

# ON ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

an interview with vinciane despret

Brett Buchanan, Matthew Chrulew & Jeffrey Bussolini

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*Brett Buchanan: As a philosopher, what drew you to ethology and the study of animal behaviour?*

Vinciane Despret: I was trained in philosophy, but I studied psychology because I wanted to be a clinician; with a philosophical diploma it was very hard to find a job in Belgium, as they don't teach philosophy in high school. And so I began to study psychology and the most interesting courses I had were not the clinical courses but the courses in ethology and animal psychology. Back at that time, the reason I really liked ethology was that it was always surprising. I wouldn't say that ethologists tried to surprise us but they shared their own surprise. They were always surprised by the animals they were discovering, which is maybe an important word because "discovering" was exactly what was happening. Psychology was just keeping on the same track with the same ideas, but in ethology everything was new, even if it was not a new science. It was a new science compared to others and ethologists were discovering so many things; they were always surprised by these things because they did not expect the animals to do what they did. Or we didn't understand why they seemed so strange. Why we expected one thing but they were doing something else. And they might look idiotic but if you understand correctly they're not idiotic at all. They have good reasons for what they do, and they see the world differently. That's the first thing: you know, remember the beginning of philosophy, "thaumazein," to be surprised, to be curious. And I think that being a philosopher maybe influenced me so that I could be so sensitive to that question. The question of surprise. The question of risk. The question of translation. The question of not being in a

brett buchanan  
matthew chrulew  
jeffrey bussolini

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routine. Because that's exactly the game philosophers should – or do – play when they are good. Not playing the game. What does Deleuze say about philosophy? He says it's "a throw of the dice." So maybe I was prepared for that because I was a philosopher.

The second reason is more anecdotal. Ethologists tell wonderful stories. Ethology is a story of stories. Even a history of stories. Because you have living animals, who have lives, who do things. They risk their life, they reproduce, they have babies. They take care of their babies. They meet someone, they have friends (and another being becomes "someone"), sometimes they enjoy living... And these are all stories – beautiful stories. The best drama is written by animals, I think, and I think that it

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was a good choice for ethology to choose stories, not only because it's pedagogical but because it always obliges and requests from us to remember that we are dealing with a living being, a subject with their own experience.

And the third reason was a question of translation. I loved the problem translation raised. Ethologists were, I think, really keen, intelligent and imaginative translators because they were confronting not just another language but totally, radically, different types of languages. So there was an opening up of worlds and discovering that scientists can be surprised and that surprise constitutes, maybe ... their mode of being. I am thinking here about the ethology of ethologists, in the sense Deleuze gives to the word ethology, as that of a practical study of modes of being, that is to say, the practical study of what humans or animals can *do*; not of what they are, of their essence, but of what they're capable, of what they're doing, of the powers that are theirs, of the tests that they undergo. That is what makes an ethologist a good ethologist. I would say that if an ethologist is not able to be surprised, he's not a real ethologist. There are multiple talents: to be a good observer, to be imaginative, but I think that first one is not only to be able to be surprised but even to seek to be surprised.

*BB: Was it the element of real surprise, then, and a love of good stories, that drew you into fieldwork in the beginning?*

VD: I am happy I did fieldwork because you learn that – you know, it's very easy to dream about what fieldwork is. A lot of people dream about fieldwork. "Ah, it's observing animals!" But most of the time they don't do anything. Thelma Rowell says that with baboons there's always something happening, but with sheep, for example, you can stay there and wait for hours before they decide to begin a conversation. It was important for me to learn that fieldwork is spending a long time doing nothing except observing, taking notes, and hoping that something happens and, after a few hours, hoping that they just go back home and that you can yourself go back home because it's winter and you're freezing to death. I think

my ethology professor was right to make me do fieldwork, even if it might have nothing to do with what I was doing, because he also wanted me to learn how to observe and to learn to be modest. Otherwise, you have big dreams about what fieldwork is and you don't understand what people really do. I think it's important to see what they really do. Like Bruno Latour, whom I will discover later, says, you don't learn something by just reading the papers, you learn by seeing what they do and doing it with them.

*Matthew Chrulow: What was it that you learned from Zahavi and the babblers?*

VD: I began with a theme of research for my Master's degree by reading all this literature about altruistic birds. Mostly, if not almost totally, subtropical birds. I don't know about now but at that time most thought that only subtropical birds were altruistic. Maybe there's some ecological condition that favours the altruistic behaviour. But I also think that some ecological conditions favour why ethologists want to study some birds as opposed to others. I mean, my fieldwork would never be in the Arctic or something like that! [Laughter.] So I read all this literature and it's then, the fact of knowing profoundly one little field of ethology, that I can say I became an amateur in Latour's sense of the word, which means somebody who knows, who likes, but can have good taste about things. An amateur is the one who says – when you present him or her something or you read a text – says, [sniffs] "No, it's not a good taste here. There's no style here." And studying these birds that were behaving altruistically really gave me an amateur taste for the practice of ethology. Because after the thesis I could discriminate more finely the criteria that make an ethologist interesting compared to another one who goes about business as usual, for example those for whom this bird could have been another bird and it wouldn't change anything. I finally noticed that helpers of the nest were the most studied. Mobbing was also well documented. And I thought: why are these behaviours so privileged for researchers in altruism? I think that if we make this

hypothesis it's because they are the most easily observed, because the nest is easy to observe. Mobbing is also easy to see because it's spectacular. Thelma Rowell says something very interesting: if we have seen so much competition it's because we were observing things that were easily observable, which means the way animals eat and act together, or where the food is concentrated or rare. But she says that most primatologists, for example, didn't see cooperation in cases of predator attack because predators don't attack where the observer is observing, if he practises habituation for example. So I think that altruism was mostly helping at the nest because that's the way that's easy to observe. I think the second reason it was so well studied was because of the dominance of sociobiology, which for all these reasons, if you observe certain *comportement*, it's easier for this kind of theory to find proof. Anyway, in reading all this literature on altruism I noticed that after the surprise of the first five or six birds – Blue Jay, Florida Scrub Jay, Mexican Jay, and so on – they all were the same. They were all doing the same thing, for the same reason, in the same ways, with the same motive. And I noticed that finally after ten birds I was getting bored. And I was getting bored because it was always the same big story – there were no individuals, you know? It's what we call in French the *quiconque*, anyone. But there were only two exceptions that I found: one was the dunnock in Great Britain, which were observed by two British sociobiologists, and the other was the Arabian babblers, studied by a certain Zahavi. The babblers were really different birds, and Zahavi was really contesting the main sociobiological theory. First, they have stories. They were all identified, and he gave a story of some of the birds in order to explain them. Zahavi never stopped saying "in principle," but it was interesting because the "in principles" became, you know, "they are more flexible than that." "Okay, we can say that in general, but they won't follow you everywhere," which means that he was attentive to the details and to the individuality of these birds, and I thought this was surprising for birds, because back to that time this was only

the story for primates. Having a name, having a biography, having a personal story, having experiences, building society, as Latour and Strum would say. So I was really interested in understanding why these babblers were so different from other birds, and I came up with two hypotheses. The first one would be that these birds are very different because they live in some ecological condition that is different – this is a surprise of nature. But the second hypothesis that I believed at that time was the hypothesis that was inspired by philosophies of science – mostly French – that were dealing with natural history in trying to find what was natural and what was political in each theory. And they were, for example, dealing with Spencer, Darwin, Kropotkin, and others. I was inspired by what I was reading in philosophy of science and I thought that maybe these babblers are so original because they're observed by an ethologist who does not respect the rules. As a matter of fact, Zahavi was heavily anthropomorphic with the babblers, giving them motives, intentions, projects, strategic plans, and so on. So I thought we might have babblers that ultimately are the subject of over-interpretation. And that's exactly why I wanted to go to the field, to see if babblers really were so different from other birds.

*MC: So you weren't just observing the babblers, you were observing the scientists observing the babblers and Zahavi observing the babblers.*

VD: That's what I wanted to do. But after five minutes you can't do that anymore ... It was nonsense to think that I was going to look at Zahavi while he's observing babblers. [Laughter.] Remember what Latour said, with the proverb "when the sage points at the moon, the idiot looks at the fingers." Observing Zahavi, I would have been exactly this kind of idiot. And it would not be polite because you don't look at people like that all day long because it's profoundly disturbing. [Laughter.] Zahavi thought that the only thing that was interesting in the field was the behaviour of the babblers, not him. And, of course, he was not interesting because he stays still. There's nothing to observe. He wouldn't have

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understood why I took so much of his time and asked for his help, only to observe him and not what was interesting to observe, the babblers. The babblers really were interesting, but they were all the more interesting because I was observing them with Zahavi. I don't think that I would have been interested to stay hours and hours. I don't have the patience of an ethologist. Nor the knowledge or expertise. You don't see much while observing animals because you need stories to see things, you need stories that help you to collect things. I am not a real ethologist because I wouldn't have the patience and I could not understand most of the things that happen. A little, sometimes, but not much. But it's so interesting to hear somebody telling you: "I see this, and this will happen next, I can tell you already because did you notice that this happened, just before he did that?" These details all connect together and make a story. And this story helps you to predict what will happen and to be attentive to what will happen. Otherwise, you'll miss it.

Finally, I had the good fortune that other people were also in the field and were not seeing the same thing as Zahavi. They also asked lots of questions, and you begin to understand how, upon observation, a theory can be built – what counts as observation, what counts as details, what counts as a good interpretation.

*BB: How did this book come to be written?*

VD: I will tell you the truth about the babblers book. I came back from the field in Israel and decided to write an article. I had so much to say, I thought, I can't write this article. So I wrote fifteen pages and sent it to a friend, and he says: "This is too boring. Nobody would read that." I said, "Oh, good grief, what should I do?" And then I heard Isabelle Stengers on the radio. And when I heard her ... good grief. This woman is really something. I didn't know her personally, you know, just her name because she was already famous due to the Nobel Prize of Prigogine. So I bought her book, *The Invention of Modern Science*, and read it and thought: I've got it. The babblers.

She is writing for the babblers – that's exactly what I felt. Everything she says may apply to the babblers, so I have my stuff, my material. I know what I should do with all the data I collected. And now Robert Rosenthal makes sense. I had already read Rosenthal but I didn't know what to do with it, but all of a sudden, after reading Stengers, I understood that of course Rosenthal is wrong and the babblers are right. They have the right to dance and to rightly do it. Then I read Bruno Latour's *Laboratory Life*.

So that's the part of the babblers. And *Hans* was written in 2003. It was written very, very fast. But the main idea was about my surprise in discovering that all these stories that were trying to explain the "Hans" case were so different, as though several investigators had conducted an inquiry on this subject, but arrived at unbelievably different stories. That is what gave me the idea to deal with this book like a *roman policier*, like a detective novel. At that time I had just read a very interesting book by Pierre Bayard, *Qui a tué Roger Ackroyd?* It's such a funny story. He read Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, and he claims she didn't find the murderer at the end. That's not him, that's not possible. And he says: "No, no, no, no, no. She has been the dupe of Hercule Poirot. He was completely wrong and she believed him. I'm going to do a new inquiry. [Laughter.] Yes, I am going to do it all over again so that we read Christie's book thinking this doesn't work, this doesn't work, this doesn't work, and he found another murderer in that book. [Laughter.] I found the one who did it." And it's such an amusing and funny book. It's really great because his analysis is premised on the idea that Christie breaks very important rules in that book. And so the idea behind my *Hans* book is exactly what Bayard was doing with Christie. I don't accept Pfungst's results. He's wrong. I'm going to do it again. That was the idea, and everybody has noticed – I mean, good readers – noticed that the architecture of the book was the same architecture as the police novel.

*BB: A significant part of your writings is about asking the right kinds of questions about the*

*multispecies world around us. To me you don't seem bound by existing theories or paradigms, you rather allow your curiosity and wonder to lead you.*

VD: Maybe I had something that helped me a lot. I'll refer back to my love of stories. I've always loved to read stories, to read novels, and to tell stories and to be told stories, and my mother told me stories, and my father loved to tell real stories that happened to him or to his friends. What I like in stories is how they make links between events that are not normally linked. If you tell a story, but you know how it ends from the very beginning, it might be a good story but you have to hope it takes an unpredictable path to arrive at the end if you already know the end. Otherwise there is no interest at all. So, I like to make links. One is always trying to reconnect all the elements of the world because they are totally disconnected. Like what Philippe Descola calls analogism. If you read Gombrowicz's *Cosmos*, that's exactly what he is doing. He's trying to find connections between all the elements. Because for the narrator of *Cosmos* the world is in such chaos that he has to make all the connections and create links that make a little bit of order in that world. What is the relationship with a bird that has been hanged by someone? And a little piece of wood they discovered three days after that? Maybe there's a connection between them. And what does it mean? And who did that? And so on. And it's a completely different world. I loved this work of the imagination. Creating links is a thing that I can do. I don't say that my links are good but I love to create stories and to create links between things. That's why Leibniz interests me so much now, because it's totally weird – a totally different way of creating links between events that he proposed with his "Monadology." You can accept cause and effect, but it's too simple for Leibniz because effects are only one part of the explanation. It's the clearest part of the explanation. That's also why I like Michel Tournier's novel *The Erl-King*; that's exactly the way he functions in it. Conspiracy, complicity

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of events, signs to read, connections to make, and so on. Connectivity.

MC: *At what point did you begin reading William James?*

VD: I don't remember. I know that he came during my thesis because I read philosophers about emotion and I was really dissatisfied by what they were doing with emotion. This thesis was complicated because I was searching for different theories of emotion and new frames of analysis. The exception to the traditional psychological theories was anthropology – that was my discovery during my thesis because anthropology, and ethno-psychology of emotions, was a really flourishing, interesting, and new field. That was a great moment. And it was James that I focused on, because James was really critical about the way the sciences dealt with psychology and because his theory of emotions was really fascinating. James was, I think, the first one to give me the tools to begin to think the notion of "version," and the notion, which is so important to me, of indetermination. The double fact. Don't try to separate subjective experience and objective world. Don't try to think that maybe dancing Arabian babblers are a subjective projection. If you say that, it's because you made a choice and nothing can guarantee that your choice is right. So, it is just a choice to separate subjective experience and objective world. And James helps – he gives us tools to think this through. Not to bifurcate nature, like with, say, Whitehead. James gives us tools to help cultivate a site where different versions can coexist. This is the very definition of what I call a *version*, instead of *vision*. A *version* is when multiple stories can coexist; where they are compossible, Leibniz would say. With *vision*, if you say "Oh, this is your vision of the world," it means that it's a subjective experience and it cannot coexist really with mine, because this is your vision of the world, and I can say that you don't have the truth. You just have an opinion. So, *vision*, for me, means the exclusion of other possible stories, whereas *version*, for me, is the word that defines the possibility of multiple hypotheses

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that can coexist. In *Women Who Make a Fuss*, my book co-written with Stengers, you will find a definition of “version” in English; it’s also in the *Abécédaire* under “Version.”<sup>2</sup> Perhaps you saw on YouTube the crow that slips on an icy roof with a little disk of some sort, like a Frisbee? She takes it in her beak, puts it on the top of the roof, and slides on the snowy roof with the Frisbee, then takes it back and goes back on the top of the roof and does it again and again. It’s really funny to see. If you see that, you can think she’s playing. But an anthropologist who studies animals might reproach the animalist and say: “these fantasists, connectivists, they say that this crow is playing, but no, she’s just trying to know if it’s eatable.” I was thinking about that and I think that we have a good story for the version. If it’s the case that the sceptic is right, you exclude the hypothesis that she’s playing. Okay? So, eating is the only hypothesis that can be kept, and you can’t say anything else. Animals are animals. They are only a stomach with fur. You know, they just think about eating, that’s the only important thing animals do in their lives. Reproducing and eating. But if you say that she’s playing, you don’t exclude the fact that maybe at first she believed that it was food, she tries to eat it, she slips, and discovers that you can do something else with food or non-food than eating, and she just enjoys it – a beautiful article by Nathan Emery and Nicola Clayton has recently commented on this video and claimed that birds like to have fun (“Do Birds Have the Capacity for Fun?”). This is the same with conditioning. If you say that you learn by association and you say association is enough and it’s not higher competencies, you exclude everything. If you say higher competencies, you don’t exclude association because association may take part in the learning of higher competencies. You see what I mean? And for me James gives really good tools not only to help make versions coexist but to prevent us from excluding too prematurely a hypothesis that could get its chance to discover something else. And that asks for further questions.

*BB: It seems that all of your writings have an underlying notion of metamorphosis, and even hope. The playfulness and openness you have towards different versions of stories show not only what animals are capable of but how they and their stories can transform our understandings and relationships with them.*

VD: I’m an optimistic person, but this is only a personal characteristic. I prefer to walk on the bright side of the street. I could refer to my parents and so on – there are a lot of things, you know? Because I’m the daughter of a history. I’m the daughter of a history – people having lost their parent during the war, having known the war, and having tried to teach their children that their life was beautiful as well as they could. I wasn’t born just after the war, it was fifteen years later, but I hear it and inherit a history and my parents were two marvellous people. They lost their fathers during the war. I think that really they probably believed that the world would be better if we trust the world. I’m probably not the only one of my generation having benefited because of this sort of joyful optimism. The second reason is that I went against this philosophical tradition that was my first path, which is critical philosophy. For example, *trier les bonnes graines de l’ivraie*, if you wanted an Evangelical sentence, which means separate the good seeds from the bad, the wheat from the chaff. And that’s what normally I was supposed to do. Ideology or Science? Kropotkin – ideology. Darwin – science. Malthus? Ideology but one that is science, at least when it becomes Darwin and if it doesn’t end up as Spencer, for example. So you just make a constant operation of separating and separating and separating, which is kind of philosophical. “I’m critical.” Critical philosophy. And denounce. Oh, that’s so much fun to denounce. [Laughter.] Because you are so intelligent when you denounce. [Laughter.] Yes, because not only are you more intelligent than the one you denunciate because you caught them, but you are more intelligent than all these people who still believe them. And so you build your own

intelligence on the stupidity of others. And I think that this feeling, to be ironic, sarcastic, is a sort of bad joy, *joie mauvaise* in the Spinozist sense, *passion triste*, sad passion. You know? To be so intelligent at the expense of others and convert them to your truth and cure the blind. [Laughter.] In French we say *dessiller les yeux*. Open the eyes – that were closed. I didn't feel at ease with that because I felt that there was something profoundly dishonest in it. Because you always write against someone else and you always create a kind of easy intelligence that is only built upon the stupidity of others. That was why I could not go along with this for very long. Thankfully, my own eye opening happened in the field because otherwise it probably would have taken me years before transforming an uneasiness, *inquietude* or *malaise* into something that can be thought, that can be used to make things, to make thought, to make stories ... I think that the best fortune I had was that it happened in the field. I cannot separate. My uneasiness with doing that might have lasted a long time before I would finally have revolted against this kind of ethos – this ethos as a feeling, as a way of habit. That's why I like James. He has humour but he never built on stupidity in order to be intelligent. The only thing I could do, then – instead of denouncing stupidity, malpractice, bad sciences, especially uninteresting sciences, I could do something that was comfortable for the way I like to work, for what I can do, because I'm not very good at denouncing [laughter] – was to celebrate achievements and just keep silent about the rest, which is not an easy position in the sense that it sometimes asks you to say nothing, just to keep silent. With *Quand le loup habitera avec l'agneau* I made a concession to that position and I criticized Harlow. I did it because I didn't want everyone to believe that everything is a romantic and wonderful world where all the scientists are wonderful people. Everybody still thought that Harlow was such a great scientist because he taught us love ... [Laughter.]

*BB: In some ways your approach highlights a difference between yourself and particular*

*streams of contemporary French philosophy that work through deconstruction, genealogical analyses, critical readings, and so on. How do you see your animal projects in relation to the various other "questions of the animal" in Derrida, Deleuze, or even in relation to the rise of "animal studies" in general?*

VD: I came late to these discussions – first because I wanted to study with scientists, and they are rare, I mean in this literature, rare are the people who really take this seriously, who study scientists doing things with animals. We have some people now but they were very rare before – I didn't know anyone who was really studying scientists in their real relationship with the animals. They were talking about what they were writing and the political context of the writing, and the political ideas that were in the writing. But in the French tradition I could not find anyone who could help me, except Latour and Stengers, who are not dealing with animals but with practices; that's why I have been reading them and follow them, because they are interested in practices and they are very helpful to think about practice. Not only do they think and write about practice, but they write about their love of the practices – of the good practices, of course, especially for Stengers (Latour is less normative). This is the first point.

I didn't read Derrida for a long time, and if I did read Derrida it's because of Donna Haraway, which is funny because I had to read Haraway the American to come back to a French philosopher. I didn't want to read him because I was so suspicious, suspicious of philosophers because they were talking about animals but without knowing, and believing in the human exception has been for me so disturbing since the beginning. Derrida, you know, I saw him in Liège, and he said something that was very important for me. He gave a talk – not about animals – it was a sort of roundtable, and one of the participants asked him what he thought – since he had been writing a bit about animals – about Bergson who says this and that, quotes a lot of philosophers, and Derrida was really mad and said, "why are you



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philosophers always quoting old philosophers who didn't know what we know today and why don't you read scientists?" To say that, given the reproach Haraway made later on ... Well, I thought maybe this man is not all that bad. [Laughter.] Because it is exactly what I was thinking, that when my colleagues in philosophy say to me, "If you read about animals you will find that ... and so on," I thought, I don't want to read these people, because they were right to think what they thought, probably not all of them but Bergson, for instance, was right to write what he thought because scientists were thinking the same at the same time and he was interested in the sciences. If Bergson helps you to speculate, then yes, great, for the gesture of speculation, for what he did with fake or faux problems. This is important. But not necessarily the content. So take the gesture, take the problems, but don't take the content with it.

So I didn't really want to read philosophy. Then I read Derrida but with Haraway's reproach in mind – I think that she's right. She's quite right because the cat appeared on the scene, complicated it, but very soon, you know ... The animal is again just a pretext. What Derrida is right about – but I didn't need Derrida to point this out – is that "animal" is a concept, a really badly founded one. That's what bothers me in animal studies; that it rests on that really ill-founded concept. Because it seems that it's again animal on one side and human on the other. And I would rather prefer different frameworks – maybe the field is too young for that, but that it contains a future possible splitting. We know, for example, that with anthropology today, if you know a little bit, and you ask someone "What are you doing?," they'll respond, "I am an anthropologist." The next question will be "which cultures are you studying?" If you don't raise this question, you don't know anything about anthropology; because anthropology doesn't exist, as Dominique Lestel says that ethology doesn't exist. It exists in peer-reviewed journals, but it's a big word for very different realities. Are we able to consider that animal science or studies is a big word for very different realities? I'm not sure. That's

the first point. The second point is that I didn't read until lately all the writing of people like Deborah Rose, Thom van Dooren, Cary Wolfe, all these people. You know that there is a profound difference between the way the French tradition and the English-language tradition deal with the problem of animality. It's very, very different. In France you generally have a very apolitical way of dealing with it; the question of biopower, and so on, has only begun to emerge. The French tradition has been more of an *érudite tradition*, dealing with old phenomenology, or like Élisabeth de Fontenay's history and so on. I didn't like this tradition – this kind of erudition that doesn't pay attention to what's happening here and now, even if all these people are very sensitive to animals.

The third important point is that people like Thom, Deborah, Donna, all these people writing about animals have been not only very politically engaged and involved but morally and ethically they were saying we have to protect and denounce what's happened, the iniquity of treatments and so on. I could not take this risk. Had I done this I would have been completely stigmatized as a militant and not as a philosopher. What was possible in the United States, for example, to write about the injustice, the way we treat animals and so on, here would have looked like a militant discourse. Scientists would have suspected me to be a type of liberationist, and philosophers wouldn't have accepted it all the more because I am a woman and I would have been, I think, designated as "the sensitive woman" who takes care of protecting animals and denounces their suffering. So I strategically tried not to be involved; I didn't read this literature because it could not help me. And it's only lately that I decided that not only have they a lot of things to teach me but in some of their work there is a way of thinking that is really interesting. Like when I was talking about the gesture of Bergson, I'm talking about the gesture of Thom, the gesture of Deborah, and they each have their own philosophical gesture. This gesture, their way of apprehending animals, of talking about animals, of creating a new sensitivity because they are really creating sensitivity, they are

good technicians of narrative, especially Donna, she's an expert in creating narratives that modify your sensitivity. Thom, I would say, has a particular skill to make you hesitate with the "but." You say okay, well, Lorenz did that – *but*, and he has even criticized me for this in his book *Flight Ways*, and he's right to do it. "Despret says that what Lorenz did was – *but* she forgets that ..." and he's right because after that you have to hesitate. You cannot be innocent any more. So, I would say that Thom's skill is to make you hesitate. Donna's skill is to transform your sensitivity and to transform culpability into responsibility, indifference on the one side and culpability on the other, which are counter-productive. She transforms people with narratives that have poetic metamorphoses. Nobody's indifferent to Donna Haraway, because when people are transformed they cannot be indifferent, they can resist metamorphosis but they cannot be indifferent.

I think that what prevents me from reading some authors, either in France or in the United States, is they are not talking about real animals. They are still talking about rules, principles, discourse and so on. And I have had enough of that. Philosophy should take ... well, Michel Tournier explains it well. What is it to write a philosophical novel? It is to give a philosophical architecture to reality. To go back to reality and be the most concrete you can be. And that's what I reproach, the lack of concreteness.

*Jeffrey Bussolini: As a science, ethology has largely focused on animal behaviour that is restricted to a particular species, population, family, or individual. But what is the role of the human here? How do you see ethology asking the right questions about humans?*

VD: An ethology of human beings has never been something that excites me or interests me because I think that, since we have language, language should be a part of the picture. Language is important for every being that communicates, but to deprive humans of what is so important for them seems to me rather uninteresting. Secondly, I don't like the

idea because I'm sure this will lead to human exceptionalism again. If an ethology of humans makes sense, it will be an ethology of humans and animals together. That makes sense. This would be a form of sociology – not as generally practised – but a new kind of sociology, as one can see with some sociologists who are beginning to open anthropology to the relationship between all animals – human and non-human. But ethology, I think, does not have the right tools to look only at humans because it cannot consider language and a lot of other things. And because it separates; it always raises the question of whether something is cultural or natural, and for me this is not the right question. If ethology opens up to humans and animals, I think the question of culture/nature can't be raised because not only is it very hard to see if a cultural behaviour is from nature or from culture, but because culture doesn't mean a human product anymore. Dominique Lestel says, I think, that ethology doesn't exist anymore. I don't know if he still thinks that but he used to think that. Perhaps a kind of anthropozoology is needed, but even this isn't a good term because if you say anthropozoology you still consider that man is unique and it's probably too big a category as well. So, I rather prefer what Jeffrey does; a kind of sociology of relationships. Doing yoga with cats for example – it's a sociological act of *observation participante*. But I don't think that the observer is the human one. [Laughter.] In these situations, the question is raised: who is the observer? The question may be raised but you don't have any answer. That's the interesting question; you can see, and you can observe how your cat observes you observing him, and it's very interesting. I think that, for example, the ethology of dogs or cats is really helpful too because the question of nature and culture cannot really be raised, because even if all dogs behave in a certain way, it might be culture, but ... it's not a culture of the dogs. It's rather a culture of the history of dogs with humans that transformed both dogs and humans, and created an artefact. A dog is an artefact. A wonderful artefact. A non-Cartesian

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one. Which means also some things you don't expect. "Artefacts" has multiple meanings here.

MC: *You've worked a fair bit with other people; you've co-written with Jocelyne Porcher and with Isabelle Stengers, worked with artists through art galleries, on documentary films, with farmers, scientists, and so on. How do these collaborations come about, and how would you characterize their importance for your own practices?*

VD: This is a definition of my own subjectivity that I am giving here. A part of my subjectivity may be at rest because somebody I trust is taking charge of this part of my subjectivity, which means we arrive at a project of collaboration, which means that they are part of my subjectivity that I don't cultivate, because some other people will do it better than I can and allow me to do exactly the stuff I'm at ease with. So we arrive at the collaborative aspect of the work. I would have loved to be an artist. I have a lot of friends who are artists and I like to discuss things with them. But I cannot be an artist in the strict sense of the term. It's funny – making a movie is a medium and it asks you to think like a filmmaker, but I don't think like a filmmaker. I tried to write a theatre play with a friend of mine, with a real playwright. I began the dialogue, and he says, "you cannot make her say that." I said, "Why? We have to say that to the audience." "You don't have to say that, you have to show it." I'm not a playwright because I'm not able to translate something from one language to another kind of language, that is, into silence where you show or evoke things. But I tried to learn because I think it's important to change, to push the border as far as you can, and still be a philosopher while intruding in another field, and considering not that I am annexing the other field because the border is still there but rather re-creating the border. Working with artists, for me, has been really great because it makes me explore all these borders and sometimes jump to the other side, and it means that the border of philosophy is not at the same place anymore because you cannot forget you are a philosopher. For

example, the exhibition at la Villette was, of course, a great experience, but it was not a true collaborative experience with artists because the artistic creator was the one really in charge (Despret, *Bêtes et hommes*). I could say a word here and there, I could give advice, but I never worked with the artists, you know? I didn't choose the placement of the works ... I was still at ease in narrative, and in this exhibition I created narratively. Any time we were working on the exhibition I was telling a story. The last movie, the film I made with Didier Demorcy, is "Non Sheepish Sheep." I have been more involved in the scenario because I had the scenario in my mind already when we began. As I had read a lot of Thelma Rowell before, I knew what I wanted and when I asked the question the scenario took place. Didier let me be really free about that. But it's not really an artistic film. It is made by an artist and me, but it's more an exploring, sharing movie. I'm also working with Luc Petton, a dancer who dances with birds, and he has been working lately with starlings, black-birds, jays, and it's fantastic to see. You see the dancer dancing and the birds coming and flying around the body, responding to each other. It's really beautiful. After that he made another show, a more classical one, with a black and white swan, called "Swan," and it takes all the conventions of classical ballet but puts a real swan in it. Now he's preparing a ballet with the Manchurian Crane. They are beautiful birds. Very big, tall, black and white, and they dance. In nature they dance and, you know, one of Luc's dancers says that they probably invented the *entrechat*, a typical figure of dance with the legs. Luc asked me to come and work with him, so I went to see the rehearsal with the crane and I didn't know what to contribute; I think that it's perfect that way. Because we will figure it out together somehow. Yes it's an *expérience de pensée*, a thought experiment, but it's an experiment that calls for change, not in the relationship because I don't like the word, but to change *la mise à rapport*. The way to relate to the world, the way to connect to the world ... I can try this with Luc because what I noticed right

away when I saw the dancers dancing with the crane, I thought, “Oh this is interesting because we don’t know who the choreographer is here.” We don’t know who the choreographer is because the cranes are so strong, they have their own will, and strongly mark it. They know how to dance – sometimes they will take the initiative and sometimes respond to the initiative of the dancer. With this idea of how the crane perceives the world in that particular situation, I think that we will learn with them because each time they answer to a gesture and come or follow or begin to fly ... they are saying something. You don’t improvise your own gestures, you just hope that making a gesture will provoke one of the responses you expect, and if not, it will be a response that will make the dancer respond. For example, when I saw this particular dancer proposing a lot of gestures to the crane, I thought this was fantastic because Whitehead wrote about a lure for feelings, a lure for thoughts (*Process and Reality*). What philosophy makes – what a good proposition makes – is a lure for feelings and a lure for thoughts. Lure is *appât* in French; something that attracts. But in French we have also the word *appeau* and an *appeau*, for example, is a fake whistle that you use to trick birds, a fake whistle that ethologists and hunters use to call birds. In French it’s *appeau*, which has the same roots as *appât*, like lure, but this is a specific name to designate the object that can lure animals. Anyway, I proposed that we think of dancing as creating *appeaux*. Which means that I’m considering that the dancing, for example, is creating for the dancers, either for the humans or for the cranes, a new way of perceiving the world. Inter-specific ways of perceiving the world, which are neither the same nor symmetrical because both are transformed, and we can see the transformation.

What I’m expecting of collaborations, then, is to change. That I change. And this is very egotistical. Because this is a concern of mine, that I think that I might work better if I change because I think that I’m stuck in a routine. If something has been working pretty well and I have no reason to abandon it because it works

well, then that’s just a good reason to abandon it. It works too well.

*BB: It’s a really interesting notion of egotistical though. You’re saying that you’re doing it for yourself but the self that you’re doing it for is the self that you want to change, to transform, to test.*

VD: Collaborations force me against my, I wouldn’t say “laziness,” but my tendency to inertia. If something works, why change? Yes, change. If you think that, change. It’s risky, but I don’t have anything to risk any more except that I still have ten years of work at the university in front of me, and I hope more after that. But yes, I hope to feel differently. To have new percepts. That’s it exactly. Working with artists gives one new ways of perceiving, new ways of thinking, and maybe more courage to go a little too far sometimes. Yes, to go too far. I have gone too far sometimes but I didn’t do it on purpose. I only noticed it because some reactions were bizarre. [Laughter.] But I would like to go too far on purpose – a little too far. Not to offend anyone, but just to cross a border and see whether maybe I’m home. Or maybe not. Maybe somebody will say to me: “What are you doing here?!” [laughter] and it will be nice. Just a visit.

*JB: Can you give an example of when or where you’ve gone too far?*

VD: One way of going too far is what I’m trying to figure out now, and it will probably be a direction I take with Luc Petton, is how I take into account the problem of extinction and equality, there being enough room for everyone, conservation problems, and so on. I don’t want to deal with these kinds of problems – extinction, for example – ethically. I don’t want to say this is an ethical problem – even the term “ethical problem” for me, I get bored as soon as I say that. [Laughter.] The way I’ve been thinking about extinction, for example with passenger pigeons, is to consider that if one species disappears, what disappears is an ontological part of reality. Following Gustav Fechner, and James, the matter of the world is the way the world is enduring into its existence. And one

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of its modes of enduring into existence is to think itself. The world is thinking itself. And this makes it also exist. Leibniz has helped me to clarify this as well. If I say, for example, that if we lose little penguins, this is a part of reality that disappears; not only the reality made by the body of the existence of penguins but the way the world is perceiving itself, by the way, or through the way, penguins perceive the world. What is lost is the particular noise of the waves that only penguins can hear, and the light that only these penguins can see. I'm not holistic, in a Gaia hypothesis sense, but I am trying to speculate about the fact that each species that disappears impoverishes the way the world is perceived. So I am not talking only about the way the world is inhabited but the way the world is thinking itself. And saying that, if I say that to a scientist, I know I am going too far. So, how can I go too far without being completely misunderstood? It doesn't help if everybody believes you are a fool. So you have to learn how to go too far, which makes things change – I mean ways of thinking change – but not too, too far. You know? In this case, for example, I can say to a scientist, and in a way they will understand when I say it, "I am a methodological animist." So I am not an animist – maybe I am, but that's my concern – but I am a methodological animist, which means that if I speculate that way, how does it help us to change the way we perceive the world, the way we perceive animals, and the way we enter into relations with them? And this is to go too far, which means that I have to go outside of my normal field, which was describing scientists, understanding a dispositive, and so on.

When I speculate that when a species disappears the world is losing a way of perceiving itself – if it's true, what does it change? But if you ask the question "if it's true what does it change?" you also have to raise the question "but which kind of truthfulness are you talking about?" And I'm referring here to Bruno Latour's modes of existence. In which mode of existence does this truthfulness belong? It's not a scientific truth. I am not describing a word chain of references of

translation that comes from a piece of Earth to the laboratory in Los Angeles, all these little chains of translation that make the science work and the truth become truth. The real becoming – or the becoming real – of a true statement. The truthfulness of my statement is not a scientific one; that is why I specify that I am a methodological animist, which means I don't say that I believe that each being has a soul and that the world is the soul of every being like Fechner did. It's only methodological. Let's try to imagine the world: we don't know how the world is composed. Yes, we know *scientifically* how the world is composed, but we don't know for other modes of existence how the world is composed. We don't know outside causality how things connect together, and yet at the same time we do know, but the term "to know" has changed meaning. I mean, yes we know a little bit, but we have a lot to learn and we are not well equipped for that. So, if I say it's a methodological animism it's to specify that it is just a gesture, a position I take, and an experimental trial. If we think that seriously, what does it change and what should we change?

*BB: Are there any particular moments or events that stand out to you in your own metamorphoses?*

VD: Two personal experiences. One of the greatest experiences I have had in my life is one morning hearing a blackbird – I've written about this – and all of a sudden I had the feeling that this blackbird knew what importance means. On that morning I really thought that the blackbird invented the concept of importance. I really did think this ... this is going too far, I know, but I'm crossing a border here, that if we know what importance means, it's because a blackbird taught us. Because if you hear a blackbird singing in the morning you will know what importance means. And plus the blackbird has this characteristic – I don't know if it has been studied but when they sing – I don't know if you have the same feeling as me but, with the tympani of the ears, sometimes you feel that it's not the same place where the music arrives and

where the words arrive – like if it was geographically distributed in your ears. I feel it that way – I’m not sure that it’s not scientific – but I feel that words don’t arrive at the same place in my ears as music. When the blackbirds sing it arrives where the words arrive in the form of music. It was the most fantastic experience of hybridization. And a second experience that is funny – well, it was a fun experience – I went to visit a friend in Normandy. She raises horses. In the afternoon they proposed that we travel on a carriage, an open one, you know, a very old, open one. And I was with the driver in the front seat. There are a lot of horses there, you know, it’s a part of Normandy where it’s only prairies with horses, sheep, goats, dogs, a lot of animals, I couldn’t believe it. I’d never seen so many before; these horses, all of these animals, it was sort of like heaven. We were crossing a little path and all the animals came running to the fence to see the two horses pulling our carriage, and they were talking together. I’ve never noticed that before, because they don’t do that for us. But they did that for the horse. And I was like a poor person, welcomed in a chateau with all these animals. And all these animals were welcoming these horses because they knew each other – I asked, and this man rides very often so the horses know every animal where they go – and the animals know the horse and all these animals were running, just saying hello. It was so fantastic. I was in another world.

BB: *Like a fairy tale.*

VD: Yes, it was. We always live under the sort of obvious thought that the world belongs to us. We act like that, we feel like that, we have been living like that, we have been raised like that. And when you see all these animals ignore you, or they pretend they do, and have so much conversation together, and they live two metres from us and we ignore them, then all of a sudden the world doesn’t belong to us. I know that this was not for me, but I was involved in it, and it was like a gift, you know? All these animals were making me a gift.



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## notes

1 The majority of this interview was conducted in person (in English) outside of Nîmes, France, in May 2014. It has since been edited, expanded, and revised via e-mail. Responses in French have been translated by the interviewers.

2 Despret and Stengers, *Les Faiseuses d’histoires* and *Women Who Make a Fuss*; Despret, *Que diraient les animaux* and *What Would Animals Say?*

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Vinciane Despret  
Philosophie et Lettres  
Université de Liège  
4000 Liège  
Belgium  
E-mail: [v.despret@ulg.ac.be](mailto:v.despret@ulg.ac.be)

Brett Buchanan  
Department of Philosophy  
School of the Environment  
Laurentian University  
935 Ramsey Lake Road  
Sudbury  
Ontario P3E 2C6  
Canada  
E-mail: [bbuchanan@laurentian.ca](mailto:bbuchanan@laurentian.ca)

Matthew Chrulew  
Centre for Culture and Technology  
Research and Graduate Studies  
Faculty of Humanities  
Curtin University  
GPO Box U1987  
Perth, WA 6845  
Australia  
E-mail: [mchrulew@gmail.com](mailto:mchrulew@gmail.com)

Jeffrey Bussolini  
Sociology – Anthropology Department  
City University of New York  
2800 Victory Boulevard  
Staten Island, NY 10314  
USA  
E-mail: [jbussolini@mac.com](mailto:jbussolini@mac.com)