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On Asking the Right Questions

***What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?* by VINCIANE DESPRET**

University of Minnesota Press, 2016 \$30

Reviewed by **NATHAN TEBOKKEL**

Vinciane Despret's newest book is an abecedary of what Bruna Latour calls "scientific fables." Despret tells the stories behind animal experiments and challenges their canonical interpretations by offering alternative narratives and literature from the perspectives of the animals studied rather than from the researchers. Her theory is one of "additive empiricism," of asking questions and opening up new modes of understanding. Because she approaches ethology and zoology with the acuity of a trained psychologist and the playfulness of a French theorist (which is perhaps a bit overwrought with the *Thousand Plateaus* "start anywhere" motif and the "hyperlinks" to other chapters indicated by a ↗), her hybrid tales are mostly insightful and provocative. They may even be accessible beyond academia—from the understated language to the book's episodic structure, which foregrounds questions about the academic monograph against the brevity of Twitter and the immediacy of Google. It is a contribution, in the vein of science studies, to furthering the understanding and questioning of science.

Her moral ends are elucidated by the title's allusion to utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham's famous question about animals: "the question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?" These ends are elaborated in her main methodological principles: first, asking questions is better than making claims; second, field work is better than laboratory

work. These principles are made more rigorous in her analyses of experimental methods and case studies that avoid potentially erroneous universalisms through curiosity and humour. Her writing, usually well-translated from its original French by Brett Buchanan, is often humorous and at times sarcastic. In "J for Justice," she tells the story of termites charged in 1713 of destroying a Brazilian monastery, their successful defense lawyer's argument—"Termites," he said, 'are industrious creatures: they work hard and have acquired from God the right to feed themselves'" (73)—and the ruling that required the monastery to provide a woodpile for the termites.

Outside the pioneering work of ethologist Jakob von Uexküll, critical animal studies has few precedents so committed to the perspectives of actual animals, not only in terms of content, which is fairly common, but in terms of the rhetorical strategy that carries it—one that is necessarily tentative, but gains rather than sacrifices import because of this. Like animal studies, though, Despret mostly focuses on familiar large mammals (donkeys, chimpanzees, dogs, monkeys), cute small mammals (mice, marmots), smart birds (crows, ravens, parrots), and social insects (termites, ants). What about those animals we find harder to like—roaches, snakes, spiders, piranhas? What would animals say if we asked them *all* questions?

On a performative rather than solely logical level, Despret's questions are intriguing. Her notion in "M for Magpies," that a partially successful self-identification experiment on elephants and magpies may be more illuminating than a completely successful experiment would be (102), is one example among many that helps erode fantasies of objectivity and scientific

certainty. Though this reluctance to make or accept strong claims often works to Despret's advantage, troubling easy anthropomorphisms, it works equally to her disadvantage. In "W for Work," she questions the narrative of "animals as victims" via the work of sociologist Jocelyn Porcher on cows (177–83). She wants to conclude that cows collaborate with farmers in milk production, that their conditions are "not exploitative" (178), but skirts the history of this claim and how it might reflect the human history and reality of labour, in which pro-slavery arguments insisted that slaves liked and needed their work, or modernity required and still tacitly endorses sweatshops and child labour. Despret's attempt here to give agency back to the cows is gentle but unaware of its heavy bulk.

The example of the cows adumbrates what could be viewed in Despret's writing as a certain slipperiness: simultaneously, a subtle shirking of responsibility via questions instead of assertions, an inheritance from the late 20th-century deconstructionists (Despret can always say "I didn't quite say *that*"), and an attempt to stake a transcendental position outside all discourse from which to evaluate all discourse. This dual urge—bluntly, to dodge refutation and to be the philosopher-king—comes to a head in the final chapter, "Z for Zoophilia." Here, Despret questions laws around bestiality through several case studies. Here, her privileged positionality emerges in what might amount to sophism, where she seems to want to support zoophilia, but instead couches whatever her stance and thesis are in criticisms of anti-zoophilia legislation as "returning to older laws," "repressive laws [that] colonised much of the country" (204), "puritanism" that is "based on a

contradiction" (205), and in mouthing the quotes of more forthright authors. Her chapter centers on the animal's inability to consent, which she says is used both as "justification for condemning the zoophile" and for slaughtering animals (209); in contrast, the rest of the book grants animals the ability to consent (e.g. the collaborating cows). The "right question" here may not be about consent, but about the conditions in which consent becomes a question, and the very asking of this question—conditions and ideas of animals as property, machines, food, and humans as masters, inquisitors, and owners.

Despret here asks a question for its shock value rather than for its being "the right question," and this commodificationism colours her additive empiricism more broadly: more and bigger questions are not better when they bury tough and perhaps right questions. We don't need to entertain zoophilia to understand animals, as we don't need pedophilia to understand children. The bizarre notion that zoophilia "undoes anthropocentrism" (210) and that this might make it permissible is a failure of inquiry that invites the reader to return to the rest of the book and ask: Is anthropocentrism undoable, and are there worse *-isms* to more practically undo? Did this book listen to the answers to its questions? Did it ask the right questions about asking the right questions?

Nathan TeBokkel is pursuing his PhD in English at the University of British Columbia, where he studies poet-farmers from Robert Burns to Wendell Berry. Drawing on his background in genetics, melon farming, and food safety audits, he examines the aesthetic motivations behind biotechnological research, agricultural practice, and government legislation.