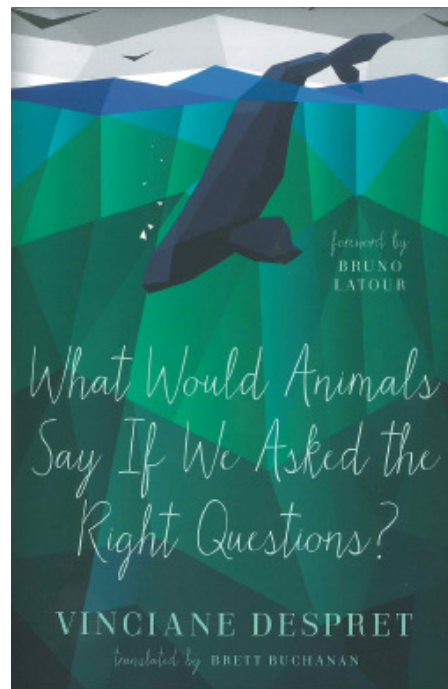


Review Article

Erica Fudge

Thinking with Vinciane Despret

Vinciane Despret, *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?*
Translated from the 2012 French edition by Brett Buchanan. Minneapolis: University
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'Flush,' Mrs. Browning wrote to her sister, 'is wise.' She was thinking perhaps of the Greek saying that happiness is only to be reached through suffering. The true philosopher is he who has lost his coat but is free from fleas. (Woolf, 90)

In Virginia Woolf's reading of the Victorian poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning's depiction of her pet spaniel's life, Flush achieves understanding through loss of status. No longer a pedigree among mutts, his infestation of fleas leads to his being clipped, and to a realization that he is not superior to others, but, in fact, that "all men were his brothers" (Woolf, 90). The loss of hierarchy, Barrett Browning suggests, produces wisdom. Without wishing to suggest that she is like a dog, it struck me when reading Brett Buchanan's English translation of her 2012 book *Que diraient les animaux, si ... on leur*

posait les bonnes questions? that Vinciane Despret, like Flush, is wise. She too has, you might say, discarded hierarchy and emerged as a true philosopher. There has been no actual shearing here, of course, but Despret's wisdom is made visible in the way in which she sheds, and asks her readers to shed, assumptions and ideas that position humans as superior to animals. She constantly challenges the authority of much conventional science and of the philosophy that figures animals as always lacking. Indeed, Despret's definition of the term "authority" in this context is telling. For her, far from being a tried and tested source of meaning, she has written (using the ideas of Gregory Bateson) that "a person is said to have authority when anyone who is under the influence of that authority does everything possible to make whatever this person says true" (118). This is not expertise but something more tyrannical, hysterical almost. It is by laying bare how scientific and philosophical discourses have constructed their worlds in order to possess such authority that Despret has become established as a key thinker in animal studies.

In a series of short, highly readable essays, written as an "abecedary," *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?* picks holes in assumptions that hold animals under, that refuse them a place in the conversation. In his foreword Bruno Latour calls the 26 alphabetized chapters ("G for Genius," "R for Reaction," "V for Versions," etc.) "scientific fables" that bring together "the resources of science and of the humanities," a necessary collaboration, he argues, if we are to "understand what animals have to say" (vii). Each of the chapters opens up with a brilliant question: "With whom would extraterrestrials want to negotiate?" "Do goats agree with statistics?" "Do chimpanzees die like we do?" And at the heart of all of them is an assumption that Despret outlined in *Ces émotions qui nous fabriquent: Ethnopsychologie de l'authenticité* (translated into English in 2004 as *Our Emotional Makeup: Ethnopsychology and Selfhood*). In this work, in part an exploration of the impoverished understanding of the nature of emotion that is produced in laboratory studies, Despret quotes from one of her key collaborators: "understanding, as Isabelle Stengers reminds us, 'when it concerns science, is not a discovery of that which predated the question'" (21 – italics in the original). This has been a constant mantra in Despret's work: attending to how we inquire as much as to the responses we elicit is crucial, hence this more recent work's title. As Buchanan wrote in his introduction to the special issue of *Angelaki* dedicated to Despret's work from 2015: "asking the right questions does more than attribute a different approach to the animals, it just as importantly highlights a different response from animals" (Buchanan, 22). Or as Despret (writing with Jocelyne Porcher) put it in an essay included in that special issue: to acknowledge that "we don't know how to ask the right questions ... redistributes expertise and alters the asymmetry of the positions"

(95). The shift affords new interpretations of authoritative positions because it allows new voices to be heard.

In her work, Despret thus constantly interrogates how questions are asked. So, in “L for Laboratory” in *What Would Animals Say* she wonders, “What are rats interested in during experiments?” She comes to the conclusion that “the possibility that the animal could show how he takes a position with respect to what is asked of him” is too often blocked by the “operations and routines” of the animal psychology laboratory (91). In orthodox maze experiments, she notes, “not only must the animal respond to the task that is addressed to him but above all he has to respond in the mode according to which the question is addressed” (92-3). The same is true of human participants of many psychological experiments. In *Our Emotional Makeup* Despret revealed this through her record of an experiment that she and Stengers undertook in the 1990s which reproduced in part one that had previously been run in the 1960s. In the original, subjects were shown images from *Playboy* magazine with heartbeats with changing pace perceptible to them as they looked. They were advised (falsely) that these heartbeats were their own, audible through the recording devices the testers were using to track physiological responses (the apparent aim of the experiment). When questioned afterwards, subjects revealed that slides shown with the sound of an increased heartbeat were their favorites, thus revealing, as Despret put it, that “something really did succeed in affecting each of the subjects” (89). In their reproduction of this experiment Despret and Stengers changed some of the elements. The pictures were replaced (“times have changed as has the relationship to these images”), and the explanation for the audible heartbeat which the subjects were to hear was much less labored than in the original test: “we merely indicated that we were recording physiological parameters.” In addition, they “invited [the] subjects to come back ten days later so we could discuss with them how they felt about what we had asked them to do.” At that meeting they asked: “In your opinion, what were we looking for?” (88-89). This is not a question that had been asked in the earlier experiment. What Despret and Stengers discovered was that their subjects — like the original ones — picked slides that “correlated with an increased heartbeat,” but that none of their subjects believed that the heartbeat they were hearing was their own — they had seen through that falsehood. Why then, Despret and Stengers wondered, did the subjects still pick the images with an increased heartbeat *that they knew was not their own*? The answer was hugely revealing: each subject reported that s/he had “managed to connect his/her version of emotion to what the slide suggested.” That is, they had obediently (as they saw it) agreed with what they took to be the intention of the experiment. All the participants, Despret writes, “behaved like good subjects: they were willing to be taken

hostage by a problem of which no one knew how far their interest in that problem went and how they themselves would construct it" (90-91). As for animals, so for humans.

Despret has argued that this sense of the willingness of the subject of the experiment to get it "right" as they believed the experimenter had defined it is not addressed by the majority of scientists. But it is not only in the laboratory that her work has implications: she has noted the obedience of the subject in other contexts. When interviewing people in refugee camps in the Former Yugoslavia, for example, she records in a 2008 article that she came to recognize that offering those people anonymity in their responses to her questions, while it might have appeared to allow them freedom to answer as they saw fit, actually "prolonged what one could call a regime of insults" they were experiencing; it marginalized and disempowered people already labelled "refugees," a term that they might themselves not recognize, or choose to call themselves. "The result, the stake, even, of anonymity," Despret came to see, "is to produce a radical asymmetry of expertises: on the one hand there is the 'researcher-author' — the author of questions, of interpretations of hypotheses, of constructions of problems; on the other, there is a social actor: witness, informant, someone having opinions, beliefs and representations for which the researcher will take charge of the analysis" (130-131). As with the rats that were put in mazes by psychologists, and as with the subjects of her and Stengers' heartbeat experiment, in her conversations with the "refugees" Despret recognized that:

The subject is summonsed by a problem that he or she often has nothing to do with, or in any case nothing to do with the manner in which the problem is defined ... And most of the time the subject mobilized in this way will agree to respond to questions without calling into question their interest, their appropriateness or even their politeness. (131)

This is a willingness on the part of the interviewees that should never be discounted. Their readiness to answer the questions that they have been asked but that they have not formed is crucial to how knowledge is gained. It seems to underline the authority of the researcher-author (no one is questioning their questions); but it should invite us to attend to the subjects' engagement, their will to translate, their desire to fulfil the expectations of those they are working with. The questioners are thus, as Stengers knew, not discovering an answer, but forming it when they ask their questions.

This willingness of respondents Despret traces in the world of agricultural animals, too. In "W for Work" in the current book she notes that we should recognize that "when all is functioning well [on the farm], it is because of an active investment on the part of the

cows. For when everything runs well, one doesn't see the work." But this reading of the farmyard is not only an attempt to bring back into view the purposive engagement of animals (although it is doing that), it is suggesting something even more profound than that. In her attention to the cows Despret recognizes how deeply embedded in conventional Western thinking is the idea of animal incapacity, the belief in their inability to display willingness because willingness is a virtue that requires a will (i.e. intention): "When the cows go peacefully to the milking robot, when they do not jostle with one another, when they respect the order of turn ... when they do what they need to do so that everything runs smoothly, this is not seen as evidence of their willingness to do what is expected." Rather, she writes, "Everything has the look of something that functions or of a simple *mechanical* obedience" (180-1). In an earlier reading of this (misreading of) bovine politeness — the disposition of the cows to work with each other and with their human keepers — Despret went further:

(I will probably push this point slightly too far), I would even suggest that what we call mechanistic thought, ironically, could be partially due to the good will of the animals themselves! When animals do what they know is expected of them, everything begins to look like a machine that is functioning. ("From Secret Agents" 43)

The undermining parenthesis, the idea that this realization is "ironic," the exclamation mark, typically for Despret, I think, present what is a truly insightful recognition of a profound misrecognition with delicate humility. In thinking about cows as workers, not only does she reveal herself to be a better ethologist than Descartes; she also asks us to re-assess one of the cornerstones of Western philosophy that we might, all too often, take for granted. And she does it quietly, wittily, stealthily. Hierarchy is challenged; status undermined; mechanical reaction is acknowledged as, actually, collaboration, and what is brought to the fore is our blindness (perhaps willful blindness) to this. Vinciane Despret is wise.

In recognizing the inherent willingness of experimental subjects, interviewees, and agricultural animals to go along with the rules that have been set by others, the collaborative participation of all as they try to work out what is being asked of them and to provide what they believe to be the "right" answers based on that perception, Despret looks for a way of coming to an understanding in the pursuit of knowledge that allows all parties to "speak." She recognizes that politeness must be a "virtue" that is displayed by the experimenter/interviewer as much as by their subject/interviewee ("Sheep do have opinions" 360). Indeed, politeness is a key word in Despret's thinking.

It is, Buchanan writes, a “form of methodological courtesy as well as an ethical obligation” (Buchanan, 22). Donna Haraway offers a useful definition of what she terms Despret’s “cultivation of politeness”:

She trains her whole being, not just her imagination, “to go visiting.” Visiting is not an easy practice; it demands the ability to find others actively interesting, even or especially others most people already claim to know all too completely, to ask questions that one’s interlocutors truly find interesting, to cultivate the wild virtue of curiosity, to retune one’s ability to sense and respond — and to do all this politely! (“A Curious Practice” 5)

Despret’s 2005 essay “Sheep Do Have Opinions” is a good illustration. She makes clear once again how the questions posed form the responses given. The problem sheep have faced, she writes, is that they, “even more than [other animals,] have been victims of questions of little relevance compared to their ability to organize themselves socially.” If you ask a sheep a question about “what they eat,” she writes, then you will only find “what we expect from sheep: that they convert plants into mutton” (362). What, though, is a good question to put to a sheep? Or, as Despret puts it, “How are we going to afford them the opportunity to give us the chance to talk differently about them?” (364). She takes her prompt from retired primatologist and now farmer Thelma Rowell’s decision to put down an extra bowl of food for her sheep. Despret writes that, in this context, “if a sheep leaves its bowl, shoves away its neighbor to take its place and immediately returns to its bowl, or persists and follows the other one to oust it once again, a large number of hypotheses can be formulated” (360). The extra bowl means that such actions are not only (or not at all) to be read as reflecting competition over resources. Crucially, Rowell has given sheep the opportunity to do something else: the questioner has prompted interesting responses by giving her subjects the chance to play a role in forming the questions.

A similar understanding is brought to bear in her collaboration with Jocelyne Porcher, with whom Despret studied the cows. As they wanted to interrogate “the possibility that animals could take an active part in work,” they decided to involve the farmers they were working with in the interview process. Porcher would say to them:

During the research I undertook with farmers I (Jocelyne Porcher) often heard anecdotes, stories, even ways of talking which suggested that animals, in some way, collaborated in work. Now, when I tried to pursue this question with the farmers head on, I was met with resistance or

incomprehension. Clearly it's not a good question to ask. But first-hand evidence kept coming up; this encouraged me to persevere. So, in your opinion, as a farmer, how do you think I should be framing my question so that it has a chance of being understood and being interesting? (Despret and Porcher 92)

The responses of farmers allowed Despret and Porcher to recognize what they call "an amazing similitude between our relationship to research and the relation of the farmers with their animals" (94). The farmers, like the academics, also constantly questioned their own authority; they also gave over some of the power to their animals. Thus, as recorded in another essay, one farmer, Manuel Calado Varela, noted: "When I open the doors, the cows know I want them to go out, but I don't know if they really want to go out" ("Becomings of Subjectivity" 133). For Despret, as for Calado Varela, interviewer and interviewee together create the successful interview. Far from the "radical asymmetry of expertise" produced by much conventional social scientific practice in which the interviewer is the dominant, authoritative force, Despret and Porcher understand that an awareness of the active role of all partners in what Haraway has called the "joint dance of being" creates a new sense of partnership "that breeds respect and response in the flesh, in the run, on the course" (62). It opens up the way for conversation: between experimenter and subject, interviewer and interviewee, but also human and animal. "[O]f interest," Despret writes of Thelma Rowell's study of sheep, "is he or she who makes someone or something else capable of becoming interesting" (2005, 363).

And we find ourselves back with the key point: *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?* This book wonders about (among others) elephants who paint self-portraits, monkeys who get drunk, male penguins who are female after all, chimpanzees who mourn. What is at its core is a question about collaboration: how we can work together, communicate, translate each other; and from that come to gain more respect for each other. The onus is on us humans, inevitably, because until now we have been the ones setting most of the rules. It is our questions that demand answers, and the laboratory, with all of its failures, comes to embody some of the wider failures in human-animal relations.

In ranging across various issues — whether animals can be said to be artists; what imitation might actually be, and whether animals do it, whether they might have a sense of justice — Despret views the world with a kind of practical pragmatism, and takes people at their word in a way that is not naïve or gullible, but interested, trusting,

open, and, because of that, is revealing. Thus, for example, in “E is for Exhibitionists: Do animals see themselves as we see them?,” Despret contemplates Bobby Berosini’s cabaret performances with orangutans, and from that contemplation posits the idea that an exhibition presents “the possibility of exchanging perspectives” (30). That is, it takes selfhood away from the “solipsistic” version that the scientific mirror test supports, in which “it is with one’s self alone that being a self is negotiated” (32). She suggests instead that some kinds of exhibition can show that animals might have not only a sense of self, but a sense of the perspective of those others who are watching them — which would be evidence of their possession of a theory of mind. Despret supports this in two ways. First, she suggests that “the act of hiding oneself is complementary to, and not contrary to ... the act of exhibiting oneself.” She clarifies this by noting that “Hiding oneself while knowing that one is hiding indicates ... the implementation of a process consisting of the possibility of adopting the perspective of the other: ‘From the spot where he is, he cannot see me’” (32-3). The bald clarity of this reading of hiding is typical of Despret’s work. Here, and elsewhere in this book, I found myself saying: “oh yeah,” and feeling like an idiot for not previously thinking of things in the way she presents them. She has the capacity to make what has never, or not fully, been considered seem patently obvious. Of course it is possible to view a mouse that hides from a cat as having a sense of the cat’s perspective and intentions. Of course the mouse in this scenario can be interpreted as having a sense of self that is a self in the world — even if it does not react as we might to its reflection in a mirror. I knew that, but until it was pointed out to me by Despret, I didn’t quite know it, if you know what I mean. That is something that her work does constantly.

The other way that Despret considers the question of animals and selfhood in relation to exhibition is to consider, again obvious, how those who work with animals describe such exhibitions. Returning to her work with Porcher, Despret recalls how one farmer felt that at the end of an agricultural show the cow he had brought to be displayed held “the belief that she really is different and particular.” Another stated that: “I had a bull that participated in some shows, and he knew that he had to be handsome because when you took a photo, he immediately raised his head a little. It was like he posed, you see, just like a star!” (33). It is not only that Despret is willing to read these breeders’ recollections as revealing that “animals and people have succeeded in becoming attuned to what matters to the other, to act so that what matters to the other also matters to oneself” (34). She also steps back from this immediate perspective and recognizes, yet again, the broader philosophical implications of her listening to, and taking seriously, these anecdotes. “I know these accounts will elicit a few giggles,” she writes, and she takes this very seriously. Like Toto at the end of *The Wizard of Oz* (another canine analogy), Despret pulls away the veil and reveals a reality that had

remained hidden. She relates our giggling at the farmers' bovine anecdotes to "the long history through which scientists have obstinately disqualified the knowledge of their rivals in matters of animal expertise" (34). In this context, we are implicated. We gigglers are those who are supporting the authority of the scientists, and the giggling — *our* giggling — can be read as a manifestation of the power of experimental science to control how animals are conceptualized, a power supported even by Despret's own readers — that is, by those who might consider themselves to be open to, and perhaps actively engaged in, thinking against that perspective. The "common sense" nature of a particular — hierarchical — way of constructing knowledge is revealed when we scoff at the idea of the posing bull. We are surprised into self-awareness through her thinking, and by this means she reinforces just how powerful the authoritative position is.

In recording the farmers' understandings Despret shows how far the dismissal of anecdotes (a label that immediately demeans these reports) is also a dismissal of a certain way of viewing animals — a way that makes them much more capable than they might be in the laboratories in which "we show something *à propos* of animals [but] the animals show us nothing" (34). As such, her belief that some animals' responses to being on show can be read as evidence that they possess a sense of the perspective of those who are looking at them reveals a willingness to recognize animals as collaborators in the exhibition. It also takes seriously what might be dismissed as merely anecdotal claims of non-experts. This is evidence of Despret's readiness to think beyond the "authority of science," as she has termed it (*Our Emotional Makeup* 84). It is a preparedness to see expertise as possessed, not only by those who work alongside (rather than experiment on) animals, but by the animals themselves. This is true politeness.

Thus, in "C for Corporeal: Is it all right to urinate in front of animals?" Despret explores the primatologist Shirley Strum's recognition of the significance of her presence in the world of the baboons she observed. She hones in on Strum's worries about what she should do when she realized during one observation that she needed to pee. Despret records that Strum made the decision "no longer to go behind her truck" — that is, no longer to hide from the baboons the fact that she, too, was a body in the world (with all the implications for control, dominance and authority that such a disembodied state supported). Instead she undressed carefully in view of the baboons who were, as Despret records it, "flabbergasted by the noise, for in fact, they had never seen her eat, drink, or sleep before" (18). As well as revealing her to be, like the baboons, in possession of a body, Strum's actions illustrate her recognition that those baboons were

active participants in their relationship, not simply creatures that she could watch as if she was not there. So, to ask “is it all right to urinate in front of baboons?” is to engage as a social being with the baboons who are themselves recognized as social beings (18). It is to open up a conversation that involves all participants, and that might transform all participants, too. To ask, “is it all right to urinate in front of baboons?” is to display “tactfulness,” and to recognize that in some contexts urinating publicly is actually a display of politeness.

Despret’s work thus asks us to think afresh about human-animal relations — in particular to consider not only how we ask questions of the subjects of our research, but also to recognize that the way we ask questions is crucial to the answers we receive. Her understanding emerges from her observation of all participants in the lab, the field, the farm, and from a realization that expertise can be found in places that orthodox science and philosophy might reject. “In the best farms,” she writes, “talk is incessant.” The farmers speak to their cows and the cows respond: “because there is talk, there is talking back” (“Becomings of Subjectivity” 133). But Despret’s work should not only impact animal studies as it analyzes the ways in which non-humans have been addressed, dismissed, misheard, and so on. I think her work also provides a kind of model for thinking that remains crucial to the development of our field. Being interdisciplinary — being willing to read across, among, and with the boundaries that have been put in place by the institutions we work within — offers vital insights into human-animal relations that might be missed if we remain in our own places (I’m tempted to say “cages”). As Bruno Latour states: “to understand what animals have to say, all the resources of science and of the humanities have to be put to work” (vii). I hope that it doesn’t sound too impolite to suggest that wanting to know what it was like to be a cow (my current research interest) is not so different from wanting to know what it is like to be an environmental ethicist. Despret’s work shows us that both require a willingness to assume that there is more than one way of viewing the world, more than one kind of scholarship, more than one method of argumentation. My feeling is that being interdisciplinary requires the kind of politeness that she articulates — that, in fact, tact is crucial. If I believe a cow can’t think or experience anything of significance to me then I have relegated it (and she is definitely an “it”) to the zone of the uninteresting (and incapable of becoming interesting). I would therefore be wasting my time wondering what it was like to be one. Likewise, if I think an environmental ethicist has nothing to say to me that will be of value to my project then I have already shut the door on her, closed down that conversation, and my project has, as a result, become narrower. But if I open the door, or if the door is opened to me and I agree to walk through it, then I am, to use Despret’s words, making “someone or something else capable of becoming interesting” (“Sheep do have opinions” 363) and I am being made

capable of being interesting myself. There will be misunderstandings, apologies, uncomfortable silences, moments of disbelief, perhaps — that is the nature of communication. But, as in all good collaborations positive things might also emerge.

Despret's reading of the work of the psychologist Irene Pepperberg is telling here. Despret noted that Pepperberg and her team decided that when Alex, the grey parrot from Gabon they were working with, made a "new signifying sound" to which they could attribute no meaning they would "act as if this sound was intentional and respond to [it] as if Alex had wanted to demand something or comment intentionally" ("Becomings of Subjectivity" 125). They chose to assume that Alex's call was the opening gambit in a conversation; that it was "a new act of language." Despret writes: "The fact that the parrot may or may not have had the intention of producing the new combination is not important, Pepperberg explains, because we simply want to show the parrot that phrases can have meaning and that they can be used to control, or at least influence, one's environment and the actions of those who take care of him or her" (125). If a parrot could speak we might not immediately understand him, but we could act as if we did in order that he might recognize that understanding between us is possible. From this beginning Alex, famously, revealed himself to be well capable of communication, of abstraction, of intention. A conversation did actually follow. As Despret notes in "L for Laboratory," at the end of a day of experimental conversation, in what she terms "a real world ... in which beings of different species work together," "every night a parrot says to his experimenter as she is preparing to go back home, 'Good-bye. I am going to eat now. See you tomorrow'" (96).

A tentative translation is possible to the potential of interdisciplinary understanding: when I hear, for example, an anthropologist, I should assume that his articulations are meaningful to me, even if that might seem unlikely on first hearing. And, once I have assumed that meaning is available in his articulations, when I ask him questions and try to understand more fully what he is interested in this interaction can only work if I give over some of my authority, if I assume that knowledge also dwells elsewhere, in places I cannot fully understand or translate into my own terms. In short, I must engage on the basis that anthropologists do have opinions. In addition, it is important that, in order for that conversation to be productive, the anthropologist should also consider what it is that I — a historian — might be interested in. There will be misunderstanding, but there will also be the potential for the historian and the anthropologist to achieve a rapport and from that to think in new ways, to be made capable of asking better questions and so of eliciting better answers — from each other, but also from the documents, texts, cultures that are the focus of their own individual research.

Despret's work allows me to see this as a vital way forward for animal studies. In a field that is growing so fast that it feels almost impossible to keep up with the work from one's own discipline, she reminds us of the value of looking over the fences that have been put up by institutions and their managers. She asks us to recognize that new ways of thinking might come from attempts to read across boundaries and to speak — politely — to those who live in the next enclosure. Despret has taught me, through her explorations of the worlds of people and animals, that we do not speak alone; we all speak to and with others for whom we should try to form our words, and who, in turn, will transform them to make new meanings. In the midst of these conversations common ground is possible. There is the potential for situations in which, as she writes, "a 'we' is created," and "at the heart of" such situations, "perspectives are changed." What is crucial here is "a particular skill: *that of imagining being able to see with the eyes of an other*" (31).

Towards the end of *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?* Despret asks, "what does this do to think like this?" (179). Thinking differently, for Despret, is not an intellectual exercise, it is an action that can transform the world. It can uproot the hierarchies that allow us to regard cows as fleshy machines when they are actually actively purposefully collaborating in the work of the farm. It can challenge the assumptions that let us laugh at the idea that a bull might understand that he is a star. I began with Woolf's definition of "The true philosopher" as "he who has lost his coat but is free from fleas," and now I can see that I should actually pause over whether that is actually so fitting a way of thinking about Despret's work after all. She is shedding hierarchy, no doubt; but she is also making room for others. Rather than ridding herself of unwished for collaborators, Despret argues for the need to "deterritorialize oneself, to open oneself up to new *agencements* of desire, to cultivate an appetite for metamorphoses, and to forge multiple affiliations" (137). There might be room for a few fleas after all.

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