapter elaborating the concept of anthropocentrism before turning to examine three established approaches to epistemology (realism, relativism and pragmatism), concluding with a chapter which suggests that "the human" of humanism and anthropocentrism is not such a static and unambiguous object as philosophy had conventionally assumed it to be.

In his first chapter, Tyler elaborates the important concept of the animal as *cipher*, which names the process in which animals themselves are erased as significant presences in philosophy and become instead "arbitrarily chosen placeholders, unwittingly serving some higher pedagogic purpose", as figures in philosophical thought experiments, for instance (p. 29). Tyler gives the example of J.L. Austin's deployment of a pig to make sense of the plurality of meaning in everyday language. Austin's pigs are used to specify the concept of "realness", or authenticity, and his "real pigs" are opposed to those "piggish" animals (tapirs, for instance) which merely resemble pigs. What is significant for Tyler is that pigs, in this case, may be substituted for any other animal (or indeed any object) without upsetting the argumentative schema. "There is nothing about the pig, qua pig that lends itself to this discussion. […] The pig fills a place but is of no importance or worth in his or her own right *as a pig*. The pig, in short, is a cipher" (pp. 24-5). This disappearing animal trick erases the specificity of animal lives, and relegates animals to philosophical beasts of burden. They can provide the raw materials for philosophical disputes (as abstract figures in an argumentative procedure), but are not themselves worthy topics of philosophy. "Disputants have frequently conversed *by means* of animals, in ways that are not at all *about* animals", as Tyler says (p. 28). "They remain invisible, figurative phantoms, installed purely as examples of epistemological problems or metaphysical speculations" (p. 28).

This is just one of the ways in which "philosophy has sought to tame its animals […]. It has disciplined and domesticated them, required them to submit, has accustomed them to the hand" (p. 71). Another is the generic Animal invented by the philosophers, which suppresses differences between

widely divergent forms of animal life and asserts the essential homogeneity of all animal species – excepting, of course, the human animal. This Animal works as a device which functions "by restricting and delimiting the possibilities of both what animals can be and what philosophy itself can know" (p. 74). Tyler's response to this is to insist on the irreducible plurality of animal life: "If we wish to understand what an animal is, if we want to kill off the Animal, we must refrain from seeking a definition of 'the animal' or of 'animality' and look instead to the *animals*" (p. 44).

The recognition of the plurality of animal lives and animal perspectives militates against the blinkered mono-perspectivism of humanist philosophy which seeks to "isolate just one of the infinitely many understandings of the world and accord it transcendental status" (p. 105). Tyler argues that this multiplication of nonhuman perspectives will transform philosophical epistemology by undoing some of its fundamental assumptions. To give one example, Tyler's discussion of the qualified relativism of Immanuel Kant highlights the way in which Kantian epistemology places the transcendental (and specifically *human*) subject at the centre of all acts of knowing. The structure of human transcendental subjectivity is the condition of possibility of knowledge as such, and for this reason all knowledge can be apprehended only after passing through the specific perspective of the human (this is the position of Kafka's dog-narrator). Tyler returns to Kant's texts with a careful reading which refuses the humanism that has marked the interpretation of Kant by historians of philosophy, noting that Kant himself granted the possibility that "there may in fact be thinking beings with entirely different forms of sensibility and understanding which would make possible for them entirely different apprehensions of the objects with which they come into contact" (p. 127). While Kant's speculations on this matter are restricted to possible future encounters with as-yet-unknown forms of rational life, Tyler insists instead that we already live in the midst of multiple perspectives in our worldly relations with nonhuman animals.

From this vantage point, the human exceptionalism which links intellectual inquiry to the privileged perspective of the human looks set to come undone. Tyler's critique of human exceptionalism returns to the figure of the hand which, as noted above, has been deployed throughout the history of philosophy as the unique mark of the human. He complicates this deployment by returning to the evolutionary history of the human species via Darwin, who was the first to show "just how specious the notion of species can be" (p. 247). What he discovers is a multiplicity of hands, and he mobilises this multiplicity to undercut any straightforward claim of the uniqueness of our own species: "[…] we should eschew the myth that opposable thumbs, and thus perfect hands, originate with humanity. There

is no one, true Hand … but a multitude of particular *hands*, each gripping and grasping after its own fashion" (p. 243).

CIFERAE is first and foremost an engagement with the history of philosophical epistemology, attempting to trouble the humanism of the canon of philosophy by taking seriously the animal figures which populate its marginal habitats. For this reason, its readings are for the most part drawn from seminal or canonical figures in the history of philosophy, with Kant, Heidegger and especially Nietzsche figuring prominently. The text might have benefited from a closer engagement with more recent work in the cross-disciplinary field of Animal Studies, and I would have particularly liked to have seen Tyler more carefully situate his project in relation to comparable works being produced by Cary Wolfe, Matthew Calarco and others; though this is only a minor objection. Its lucidity and clarity make it suitable for those whose home discipline is not philosophy, and it even works as a kind of introduction to epistemology, albeit with a distinctly posthuman take on the matters at hand. Written in a lively, punning style, *CIFERAE* deserves to be read by anyone with an interest in responding to the challenge of thinking – and living – in a multi-species world.

References

Kafka, Franz. 1971. *Metamorphosis and Other Stories*, translated by Willa and Edwin Muir. Harmondsworth: Penguin.