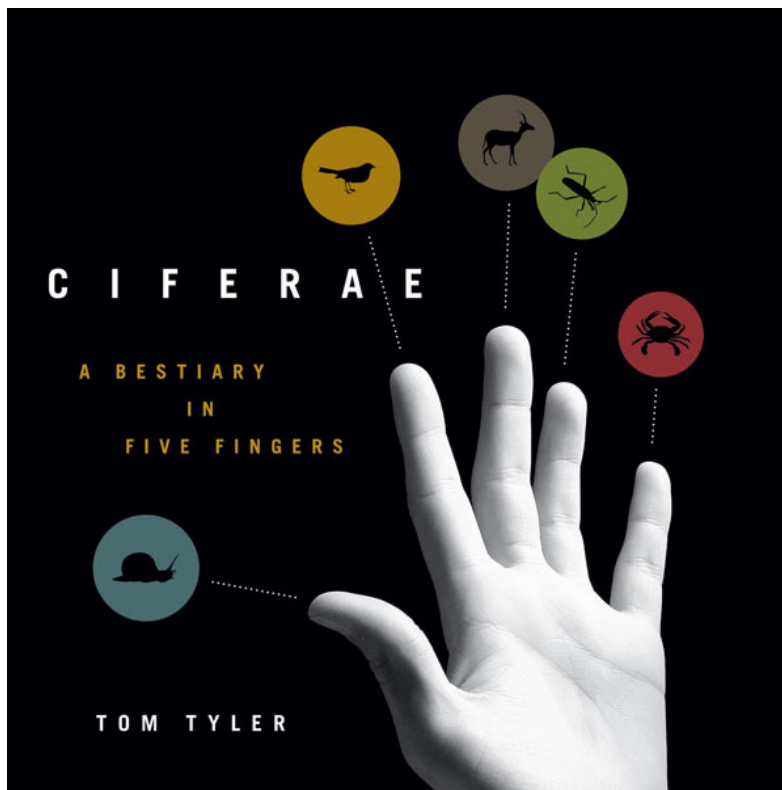


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A Hands-On Approach

Tom Tyler, *ciferae: A Bestiary in Five Fingers*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012. 319 pp. \$30 pbk.



If you do know that here is one hand, we'll grant you all the rest.

– Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (opening aphorism)

In his description of Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson*, W. G. Sebald observes that the eyes of the surgeons assembled around Dr. Nicolaas Tulp are not directed toward the dissected hand of executed convict Aris Kindt but are instead focused on a book of anatomy in the painting's foreground. He remarks that in the book "appalling physical facts are reduced to a diagram, a schematic plan of the human being, such as envisaged by the enthusiastic amateur anatomist René Descartes" (who, as Sebald notes, was likely present at the remarkable event). Furthermore, the dissected limb is "not only

grotesquely out of proportion,” but “also anatomically the wrong way round: the exposed tendons, which ought to be those of the left palm, given the position of the thumb, are in fact those of the back of the right hand” (16).

Here are two hands.

It is no accident then, Sebald speculates, that Kindt appears to have *two right hands*. The criminal is disciplined by the Dutch penal system and then again by the medical gaze’s “Cartesian rigidity.” Appropriated in the service of science, his body is ultimately overlooked by all but Rembrandt (made perceptible in the hands of the painter). In Sebald’s reading of this archetypal scene of modern knowledge, Kindt’s left hand is substituted with a schematized model standing for every human hand.

Here is one hand.

There are two hands on the book jacket of Tom Tyler’s erudite and incisive *ciferae: A Bestiary in Five Fingers* (if we don’t count the small left hand that is the University of Minnesota Press’ Posthumanities Series logo). The hand on the front cover is buoyant and welcoming, counting or perhaps pointing to the five animal silhouettes that appear at the tip of each finger (a snail, a bird, a goat, an insect and a crab). The second hand, on the back cover, rests palm down, as if poised to pet or handle an animal. Here we have *two left hands*, which are, in all likelihood, the same hand.

From Anaxagoras onward, Tyler argues, philosophy has tended to fetishize the hand as the most singular instrument, erecting it as the hallmark of our humanity. When Heidegger talks about the hand, for instance, it is always in the singular. It is “as if man,” Derrida writes, poking fun at him, “did not have two hands but, this monster, a single hand,” which “signifies that we are no longer dealing with prehensile organs or instrumentalizable limbs that hands are” (“Heidegger’s Hand” 50). There is not “one true Hand,” Tyler insists, or even for that matter two, but a countless assortment of hands “each gripping and grasping after its own fashion” (243).

One refrain of Tyler’s thought-provoking book is that animals have commonly “been taken in hand” by philosophy.” In ancient Rome, he explains, “one who was enslaved, who had been claimed as a possession, was called Mancipium, literally ‘taken by hand’” (264). *ciferae* is not therefore a declaration of animal liberation, in the sense articulated

by Peter Singer, but a manifesto for *animal emancipation*. It is an appeal for releasing animals from the hardened fist of an idealized and idealizing hand. In the same gesture, Tyler seeks to relieve humans who are themselves held captive to their own clenched grasp (when, as he says, “comprehension depends on prehension” [15]). The one self-evident principle that guides his epistemological investigation is not the search for truth (veritas) but the right to wildness (feritas), a prerogative shared by human and nonhuman animals alike to “wander hither and thither, wherever the spirit [animus] will lead them” (no page number).

Appropriating Wittgenstein’s claim in *Philosophical Investigations* that his aim is to “show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle,” Tyler proposes to reread and revise an imposing selection of philosophical, scientific, linguistic and psychoanalytical texts that have recruited animals for their own benefit, while treating them in an offhand manner. In order to resist the temptation to subsume the particular under the general (or examining the fly through the distorting lens of a fly-bottle), he observes that one must always attend concrete cases, something he borrows from Wittgenstein’s tireless examination of the metaphysical foundations of Western knowledge practices. To evade the strictures of traditional approaches to the question of the animal, Tyler adopts the format of the bestiary.* Like its medieval counterparts, his bestiary is strikingly illustrated, gathering innumerable facts and anecdotes with the intention to educate but with no pretention to systematicity, exhaustivity or objectivity (46). The pictures and their substantial captions — drawn from sources as varied as comic strips and dictionaries, classical paintings and photographs, scientific manuals and children’s books — complement and enrich the body of the text but also playfully divert our attention by pointing in unexpected directions. We learn a lot from Tyler’s baroque collection of animal trivia. I discovered, for instance, that Marco Polo portrayed the rhino as a plump unicorn in his travelogue, that some spiders possess as many as seven distinct kinds of glands to produce their silk draglines, that war camels wore sandals in Aristotle’s *History of Animals*, and that Buridan’s ass was in fact a dog.

In its eclectic erudition, the author’s modern-day bestiary asks not what we know but what *can be known* of animals (and of ourselves as knowing subjects). The book invites us to revisit Protagoras’ claim that “man is the measure of all things.” Can humans know the world beyond the limits of their human aptitudes? To answer this question, Tyler enquires whether this Protagorean perspective “derives from elements intrinsic to the writings of these diverse philosophers or is, rather, an extraneous, incidental prejudice of those already inclined to hold this position” (3). His investigation into the conditions of human knowledge production avoids being a simple rejection of

anthropomorphism. Tyler recognizes that wielding the threat of anthropomorphism can reproduce no less dogmatic a position, a reactionary posture that Frans de Waal has described as “anthropodenial” (66). To avoid this pitfall, he solicits the assistance of animals as Trojan horses informing us about their own treatment at the hands of philosophers.

Animals have often held an ambiguous place in Western philosophy. On the one hand, they have been taken up as indispensable accomplices or accessories in the service of philosophical discourses while, on the other hand, they have proved reluctant to conform to the conceptual categories we designed on their behalf. Attending to Carol J. Adams’s notion of the “absent referent” and Derrida’s concern that the general singular syntagm “the Animal” compresses the inexhaustible diversity of the heterotrophic living into a “catch-all concept” (*Animal* 31), he proposes to kill the chimeric Animal conceived by philosophy. He enlists a “small army of assassins,” taking each animal as “a particular, tangible individual in his or her own right, not an instance of animality or of the Animal” (44). Unable to do justice to the wild multiplicity of animal life, Tyler settles for one hundred and one — *ci* in Roman numerals — wild animals (*ferae*) that must not be tamed into mere placeholders or transparent ciphers (“*ci ferae, not ciferae*”). In his playful nod to Disney’s *101 Dalmatians*, Tyler pledges to follow the lead of a number of beasts sequestered in philosophical texts by taking them not as ciphers but as indices (hence the first chapter is placed under the sign of the first finger, the index): “The undertaking of these indices, the elementary education required by Animals 101, is the groundwork necessary in order both to bring about the death of the Animal and to reanimate the lifeless ciphers” (45).

The book is not merely an astute *jeu d’esprit* around our ways to count and account animals. It also carefully probes the ostensible anthropocentrism of three dominant epistemological paradigms in Western thought: realism, relativism, and pragmatism. If the authors (not all philosophers) who have engaged with and promoted these epistemologies have often manifested Protagorean biases, it does not entail, Tyler suggests, that anthropocentrism is an inbuilt tenet of their knowledge practices. That anthropomorphism may be inevitable is not the end of the conversation, however, if only because we don’t have a stable picture of the *anthropos*. Distinguishing between two forms of anthropomorphism, Tyler calls “first-and-foremost anthropocentrists” those thinkers who find the world of animals absolutely unfathomable and assert “that one must endeavor always to abstain from the sticky temptation that leads to poetic

babbling and adhere instead to the limited but reliable methods of scientific seriousness" (64).

Tyler opens his investigation into epistemological realism with G. E. Moore's famous 1939 lecture "Proof of an External World." In response to Kant's assertion that things outside us are utterly impervious to certain knowledge, Moore "proves" the existence of external things by holding up his two hands: "Here is one hand. . .and here is another." Wittgenstein devotes the 676 notes of his posthumously published work *On Certainty* to analyze and criticize Moore's claim. Surprisingly, however, it is not Wittgenstein but Nietzsche and his horde of animal mercenaries to whom Tyler turns. His main objective is not to discuss the validity of Moore's argument, as Wittgenstein does, but to expose the anthropocentrism latent in his philosophical realism. To the notion that something exists beyond the grasp of human intelligence or imagination, Tyler opposes, by way of Nietzsche, that there "can be no truth beyond the empty husk of tautology, no grasp of the eternal essentials that make up reality, due to the forms and ideas that humanity cannot help but impose (104)." This limitation, however, is not specific to human beings: "Like every other animal, humans are condemned to a particular, contingent understanding of the world."

Despite the underlying Protagoreanism of Moore's realist and yet cipherous hands, Tyler concludes that epistemological realism need not be anthropocentric. Nietzsche's perspectivism provides a case in point for what this nonanthropocentric realism might look like. Tyler reads Kant, Saussure and Benjamin Whorf to show that the anthropomorphism at work in their approaches is not essential to their relativist epistemologies. In his penultimate chapter, Tyler explores the virtues and infelicities of pragmatism by recounting William James's encounter with a squirrel and witnessing the physicist Ludwig Boltzmann slipping "a pike into the complacent pond of philosophy" (181).

Though none of the three epistemological paradigms are entirely compromised by anthropocentrism, pragmatism wins the competition hands down. The pragmatist is in the world like Bataille's animal, entirely immersed in the world she attempts to know. Tyler's hands-on pragmatism thus presents itself as an "inclusive, 'renovated pragmatism' that encompasses, as Cary Wolfe would have it, a Nietzschean commitment to 'radical plurality, contingency, historicity, and difference'" (209). We learn from the examples of Clever Hans and Rotpeter to define knowledge not as abstract theorization but as practical means in the service of subjective and partial ends. What matters ultimately is that knowledge is an instrument that enables us to "get

things done” and that the epistemological frame we choose works for us, even as this “us” always remains to be known and defined.

This pragmatist credo ultimately leads Tyler to question the supposed superiority of the “instrument of instruments,” the human hand (which plays a different role in each chapter: as irrefutable evidence of the world’s reality for Moore, as a thought experiment for Kant, as the medium of a discourteous gesture for Wittgenstein, and so on). Which came first, human intelligence or the hand? Tyler exposes the tautological rationale of both theories, which are shown to be two sides of the same uncritical “handy humanism.” Instead of trying to settle this intractable “chicken and egg riddle” (226), he asks his reader to reevaluate the supposed perfection of the hand. He reminds us, for instance, that the end of the elephant’s proboscis is called *manus* in Latin and that chameleons have not one but *two* opposable digits on each hand. As for those who mistake Darwinian evolution for a form of progress, Tyler refutes the legend according to which the “opposable thumb” constitutes the hallmark of humanity and shows that the hand is but an archaic appendage.

In *ciferae*, Tyler euphorically extends Derrida’s emajusculation and pluralization of Heidegger’s Hand by unleashing a multitude of hands with varying shapes, functions and fashions. To avoid the residual anthropocentrism of cladistic taxonomy, he ultimately borrows Johann Friedrich Blumenbach’s categories to rename the human. Considering that it is “not the hand that distinguishes human beings, but, rather, the fact that they have two,” Tyler proposes to replace *homo sapiens* with *pan bimanus* in order to welcome back the chimpanzees that had been excluded from our genus (252-254). This new classification, he insists, must be conceived as the provisional formation of a new and more hospitable “we” that would temporarily respond to Nietzsche’s appeal to “become what we are.” “Nietzsche urged his readers to construct or create a self, to ‘give style to one’s character’” (260). This is, perhaps, where Nietzsche and Wittgenstein meet: knowing (oneself) may ultimately be a matter of style.

Our five fingers, concludes Tyler, “indicate modes of thinking when ‘we’ cease to consider ourselves preeminently or exclusively as human: the 101 gesture with hand or paw toward the limits of our thinking as *human beings*” (264). In his meditation on Nietzsche’s styles, Derrida ponders the possibility of attributing “with certainty” a sentence written in Nietzsche’s *own hand* to the philosopher: “What, after all, is handwriting? Is one obliged, merely because something is written in one’s hand, to

assume, or thus to sign it?" (*Spurs* 127). To these questions, Protagoras would most likely answer yes. But one's hand, he would add, is never truly one's own, nor are we entirely responsible for our hands.

Note

I want to flag the renewed interest in amending our taxonomic conventions, as demonstrated, for example, by Caspar Henderson's beautifully Borgesian *Book of Barely Imagined Beings*, which also happens to be written under the aegis of Wittgenstein.

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