

Bookshelf: “What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?” by Vinciane Despret, translated by Brett Buchanan

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In this special “Bookshelf” post for **Women in Translation month**, RCC fellow **Amanda Boetzkes** reflects on Vinciane Despret’s recently published **What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?**

I cannot think of a more appropriate author to consider during Women in Translation month, than Belgian philosopher Vinciane Despret, whose work speaks to some of the most pressing issues in the environmental humanities with rigor, force, and even humor. *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?* is a compelling account of the terms and conditions under which scientists—from sociobiologists and cognitive psychologists to geneticists and ethologists—interpret animal behavior. More pointedly, it locates the serious gaps in scientific method which cause animal behavior, at the individual and collective level, to be profoundly misunderstood. Yet, it also identifies new forms of questioning that yield surprising insights.

At stake here is a project to expose the blind spots of scientists who seek to produce empirical knowledge without examining their own entanglement in ecosystems and a set of communicative relations with animals. In their efforts to “neutralize” their testing ground and produce idealized test subjects, a host of misguided beliefs about animals ensues, at the expense of a deeper knowledge of animal motivations, self-consciousness, language, and worlds. Following the trajectories of Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour, Despret makes visible the unwitting intentionality of the scientific *dispositive* that renders animals dumb: that circumscribes their behavior to pure reactivity (as opposed to responsiveness), to imitation as opposed to individuated improvisation, to disinterest as opposed to engagement. Yet she undoes these assumptions that reduce

animal behaviors to basic forms of competition for resources, mates, and the establishment of hierarchy. Through compelling reversals, Despret shows how the biological sciences project implicit moral judgments and values in ways that strategically appear when it is convenient to dismiss animal consciousness, and disappear when it becomes essential to make scientific claims. Thus, she writes,

“at one point or another, the behaviors that for us are the most clearly stigmatized by the moral among us come to resemble the noblest virtues as soon as they are retranslated by the theories of natural history and evolution—or, at the very least, are the condition for it. To put it another way, what an animal does, and what morality finds repugnant and condemns unequivocally, becomes, in the context of nature, the most certain path toward morality. Male jealousy now stabilizes couples, the most inflexible and arbitrary hierarchy secures social peace, and lying proves to be, still from this perspective, evidence of the highest consideration for another and the basis for cooperation. One wonders sometimes whether ethology wasn’t in fact invented by some Jesuit who is fond of mischievous casuistry.” (130)

Despret’s trenchant analysis is also punctuated by the narratives of scientists who discover new beliefs, new possibilities of interpretation, and ultimately a new understanding of the intentionality of knowledge precisely through their creative engagements with animals. Thus, she recounts how primatologist Barbara Smuts had to forgo her neutral and uncommunicative form of observation for an approach that imitated the behavioral style of a group of baboons. She examines the significance of Temple Grandin’s equivocation of autism and livestock animals, which, for all its presumption of empathy, nevertheless opens the way to an otherwise unthought statement: perhaps animals are exceptional beings whose differences must be qualified anew. We hear about anthropologist Shirley Strum’s conclusion, drawn from her fieldwork with baboons, that the dominance of males is a myth.

Despret’s narrativization of ethologists is integral to one of her main arguments: that science itself is narrated and not simply an objective presentation of established facts. She redistributes the form of intentionality of science so that it crosses the domains of belief, art, politics, and economy. She therefore narrates instances of surprising animal behaviors that challenge established beliefs. The sites of inquiry are no longer oblivious to the way that scientific observation is itself an intentional agent bound up in a social and even aesthetic field. Thus, the bowerbird nest has little to do with

instinct and is not just a structure that effects a successful mating ritual. It also acts on us, and mediates relations between humans and animals. We read about elephants in Thailand who paint (though, like humans, they must be trained to paint). We read about the establishment of a fair exchange of food among female capuchin monkeys who insistently refuse to participate in experiments that upset their forms of balanced sharing. We also ponder the horse who took revenge on its sadistic owner with a surprising sense of poetic justice.

As I reflect on this book, a translation that also translates scientific knowledge in terms of its potential to reconsider what animals would say, I am struck by its exuberance, so clearly carried forward by Brett Buchanan. Though it is grueling to hear about the pressures, duress, and sometimes downright torture of animals undertaken in the name of science, Despret recounts her reflections in a style that can attune the reader to the pleasure and humor in the ways humans misrecognize animals and the ways they refute our intentions. I take to heart this brilliant thought and its phrasing: “Morality is incredible funny *and* serious, profoundly joyous *and* grave. This can be learned among the animals, in laughing with an animal’s laugh.” (80)