***What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?* (2016)**
By Vinciane Despret, Trans. Brett Buchanan

Foreword by Bruno Latour. Posthumanism series, Vol. 38.
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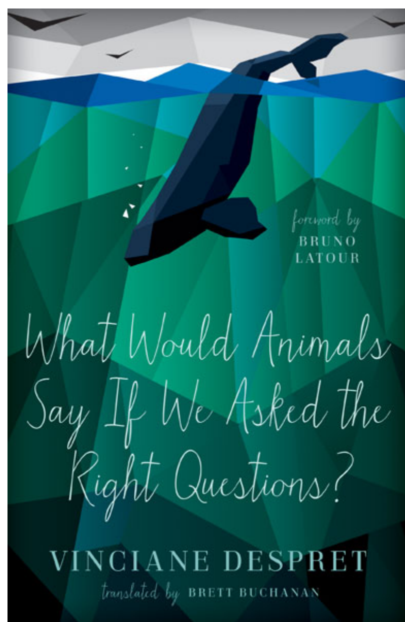
IN *The Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (2004), Bruno Latour invokes Plato's metaphor of the Cave for the inherently political relationship, in our times, between scientists—the authoritative investigators and interpreters of the 'natural' world outside—and the broader human community in 'the Cave' into which our scientists bring enlightenment. *The Politics of Nature* thus offered an early twenty-first century challenge to the dominant scientific hegemony of our times; not, it should be emphasised, through any latter-day resurgence of ancient religious epistemes, but through an interrogation of the by now taken-for-granted methods and conclusions of the scientific understanding of the world and the creatures who inhabit it.



Vinciane Despret's *What Would Animals Say if We Asked the Right Questions?* (with its Foreword by Latour), offers an engaging and convincing empiricist challenge to accepted scientific beliefs about the 'natural' world, animals, and animal behaviours. To say that her delightful and revolutionary abecedary 'offers a challenge', is to understate its revolutionary potential. Latour tells us in his Foreword that readers are entering 'a new genre, that of scientific fables'; not, he emphasises, through 'science fiction', but, 'on the contrary, true ways of understanding how difficult it is to figure out what animals are up to'.

I picked up Despret's book thus expecting a compendium of modern animal encounters, and/or apparently aberrant behaviours, which might lead us to reconsider our familiar understandings of them; or essay equivalents of such heart-warming YouTube clips as 'Christian the Lion'. And animals and their complex and enthralling behaviours and modes of being in the world are ever present in Despret's work—but in its scrupulously researched interrogation of conventional scientific methods and conclusions it offers much, much more. With contagious enthusiasm for animals, their natures and their *Umwelt*, it demonstrates the impoverishment of our knowledge of them when this apparently authoritative knowledge remains the exclusive province of scientists—and of ethologists in particular. As Latour writes, 'this is one of the precious books that pertain to the rising domain of scientific humanities, meaning that to understand what animals have to say, all the resources of science and of the humanities have to be put to work'.

Despret has an almost intimidating grasp of these resources: scientific, philosophical, legal, historical, human sociological, behaviourist. For Despret is what Latour terms an 'additive empiricist', prepared to weigh evidence across a number of fields—inviting us to widen the reach of our understanding rather than rigorously patrol disciplinary boundaries and outlaw apparent protocol violations. Scientists, however, are 'subtractive empiricists'; interested, to paraphrase Latour, in grounding their claims, but 'only on the condition that a claim

decreases the number of alternatives and limits the number of voices claiming to participate in the conversation'. Despret, and other additive empiricists, on the other hand, are 'just as interested in objective facts and grounded claims, but they like to add, to specify . . . to make multiple voices heard'. These multiple voices might then include animal caregivers, breeders, trainers, hunters, naturalists, farmers—all those in close contact with animals whose observations must be excluded—to distinguish 'mere amateurism' from the true scientific/ethological pursuits of science. What Despret terms 'the manic suspicion with regard to anthropomorphism', offers a case in point. Contrasting Darwin and Lorenz, she notes that for Darwin, 'the animal is the author of his own escapades, with motives and intentions, an animal that initiates things, strays a bit . . . leaves us open to surprise', while for behaviourists like Konrad Lorenz, animals are not 'feeling and thinking creatures,' but purely reactive. For a naturalist like Darwin, animals have 'wills, desires and cognitive competences' while for Lorenz and his followers, such claims are dismissed as 'unbridled anthropomorphism' (39). The 'resolutely scientific' approach demanded by ethologists of the Lorenz persuasion, limits animals to reactive behaviours only: 'Thus they will lose "what constituted an essential condition of the relationship", (that is, with inquiring humans, scientists or otherwise), that is the possibility of surprising the one who asks the questions of them. Causes are thus substituted for reasons for action' (39). How, Despret asks, in her section on 'Fabricating Science', can Lorenz be (rightly) 'credited with a practice that has its basis in these wonderful stories of domestication and surprises, but at the same time be at the origin of an ethology that is so arid and so mechanical?'

A personal anecdote is perhaps instructive here. As a science student, doing a major in Zoology many years ago, I only ever dropped out of one subject: that was Animal Behaviour offered by the Psychology Department. Compared with the taxonomic, physiological and ecological subjects I took in the Biology Department, the Ethology/Animal Behaviour protocols were righteously rigid. The sheer terror of not being considered a 'real' science made the methods adopted and the safely banal conclusions arrived at, absolutely risible! But it is also the case that the study of animal behaviour—and what animals themselves might contribute to this—was also marginalised in the 'real' sciences, to which ethology so anxiously aspired, because, once again, science as a whole had to strictly rule out contributions from 'amateurs' who, in their intimacy with animals, might be inclined to commit the cardinal sin of anthropomorphism.

Anthropomorphism has increasingly become a major area of discussion in Animal Studies as a whole; and Despret's contribution to this debate is an important one. In the fear of being exiled from real science, animal behaviourists felt they were on a solid scientific footing by limiting interpretations of animal behaviour to reactive instinct, proven by repeatable laboratory experiments. Instinct can then become the 'perfect cause', as it escapes from all subjective explanations, and is at once both biological cause and motive; '(a motive, moreover, that completely escapes the knowledge of the subject himself)' (40). As Despret points out, however, the accusation of anthropomorphism:

> does not really apply, or not always, to the act of attributing human competences to the animal, but instead incriminates the procedure through which this attribution is carried out. Before qualifying any cognitive procedure, the accusation of anthropocentrism [*sic*] [anthropomorphism], in other words, is a political accusation, a 'politics of science that aims above all to disqualify a mode of thinking or knowing from which the scientific practice has tried to free itself, namely, that of the amateur'. (40)

Like Latour, Despret considers the 'interesting paradox' of scientific protocols designed to exile such anthropomorphic tendencies by repeating 'controlled, purely objective experiments in laboratory conditions. Only by creating these highly artificial conditions' will you be able to detect what animals are really up to when freed from any artificial imposition of human values and beliefs projected onto them' (Latour's emphasis).

Under artificial conditions—those of the laboratory—animal behavior observed here is read as 'natural' and quickly moves from orthodoxy to stereotype. In two particular chapters, on hierarchies in animal groups, and on rats and infanticide, Despret, through a comprehensive and scrupulous reading of all the relevant scientific literature, demonstrates that the conditions under which these behaviours have been studied, radically influences, if not actually determines, the actions and the conclusions derived therefrom. These accounts are not always based on animal behaviour but almost always with some measure of artificiality: in zoos, even open enclosures. On the occasions when field observations have been undertaken, Despret shows how the very presence of the observer, (however much he/she may try to be 'hidden' or technically absent), can influence results, even for example, by discouraging predators or limiting interactions of the primary subject with other components of his/her world. This very contentious subject of anthropomorphism demands we ask an altogether different question of it: not, 'are we ascribing too much or too little' to the intelligence and behaviour of the animals we study, but rather, can the reluctance of Science to engage with it be seen as proceeding from the defence of 'some positions, some ways of doing science, some professional identities?'

If anthropomorphism remains implicit in much of the discussion here, so of course does the equally vexed question of animal consciousness. Whether or not animals possess self-consciousness underpins much of the inquiry into the lives (and deaths) of the engaging variety of birds and beasts we encounter through the 26 apparently separate—but actually ingeniously intertwined—chapters. The classic 'mirror test' has generally provided the 'gold standard' of these inquiries. But forms of play, evident in the behaviour of many animal groups, the practice of 'hiding' and/or hiding things from conspecifics and researchers, together with active participation in the staging of behaviour, and evidence of lying and deception, from crows to primates also attests to the animal's knowing 'how to see himself as others see him' (32-3). Ravens like to play, especially in confined conditions, by hiding objects. But many will, in the presence of their fellows, pretend to hide the desired article in one place, with just the right balance of obviousness and apparent concealment, having previously (or subsequently) hidden it in another. And to the ethological tendency to interpret a chimpanzee's deceptive behaviour as standard conditioning (known familiarly as Morgan's canon), the more innovative investigators wield Ockam's Razor. Despret quotes Premack and Woodruff: 'We spontaneously attribute intentions to others because it's the simplest and most natural explanation, and the ape probably does the same'. They conclude, with devastating irony, that nevertheless, 'the ape could only be a mentalist. Unless we are badly mistaken, he is not intelligent enough to be a behaviourist'. And as Despret also wryly comments, chimpanzees do seem to 'have less difficulty attributing mental states to other species than do the behaviourists' (126).

She is also rightly uncompromising in her attack on experiments of the kind conducted by the long-notorious Harry Harlow and those who followed his egregiously cruel methods to their rather too obvious conclusions. In 'S for Separations: Can Animals be Broken Down?' she concludes:

> But why did the researchers subject their animals to these types of experiments? The answer is rather simple: to see what would happen, like poorly behaved adolescents. Or to put it less simply, because the effects present an inference of causes. Except that one can never know what in fact 'causes,' other than by denying the effects of one's own intervention. If Harlow, Carpenter, Sugiyama, Watson, and many more had only considered that, in terms of what 'caused' the distress, helplessness, and deterioration of their animals, they ought to have taken into account the effect of the evil intention that ran through the entire dispositive, then they would not have been able to claim anything from their research. Their theories ultimately reflect only one thing: a systematic and blind exercise of irresponsibility. (151)

What Would Animals Say if We Asked the Right Questions? is not an unremitting attack on conventional animal sciences nor the by now somewhat outdated animal behaviourist sciences of the Harlow era. Despret does explore, with approval, the work of those who, in place of the conditioned and repetitive experiments of the less imaginative practitioners, employ inventive techniques 'through which animals [can] show what they are capable of when we take the trouble of giving them propositions likely to interest them'.

If the Two Cultures divide has bedevilled our attempts to understand animals better, it has ridden on the back of a profound ontological separation of the animal and the human; of animality and 'humanity'. With Jacques Derrida and Cary Wolfe, Despret considers the significance—of and for—this ontological divide of 'killability', or, in Derrida's words, through Wolfe, the always available 'non-criminal putting to death of animals and those marked as animal'. This ontological split is also addressed, not just under 'K', but in what is perhaps one of the most thought-provoking chapters of a thought-provoking collection: 'Z for Zoophilia: Can Horses Consent?'. Power and sex, as Foucault understood, are always intrinsically interwoven. The confused, confusing and disturbing nature of the animal/human impasse is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in Despret's discussion—which draws on the work of geographers and legal scholars—of two near-contemporary cases of bestiality, one in France, and one in the United States. The legal, and indeed ontological arguments pursued in relation to these cases provide what Despret terms 'a remarkable site' for both the magnification of boundaries and their radical destabilisation. The legal scholars and geographers involved find that the encounters 'problematise their disciplines, and our ways of thinking more generally', as well as disrupting 'the self-evidence and familiarity of the categories, the concepts and even the tools that permit us to shape them' (210).

The 'two cultures' have been separate for too long, and while the Humanities have increasingly embraced aspects of the sciences, becoming consequently enriched, Science has, on the whole—with indeed some honourable exceptions—been very reluctant to take Humanities seriously. Despret's abecedary demonstrates the necessity of Scientific studies to now take on board some of the protocols and knowledges of other disciplines. Science has shown us wonders, but it is time to open its borders to wonders garnered in other ways.

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