

Beastly Epistemologies: Tom Tyler's *CIFERAE: A Bestiary in Five Fingers*

Tom Tyler, *CIFERAE: A Bestiary in Five Fingers*, Minneapolis:
University of Minnesota Press, 2012

Reviewed by Dinesh Wadiwel, University of Sydney

In June 2013, I attended a book panel organised as part of the Canadian Society for Existential and Phenomenological Theory and Culture (EPTC) / Théorie et culture existentialistes et phénoménologiques (TCEP) held in Victoria, Canada, as part of the Congress of the Social Sciences and Humanities of Canada. The panel, organised by Christiane Bailey (Université de Montréal), reviewed Gary Steiner's *Animals and the Limits of Postmodernism* (2013) published by Columbia University Press. In addition to a paper from Steiner, the panel featured responses from Chloë Taylor (University of Alberta), Patrick Llored (Université de Lyon) and Jan Dutkiewicz (New School for Social Research).¹ Perhaps unsurprisingly, there was an extraordinarily robust set of disagreements over the value of the work of theorists such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida to scholarship addressing human utilisation of and violence towards animals. Steiner's argument in *Animals and the Limits of Postmodernism* suggests that: while postmodernism may outwardly appear to hold the promise of dispossessing us of idealized distortions and of providing us with a more adequate grasp of reality, its real function is to leave reality and our relationship to it essentially unchanged – which is to say that it can offer us no prospect of progress in the endeavor to reduce the violence that we encounter in the world everyday. (Steiner 3)

While I cannot pretend to be impartial in relation to this discussion (I use both Foucault and Derrida in my own work), I cannot help but observe that this debate is reflective of an impasse that appears to have been reached in relation to the differences between analytic and critical approaches to animals studies. On one hand, contemporary animal studies and ethics owes much to the analytic tradition, particularly the work of philosophers such as Peter Singer and Tom

Regan. On the other hand, there is a growing field of animal studies literature which draws from a continental philosophical tradition – that is scholars such as Derrida, Foucault, Judith Butler – and/or from post-humanist literature – including scholars such as Donna Haraway and Cary Wolfe. A portion of this disagreement appears to centre on the nature of ‘truth’ and its relationship to a normative ethics. Indeed, for Steiner, what appears to bedevil ‘postmodernism’ is an apparent commitment to perspectivism, and a theoretical lineage which traces to Friedrich Nietzsche:

Postmodernism takes its bearings from Nietzsche’s perspectivism and a pointedly polemical conception of discourse ... this leaves postmodernism ill-equipped to make coherent sense of the proposition that peace is to be preferred to violence. This essential limitation of postmodernism has tragic implications for human interrelationships as well as for our relationships with animals. (Steiner 3-4)

The challenge of perspectivism, its relationship to epistemology, and its relevance for thinking non-anthropocentrically, is precisely what is addressed by Tom Tyler in his recent *CIFERAE: A Bestiary in Five Fingers*. In this volume, published as part of Wolfe’s *Posthumanities* series, Tyler dissects anthropocentrism, drawing attention to the logics which underpin a human-centered world view, and the intertwined philosophies that might produce truth within these discourses.

It seems fair to say that the book is beautiful in its presentation. The volume arrives in a roughly 21.5cm x 21cm format – that is a square rather than a rectangle – which makes a refreshing change for a work of philosophical theory. The book is furnished with images – including 101 dedicated images of animals – with descriptions included, making for a book which is as engaging to flip through casually as it is to sit down with, read and digest. There is a lot going on in this book. Not only does the volume contain thought-provoking images – sketches, etchings, photographs – but extensive footnotes containing interesting facts and observations feature on every page, all of which capture the imagination, and provide context for the philosophical discussion.

Tyler’s argument is similarly multi-faceted. The book contains a main discussion on anthropocentrism. But there are also a number of creative side discussions. This includes a

long consideration of the human hand – as that enduring symbol of apparent human ‘superiority’ – which literally shapes the structure of chapters: each of the five main sections of the book are dedicated to a different human finger, with a prelude and coda bookending the whole discussion. The writing is in fact remarkably playful, with Tyler making many side journeys and providing frequent light-hearted provocations to accompany his main argument, underlining the author’s comprehensive grasp on key arguments across quite diverse fields of scholarly thought. Occasionally I felt this playfulness threatened to overwhelm and/or distract from the serious intent of the text; however the pleasure of this book is the way in which the apparently disparate strands of the text seem to come together and intertwine slowly as the argument edges forward.

In this review I don’t have space to cover all aspects of the book’s complex discussion. However, I would like to highlight the cleverness of Tyler’s main argument in relation to anthropocentrism and the nature of truth. Tyler identifies three approaches to epistemology: *realist*, *relativist* and *pragmatic*. The examination of the *realist* perspective (featured prominently in the Chapter entitled ‘Laugh Loudly and Flip Them the Bird’) begins with a discussion of G.E. Moore, and moves through figures such as Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett and Christopher Norris amongst others (see 77–89). Tyler argues that a realist perspective understands knowledge as the attainment of a truth that exists in the world (83). Realists accept that knowledge is not the same as the truth that it seeks to describe (85). Since the truth is in itself inaccessible directly by knowledge (indeed the fact that the truth must be described and is not known without recourse to description already indicates this), then, as Tyler discusses, the effectiveness of knowledge can be measured according to its apparent correspondence with an underlying reality: ‘the logical outcome of inference to the best explanation is thus, it is suggested, realism’ (86). Having in a sense already demonstrated circular logic occurring within a realist viewpoint, Tyler turns to Nietzsche, in particular the essay ‘On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense’ to highlight the anthropocentrism inherent in a realist perspective. Tyler summarises:

It is natural enough, perhaps, to believe that one’s own understanding is to be preferred, but the very fact that everyone does this, whether philosopher, porter or mere gnat, and each in a unique way, begins to suggest that there is no single, absolutely correct way of comprehending reality. (91; see also 105)

Everything here so far more or less obeys the contours of the existing antagonism between a realist and relativist approach to truth. However it is where Tyler takes this discussion that becomes interesting insofar as it advances beyond the old debate. First, through an extraordinary reading of Kant's *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens*, Tyler points out that Kant's speculative consideration of the possibility of extraterrestrial knowledge on other planets, including the possibility of ethical behaviour in aliens surpassing that of humans (see 129), suggests that knowledge systems may exist beyond the human: 'Kant explicitly leaves open the possibility that there may be other forms of sensibility and understanding and therefore other forms of knowledge' (129). Secondly, Tyler points out that despite Nietzsche's relativism, his account does not discount the possibility of an underlying reality. On the contrary, Tyler argues that Nietzsche merely reacts to and builds upon the foundations that Kant has laid down. If knowledge is a representation of an underlying reality – a truth that is in essence inaccessible – then Nietzsche only differs from Kant insofar as he observes that there can be any number of representations of this reality. However, as Tyler observes 'on the nature of knowledge itself, on the question of what knowledge *is*, the realist and relativist are in broad agreement. Knowledge is a picture or a copy, a reproduction or reflection, a representation' (133). Thus, as Tyler proceeds to discuss, there is as much it would seem in common between Kant and Nietzsche, as what might be said to differentiate them.

It is perhaps Tyler's discussion of pragmatism, as an epistemological approach, that I found most enlightening. As I have stated above in relation to Steiner's recent work, I believe animal studies is at something of an impasse in its relationship to truth, and of course the question of anthropocentrism haunts this particular discussion in animal studies, in a way which perhaps it does not trouble other disciplines (if indeed it is true that animal studies can be homogenised as a 'discipline'). Already, I think Tyler demonstrates that the disagreement between analytic approaches and recent postmodern and post-human approaches need not be as severe as they are characterised to be, since they probably share an agreement on the existence of an underlying reality, even if they cannot agree on what perspective might count as knowledge, and whether any single account can claim privileged access to a 'truth'. But this discussion differs from an understanding of knowledge as a pragmatic tool that underlies action. Returning to Nietzsche, and examining different texts including his unpublished writings, Tyler observes that Nietzsche was aware of the instability Kant establishes in the distinction between

noumena and phenomena, in so far as the truth can never be discerned from ‘mere appearances’ (167). The way forward involves forgetting: ‘we must forget this opposition because it is useless, because it does no work’ (167). In other words, knowledge might be understood pragmatically as a way of getting things done in the world; and it is here, through a discussion of the evolution of mimetic practices, in both humans and animals, that Tyler observes that pragmatism goes beyond representational modes of knowledge towards understanding knowledge as offering potentially heterogeneous ways of making sense of and being in the world. This allows different creatures to grapple with realities in different ways: ‘for pragmatism, as an antirepresentationalist epistemology, knowledge does not depict the world but instead makes possible modes of activity in the world’ (209). This inclination leads Tyler, in the final section (‘The Thumb Is a Little Hand’) to question the supposed superiority of the human hand as a tool, and highlight the multiple ways in which animals may engage with the world through assemblies of language, movement, articulation and knowledge systems.

Of course truth matters. The question of truth, whether it exists, whether we can access it, and whether this matters or not in relation to knowledge is not merely philosophical, but has a political effect in relation to social change. This is indeed what lies behind Steiner’s anxiety which I described at the beginning of this review. A coarse reading of theorists such as Foucault and Derrida might suggest that their project is to undermine the foundations of the truths we might hold in common, and therefore prevent us from producing an agreement that might allow us to move forward. I describe this as a ‘coarse’ reading, since it is not altogether the case that undermining the foundations for truths must stall action. Asking critical questions about truth, about who is included and excluded by systems of truth, surely opens the way for imagining a different community. To take Derrida’s *Politics of Friendship* as an example, while the philosopher questions the assumed human and masculine homogeneity that underpins the political community, in the same book, indeed in the same breath, he very clearly seeks to open the space for a political community that might include others with whom we do not have anything in ‘common’ (see particularly Derrida 296–306). In other words, drawing into question the foundations of what we know, and how we assume we might share things with others, does not necessarily imply that we cannot imagine different forms of community and the political challenge of achieving them. It seems fitting therefore that Tyler ends with a discussion of the ‘we’, starting with the observation that we humans share much with many apes, pointing

out that the taxonomical separations devised for distinguishing ourselves from apes were arbitrary, so much so that the ‘we’ might easily include non-human others:

If, with Foucault, we are to refuse what we are, refuse to be good bourgeois liberal humanists, it is in order that we might, with Nietzsche, become what we are, which is to say, far more than such a narrow pluralism would permit. (Tyler 261)

If anthropocentrism has given us systems of knowledge which are bound up with material and epistemic violence towards animals, systems of knowledge locked up so tight it is inconceivable how we might question this violence from within the terms of its inherent logic, then perhaps one of our only solutions is to imagine community outside of the box, purely as a strategy to rupture the container. On this final note, I would suggest that we could push Tyler’s text to go beyond questions of pragmatic knowledge towards questions of strategic knowledge. The pragmatist, we might suggest, adapts available tools towards particular ends within a given environment. The strategist, on the other hand, seeks to disrupt or evade a system as an overtly political project. What knowledges might we need to deploy – strategically, politically – in order to rupture a system of truth that is intent on reproducing an assumption of human superiority in language, thought and perspective? What knowledges might we be required to devise in order to disrupt the logics that produce as rational, ethical and humane: factory farms, mass animal experimentation, hunting and animal utilisation? What knowledges would be effective in ending human violence towards animals?

Notes

¹ The proceedings from this book panel will be published in *Phaenex: Journal for Existential and Phenomenological Theory and Culture* 8.2 (2013).

Works Cited

Derrida, Jacques. *Politics of Friendship*. Trans. George Collins. London: Verso, 1997.

Steiner, Gary. *Animals and the Limits of Postmodernism*. New York: Columbia UP, 2013.