

Article

A Is for Anecdotes, Amateurs, and Anomalies: Vinciane Despret's Case for Exceptional Interspecies Relations

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Abstract: In Vinciane Despret's book, *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?*, she tells stories about animals that surprise us, that challenge our assumptions about the capabilities of animals, and that illustrate how we might best come to know them. Despret engages with the history of animal science and scientific methodology, while also turning her attention to less conventional sources of animal knowledge, such as Youtube videos, domestic animal breeders, and animal caregivers. For Despret, knowing more about animals requires knowing more *with* them, expanding our knowledge practices beyond conventional scientific models that often emphasize distanced observation, generalization, and laboratory research. Despret highlights relational practices that function through care and curiosity, understanding animals as collaborators, with interests and valuable input. By drawing our attention to anecdotes, amateurs, and anomalies, Despret challenges scientific conventions that dismiss all three, and illuminates fascinating stories about what animals might show us if we "ask the right questions".

Keywords: animal studies; Vinciane Despret; interspecies relation; science studies



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In Vinciane Despret's book, *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?*, she comes back to stories about animals and their relations with humans that are surprising, specifically because the stories lie somewhere outside of what conventional scientific approaches teach us to expect. Outliers and anomalies do not serve the purposes of identifying patterns, drawing broad conclusions based on those patterns, and establishing a body of general knowledge through the analysis of collected observations and data. Yet, Despret's work demonstrates that the strange, the unexpected, and the experimental have something important to offer. They push us to consider how particular research models and assumptions limit the possibilities for what animals might show us, or might create with us, in our encounters. The anecdotes and anomalies that drive Despret's work sometimes involve amateurs rather than trained scientists, and they all emphasize relational knowledge practices based on care, respect, and curiosity. Despret employs stories of surprising encounters to show how the mutual composition of interspecies relations, based on practices of care, creates an opening for the unexpected, and points us towards new possibilities in animal knowledge. As Ellie Anderson notes in a review of Despret's book, the structure of the chapters—which encourages jumping around and composing new textual configurations depending on how one navigates—does not necessarily lend itself to the development of a sustained argument (Anderson 2016, p. 6). That said, the text's structure feels accumulative and it speaks to one of the most consistent ideas that emerges, in one way or another, in every essay: multiplying voices, adding rather than subtracting, pushing us towards a "new interspecific *ethos*" (Despret 2016, p. 196, italics in original). In compiling and sharing numerous anecdotal accounts of animals, often in relation with amateurs or scientists who break with conventional methodologies, Despret's book argues for the inclusion of such stories, as they create a convincing portrait of "the manners, customs, and habits that tie together beings who share, that is, create together, the same ecological niche" (Despret 2016, p. 196).

Despret's own research experience in the field with Amotz Zahavi, an ethologist who studied Arabian babblers, shaped her perspective on the methods that scientists use to study animals. As a student of philosophy and psychology, Despret decided to go into the field to observe not only the babblers themselves, but also Zahavi's approach, an approach that had already garnered attention for its unconventionality (Bussolini 2021, p. xii). Despret wondered why Zahavi's observations of the babblers, and his way of writing about those observations, framed the birds' behavior in ways that supported surprising interpretations and conclusions. She explains in an interview, "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 doesn't follow the rules" (Buchanan et al. 2015, p. 167). Despret also had the opportunity to observe the ways that other ethologists in the field were studying the babblers, using conventional methodologies that led them to see the birds' behavior in ways that contrasted Zahavi's interpretations.¹ Despret's discovery of the work of Isabelle Stengers and Bruno Latour in the field of science studies provided an intellectual framework for her investigation into questions of methodology in varying ethological practices, and the broader assumptions underlying the scientific study of animals (Buchanan et al. 2015, p. 167). For this reason, as Brett Buchanan writes in the introduction to his translation of *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?*, Despret becomes a kind of "ethologist of ethologists", taking a behavioral approach to ethologists themselves and forming questions about their modes of studying and interpreting animal behavior (Buchanan 2016, p. 18). Nathan Snaza agrees and further posits that Despret's work takes part in the tradition of feminist science studies: "the refrain of the book is that scientists like control, like restriction, like violence, like borders. And they like these so much that they shield their work from any risks which might lead to uncertainty, blurriness, or porosity" (Snaza 2020, p. 264). Despret's work challenges such scientific conventions, asking what a riskier, more curious, more inclusive set of knowledge practices might look like—something that captures the complex and dynamic interspecies relations of a milieu.

In order to explore the ways that Despret understands experimental relational approaches to animal knowledge, it is important to briefly consider conventional scientific methodologies and their relation to scientific inquiry and knowledge. Despret—and other like-minded contemporary philosophers, including Isabelle Stengers, Bruno Latour, and Naomi Oreskes—is interested in the way that scientists make claims of knowledge, as well as the methods that form the basis for such claims. Reflecting on contemporary discourses surrounding science, Naomi Oreskes posits that "It is routine, for example, for scientists to insist that their theories must be correct, because they *work*" (Oreskes 2019, p. 19, emphasis in original). Oreskes rejects such appeals to natural objective truths, but also notes that they misrepresent the history of scientific inquiry. She explains that the theory of positive knowledge associated with Auguste Comte is often misunderstood as naïve and unsophisticated, whereas Comte's "key move was to insist that science is reliable not by virtue of the character of its practitioner, but by virtue of the nature of its practices" (Oreskes 2019, p. 23). Comte, regardless of his positivism, argues that scientists have the obligation to study their practices, and to reflect upon and scrutinize their modes of observation. Oreskes argues that, in this way, Comte lays the groundwork for thinkers such as Bruno Latour, who has applied an anthropological lens to the setting of the scientific laboratory (see, for example, Latour and Woolgar 1986). While our current popular discourses about science do tend to assert—often as a defensive strategy—the indisputability of scientific facts, Oreskes notes that even the most positivist thinkers, such as Comte, recognize the need to interrogate the practices of science rather than accept them wholesale. Despret's work takes part in that tradition.

While Oreskes ultimately concludes that scientific consensus—achieved through robust practices of peer review and conducted by a diverse collection of scientists and laypeople—makes science trustworthy, Isabelle Stengers draws attention to the way that scientists are "not asked to give an account of their choices and research priorities" (Stengers

2000, p. 9). Stengers's work, a critical influence on Despret's thought, demonstrates the way that the critique of scientific practices always comes from within science itself, determining which questions to ask and how to ask those questions. In *The Invention of Modern Science*, Stengers analyzes the theoretical positions of a number of seminal thinkers in the history of Western science, including Karl Popper, Thomas Kuhn, and Paul Feyerabend. Focusing on Kuhn early in her text, Stengers focuses on his explanation of how scientists deal with anomalies, or with problems that contradict the expectations or previous understanding of researchers. Such anomalies can theoretically cause what Kuhn famously calls a "paradigm shift", but, as both Stengers and Oreskes point out, scientists first make every effort to accommodate the anomaly within their working paradigm, making slight adjustments to their understanding if necessary. A paradigm shift only takes place if the anomaly remains unresolved and continues to present a problem. For Stengers, one of the main issues with that model for the critical interrogation of scientific practice is this: "[S]ince every paradigm determines the legitimate questions and the criteria according to which responses can be recognized as acceptable, it is impossible to construct a 'third position' outside the paradigm from whence the philosopher would be able to evaluate the respective merits of rival interpretations (theory of noncommensurability)" (Stengers 2000, p. 8). One can only work from within the paradigm to assess the viability of the paradigm, determining appropriate questions and responding in ways that generally work to uphold the paradigm. As Bruno Latour explains in his foreword to Stengers's *Power and Invention*, Stengers demarcates good science from bad science on the basis of whether the practice puts itself at risk, making itself vulnerable to interrogation, rather than creating a fortress where only those within the walls can ask questions, and can evaluate whether those questions are well-articulated, interesting, and challenging (Latour 1997).

In "How to Talk About the Body: the Normative Dimension of Science Studies", Latour discusses what he calls the Stengers–Despret shibboleth—pushing Karl Popper's notion of falsification beyond the disprovability of a particular theory, and extending it to an entire methodology, to a program of research (Latour 2004, p. 12).² If falsification only comes by way of questions tailored by the scientist to produce a positive or negative result, the scientist fails to put his or her methodology at risk, maintaining the authority of the questioner and rendering mute those he or she questions. Latour explains that Stengers and Despret propose, instead, an engaged interactive process—one where the questions and practice evolve in response to the ways the interrogated entities behave or resist. Falsification in this type of practice requires the scientist to ditch questions and methods that produce recalcitrance or that simply fail to reveal anything interesting. Whether one can construct a statement that corresponds to a fact in the world no longer suffices to demarcate science from nonscience, especially if the methodology used to arrive at such a statement is unresponsive to the world about which it claims to speak. For Stengers and Despret, knowledge articulates with reality—rather than simply referring to or representing it—and thus engages in the composition of the world, while making us sensitive to its complexities. Anomalies no longer arise as a threat to a paradigm where statements of fact are either true or false based on their correspondence to reality; instead, they can exist as part of a network of well-articulated propositions that retain differences, adding to and enriching a relational understanding of the world.³ Rather than subtracting, reducing, and generalizing in order to decrease "the number of versions of the same phenomena", Stengers and Despret seek to "maximize articulations" (Latour 2004, p. 221)—a model for research that makes room for anomalies, multiple versions, diverse expressions, and individual variety. As Latour writes, Stengers and Despret propose a new definition of scientific practice founded on articulated propositions, thus emphasizing the way science constructs knowledge *with* the world and takes a multiplicity of voices into account: "'scientific' means rendering talkative what was until then mute" (Latour 2004, p. 217).

For Despret and Stengers, when research questions themselves come under scrutiny, they often do not hold up well—a conclusion clearly revealed in the title of Despret's book, *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?*. When working with

animals, asking the right questions, for Despret, requires sensitivity to the responses of the animals and a willingness to allow specific encounters to dictate the next question. In this way, Despret values experimental practices that are relational, envisioning animals as participants in research, and as subjectivities with interests and valuable input. Clearly, such practices break with conventional scientific methods of studying animal behavior, and, for that reason, Despret's work not only examines fascinating and surprising anecdotes of interspecies relations, but also analyzes more traditional practices—whether in laboratories, on farms, or in the field—in order to demonstrate how widely accepted methods fail to ask “the right questions”. Latour writes in his foreword to Despret's book that most scientists who work with animals try “to mimic, as exactly as possible, what their fellow scientists in neighboring fields have done with physical objects and chemical reactions” (Latour 2016, p. viii). As noted above, such methods tend to subtract and eliminate, only accepting a claim if it “decreases the number of alternatives and limits the number of voices claiming to participate in the conversation” (Latour 2016, p. ix). Despret studies such approaches and makes a strong case for what they miss, often placing them alongside more experimental practices that manage to add to what we know by multiplying voices, accepting different versions, and allowing for diversity and complexity. Despret shows how experimental practices reject the role of the researcher as an outside observer-subject studying a distanced mute animal-object—an issue I will discuss later—and they also value anecdotes and anomalies. An anomaly no longer represents a sort of crisis that might overturn an entire paradigm if it is not resolved within the current paradigm; rather, the anomaly points to new possibilities and differences that enrich our knowledge practices. Latour notes that both Despret and Stengers have little patience for the kinds of generalization that work to “eliminate alternate versions” in order to “sum up in the most economic ways widely dispersed phenomena in one single theory” (Latour 2004, p. 220). Instead, Latour writes, generalizations allow us to make connections between “widely dispersed phenomena”, not in order to reduce, but in order to become sensitive to diversity and differences within a network of beings and behaviors (Latour 2004, p. 220). As Brett Buchanan explains, Despret's approach rejects reductive practices of generalization, favoring multiplicity over universality: “one discovers a plurality of singular animals and meanings that reawakens our understanding of animal lives” (Buchanan 2015, p. 18).

In “H for Hierarchies”, Despret discusses primatologist Thelma Rowell's observations of a troop of baboons in the Ishasha forest in Uganda, demonstrating the way that the sciences have typically dealt with anomalous research findings. As Despret explains, Rowell's field research led her to challenge prevailing theories of dominance and hierarchy among baboons. Rowell observed that the baboons of the Ishasha forest did not practice any form of hierarchy, not even between males and females. In addition, they maintained a generally peaceful atmosphere of cooperation, contrasting the common displays of aggression among competing males in other troops (Despret 2016, p. 54). Unsurprisingly, Rowell's colleagues sought to find an explanation for the curious behavior that would allow them to maintain the well-established theory of hierarchy as a universal mode of social organization among baboons, rather than reconsider the theory itself. The anomaly needed to be incorporated within the existing model, which, in this particular case, was accomplished by distinguishing the “exceptional ecological conditions” of the Ishasha forest from the more common savanna habitat where baboons have evolved to create hierarchies. Despret writes:

The model had also, at this point, become so inevitable that it determined, in every field, the first point of inquiry. Every inquiry had to begin with the discovery of a hierarchy and the establishment of each individual's rank. And if such a hierarchy didn't seem to appear, the researchers would then invoke a convenient concept to fill the factual hole: that of a “latent dominance”. (Despret 2016, p. 55)

Despret does not discount the role of ecological conditions in baboon behavior, nor does she deny the “tests of aggression” commonly observed among baboon troops, often to establish a certain pecking order; she does, however, reject the imposition of a theory that

attempts to eliminate variety in favor of upholding a previously established generalization. Not only does the incorporation of difference into “what is known to be true” prevent the investigation of particular anomalies as meaningful in themselves, but it also dictates observational field work in advance. Despret, for her part, clearly sides with Rowell, and with other researchers and laypeople who refuse to conform to pre-established models in order to uphold universals. Incorporating anomalies into a static set of ideas becomes a means of subtracting voices and variety, rather than of composing a more complex fabric that allows for difference, and it also puts at risk reductive assumptions and knowledge practices.

It should come as no surprise that Despret’s writing takes an interest in the sorts of encounters and anecdotes that have little value to those who adhere to a more conventional ethological practice, where researchers attempt to identify “fixed action patterns” and maintain distance from their research subjects.⁴ Despret’s work reflects a radical rethinking of what it means to study animals, challenging some of the most basic assumptions of conventional scientific methodologies. She focuses on experimental practices that engage with and respond to the animals themselves, not in order to arrive at general truths, but in order to explore the capabilities of animals within specific sets of circumstances that reflect their own interests and participation. Anecdotes and anecdotal evidence have long inspired the scorn of traditional scientists—not only because individual stories do not serve the purposes of generalization and pattern identification, but also because they usually arise in settings that, according to conventional thinking, lack proper control and regulation. Strangely, as Despret explains, observations made in the field are often considered anecdotal and, thus, unreliable, until they ascend in status through laboratory research (Despret 2016, pp. 106, 125). For an anecdote to gain “significance”, one requires the setting and procedures of the laboratory, where a series of experimental tests might affirm an anecdote as something that is not merely anecdotal—something that has “acquired the status of a legitimate research subject” (Despret 2016, p. 125). Latour identifies the role of the laboratory in elevating observation as paradoxical: “only by creating the highly *artificial* conditions of laboratory experimentation will you be able to detect what animals are really up to when freed from any *artificial* imposition of human values and beliefs onto them” (Latour 2016, p. viii).⁵ Latour argues that the insistence upon the laboratory setting as the place where “real science” happens serves to discount all other accounts of animal behavior—in the field, on farms, in our lives—as unscientific and illegitimate when it comes to producing knowledge about animals. This sort of “subtractive empiricism”, to use the terminology of Latour, seeks to eliminate voices and stories in the name of “good science” (Latour 2016, p. ix). Despret’s work—also in the name of “good science”, though envisioned differently—restores those voices and stories, seeing them as valuable contributors to a more complex conversation.

Field researchers in Despret’s work often face the skepticism of their colleagues, and their work is dismissed as anecdotal, anthropomorphic, or both. Eileen Crist discusses the way that most contemporary ethological practices in the field work to distinguish themselves from observational practices—specifically those of Charles Darwin—that value anecdotal evidence. Darwin, Crist asserts, saw anecdotes as supporting a specific kind of knowledge that emphasizes variability within species and that also accounts for “certain types of phenomena that are too complex to present in a generalized format” (Crist 1999, p. 41). Contrasting that perspective, Konrad Lorenz dismissed the significance of variability, seeing rare or unexpected behavior as “incidental modularity around a fixed type or essence” (Crist 1999, p. 42). For that reason, anecdotal evidence is a sort of oxymoron, since anecdotal observations, from a Lorenzian point of view, offer no evidence of patterns of behavior, which constitute the essential characteristics of a species. Despret does not agree and instead demonstrates, often through anecdote, how “the history of animal sciences and the way that rivalries between ‘modes of knowing’ succeeded in disqualifying a considerable part of the resources of what would have constituted its corpus” (Despret 2016, p. 156). In other words, the devaluation of anecdotal observations has impoverished our knowledge practices and our attempts to understand animals, largely because of the

tendency to dismiss anything that falls outside of generalizable patterns of behavior and established models. For Despret, while an anecdote might not speak to a general truth about a species, it can add to what we know by including more voices and stories—stories that speak to the capabilities of animals, and to what is possible within a specific milieu and set of relations.

As Robert W. Mitchell, Nicholas S. Thompson, and H. Lyn Miles explain in “Taking Anthropomorphism and Anecdotes Seriously”, anecdotes and anthropomorphism are typically understood as going hand-in-hand, as anecdotes often affirm our sense of identification with other animals. They continue, “In the context of comparative psychology, the term ‘anecdote’ usually refers to a description of a unique (or infrequent) behavior in a narrative, although at times it also refers to any narrative description of behavior” (Mitchell et al. 1997, p. 7). In that way, as noted above, anecdotal accounts often demand new theories and stories rather than well-worn explanations based on previously held assumptions. Equally as important, by insisting upon variety, anecdotes necessarily push against conventions of portraying animals as predictable nonhumans that lack agency. In “The Phenomenology of Animal Life”, Dominique Lestel, Jeffrey Bussolini, and Matthew Chrulw defend the evidentiary value of anecdotes and their capacity to speak to an animal’s individuality, seeing them as an important counter to mechanomorphism.⁶ They also tie anecdote more generally to “storying”, “as a mode of observation that is closely attentive to contexts of interaction, and to the ideas, priorities, and perceptions of different actors involved” (Lestel et al. 2014, p. 129).⁷ As Lestel et al. (2014) describe, storying attests to the co-constitution of place through the different perspectives and experiences of multiple entangled actors. Anecdotes speak to complexity, to the fact that each animal has its own story, in relation to, and always “becoming with”, the stories of others with whom it shares a milieu. From that perspective, an anecdotal approach captures not only the individuality of an animal’s story, but also suggests a broader web of narratives, constituted by the stories of other individual animals. In an interview, Despret insists on the foundational role of narrative in her thinking about animals: “The best drama is written by animals, I think, and I think that it was a good choice for ethologists 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, with a subject with their own experience” (Buchanan et al. 2015, pp. 165–66). Animals have stories based on their individual experiences in relation to others, and those of us who engage with and try to understand animals tell the story of those stories.

Despret’s most sustained discussion of anecdotal approaches within scientific study comes in the essay, “F for Fabricating Science”, where she turns to the work of Amotz Zahavi and Jonathan Wright—the subject of her early research and writing about differing approaches to field work on Arabian babblers. As noted earlier, while Despret takes interest in “the behavior of these amazing birds”, her writing draws particular attention to the researchers themselves, and to their contrasting approaches and assumptions, and the interpretations they make on the bases of their specific modes of observation (Despret 2016, p. 42). Zahavi belongs to that group of researchers that often provoke the ire of classical ethologists, specifically because he engages with the birds and develops interpretations of their behavior that are made possible by his interactions with them. Zahavi whistles to the sometimes-elusive babblers and then feeds them, offering a sort of invitation for them to hang around so that he can observe their behavior. Zahavi observes what he considers a performative display of generosity, as the birds offer gifts to one another in a way that signals their own status within the group. Wright, on the other hand, interprets the birds’ behavior from the perspective of sociobiology, asserting that the gift-givers and gift-receivers are most likely related and, therefore, will all benefit from acts that support the perpetuation of their genes. In terms of method, Wright opposes the approach of Zahavi, finding it unscientific, anecdotal, and anthropomorphic. Despret describes Wright’s perspective:

One cannot claim anything if there aren't any experiments, for this is the requirement of a truly objective science. One must show proof, and to provide, one must experiment. According to him, Zahavi's interpretive method clearly belongs to an anthropomorphic and anecdotal practice—where it is understood that an anecdote is generally defined, in this area as an uncontrolled observation; that is to say, it is not accompanied by the “right” interpretive key. And it is precisely to avoid this risk that Wright proposed various experiments to the babblers that are ultimately intended to compel them to show that they are indeed a particular instance of sociobiological theory. (Despret 2016, p. 43)

For Wright, Zahavi makes anthropomorphic interpretive leaps, attempting to imagine the perspective of the birds, rather than conducting controlled experiments that put a particular theory to the test—presumably in a way that mimics a laboratory setting while in the field (see also Despret 2008).⁸ Yet, Despret's description highlights the way that Wright's own method involves “compelling” the babblers to confirm the pre-established theory he has of their behavior, and therefore implies that his approach represents an act of imposition, as much, or more, than Zahavi's. While Wright's methods might be “controlled”, they also dictate the meaning of the birds' behavior in advance, allowing no room for surprise, for unexpected or anomalous behavior, or for the sort of rare occurrence that might arise in a more anecdotal approach.

Despret explains that the contrasting approaches of Zahavi and Wright reveal a bifurcation in animal knowledge practices, with scientists on one side and amateurs on the other. Though Zahavi has a background in zoology, Despret argues that his practices reflect his work in conservation and align more with naturalists and other amateurs, “whose practices are close to ethology and who know animals very well but who don't have any real theory” (Despret 2016, p. 40). Despret includes trainers, breeders, and caregivers in the category of amateurs, and describes how Lorenz attempted to distinguish the science of ethology from the knowledge practices of amateurs, making the study of animals more “scientific”, and less anecdotal and anthropomorphic. In the case of Zahavi and the Arabian babblers, Wright took issue with Zahavi's methodology and, Despret suggests, seems to find it amateurish—largely because Zahavi fails to follow the proper scientific protocol for imbedding in the field as an invisible guest. Of course, this rejection of protocol is precisely what attracts Despret to Zahavi's knowledge practices. Despret also discusses the work of Barbara Smuts and Shirley Strum, two primatologists who appear in Donna Haraway's *When Species Meet*, specifically because both women flout the observational conventions of field work, rejecting the premise that one can be perceived as neutral and indifferent by a troop of baboons. Smuts and Strum both go into their field work with the intention of abiding by their training, yet their respective experiences prompt them to stop pretending, in a sense. Despret writes, “The only creature who believed in the so-called scientific neutrality of being invisible was Smuts herself, for ignoring the social cues of the baboons was anything but neutral” (Despret 2016, p. 16). In addition to realizing the impossibility of remaining neutral and indifferent, Smuts recognizes that her attempts to take on behaviors she learns from observing the baboons help her to learn what the baboons find acceptable and unacceptable, and to garner their respect as a “trusted subject” (Despret 2016, p. 17). In other words, she learns more with the baboons than when she hid in the trees; and that learning grows out of the willingness to be in relation, to acknowledge another, and to be acknowledged. This sort of practice multiplies voices by taking both the baboons and their relation to the researcher seriously, despite the scientific community's tendency to dismiss such methods, discounting and subtracting the insights they might contribute to a more complex conversation about the capacities and relational dynamics of baboons.

Despret also chooses to focus on amateurs themselves, considering practices that take place outside of a scientific setting. She contends, “scientists have obstinately disqualified the knowledge of their rivals in matters of animal expertise, namely those of amateurs, breeders, and trainers, and their anecdotes and anthropomorphism” (Despret 2016, p. 34). Lay amateurs, with their anecdotes about animals that demonstrate capabilities beyond

those proposed by conventional ethological models, have something to contribute to the knowledge practices that take place in field research and in the laboratory. Despret posits that taking amateur practices seriously and adding their perspectives to our understanding of animal lives can invigorate scientific practices: “In place of routine and repetitive protocols, scientists could instead substitute inventive tests through which the animals could *show what they are capable of* when we take the trouble of giving them propositions that are likely to interest them” (Despret 2016, p. 35). Amateurs typically work with and alongside animals, forging relationships through practices of care and exploring the capabilities of animals in specific supportive environments. As does Despret, Haraway and Vicki Hearne emphasize the significance of relational knowledge practices among people who work closely with animals, including breeders and trainers. Hearne—a dog and horse trainer, and an academic—writes that she always felt a kind of dissonance between the language and conceptual frameworks in the world of training, and those she encountered in academia. In particular, she came to understand that any suggestion of an animal’s cognitive capacities, though very common among trainers, was immediately understood as anthropomorphic and unscientific in the world of academia. As Datson and Mitman explain in *Thinking With Animals*, “the default assumption that animals thought and felt like humans did seemed lazy, a failure of scientific ingenuity to formulate and test alternate hypotheses” (Datson and Mitman 2005, p. 3)—especially because most anthropomorphic assumptions cannot be tested in a laboratory. Yet, Hearne, in her experiences training animals, witnessed the ways that animals responded when they were treated as collaborators, as other subjectivities, with whom a trainer needed to learn to communicate: “That was the language I wanted to understand because it seemed to me after a while that it was part of what enabled the good trainers to do so much more than the academic psychologists could in the way of eliciting interesting behavior from animals” (Hearne 1986, p. 6). Whether the language used by trainers is anthropomorphic does not necessarily matter here; Hearne’s description emphasizes a particular way of talking, and, even more importantly, a particular way of listening. This resonates with Marc Bekoff’s notion of “biocentric anthropomorphism”—a type of anthropomorphism that does not discount the perspective of the animal, but, rather, strives to allow “humans [to] make other animals’ worlds accessible to themselves” (Bekoff 2000, p. 867).

Haraway also takes interest in the perspectives and methods of lay amateurs in *When Species Meet*, as she discusses her own experiences training for agility competitions with her dog, Cayenne, and simultaneously engages with philosophical and scientific questions surrounding our approaches to animal knowledge. Haraway, as noted above, looks to scientists such as Smuts, Strum, and Rowell as models for a different and more relational and experimental approach to the study of animals, and she also describes the work of amateurs, such as Australian Shepherd breeder, C. A. Sharp, who “practices a love that seeks knowledge, nurtures nondogmatic curiosity, and takes action for the well-being of dogs and people” (Haraway 2008, p. 107). Haraway’s description of Sharp emphasizes the breeder’s investment, the sense that she has something at stake, rather than remaining aloof, indifferent, and detached. That investment—driven by curiosity, responsiveness, respect, and care—allows for the mutual composition of a relation, a “becoming together”, in the words of Haraway. While the worlds of training and breeding do not necessarily align with more formal settings of scientific study, it is clear that Haraway, like Despret, feels that the practices of lay amateurs provide insights that could improve the methodologies of scientists in, for example, a laboratory. Amateurs and animals who work closely together become attuned to another, which results in “knowing more at the end of the day” (Haraway 2008, p. 36).

Despret discusses amateur practices in several of the essays that make up *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?*, including anecdotes from her work with Jocelyn Porcher, when the two conducted a survey in which they posed a series of questions to breeders of domestic animals ((Despret 2016, pp. 33–34), and see, for example, (Williams et al. 2020)). As Erica Fudge writes in her discussion of Despret’s work with Porcher, we might

sometimes find ourselves “giggling” or “scoffing” at the anecdotes shared by breeders and animal caretakers, but, in the end, “We are surprised into self-awareness through [Despret’s] thinking, and by this means she reinforces just how powerful the authoritative position is” (Fudge 2017, p. 168). Our willingness to dismiss amateur perspectives as anecdotal and anthropomorphic reveals our buy-in when it comes to narratives of scientific authority, despite the valuable insights that amateurs’ anecdotes might provide. In addition, as Anderson points out in her review of Despret’s book, the significance of many anecdotes told by people who work closely with animals has much less to do with questions of animal (or human) intentionality than with what Despret calls “*agencements*”, or, as Anderson puts it, “relational agencies that are inseparably interwoven with those of their companions” (Anderson 2016, p. 2). In other words, a breeder’s anecdote about a “posing bull” might indeed tell us something about the bull, but it more specifically reveals how the bull’s behavior takes shape in a relational network with other actors, including breeders, and how it responds to an environment that supports specific behaviors. Again, Despret’s notion of an “interspecific ethos” asks us to consider these *agencements*, taking into account the numerous voices that constitute specific dynamic situations made up of a multiplicity of actors.

Despret makes her most sustained case for the value of amateur knowledge practices in the penultimate essay, “Y for Youtube”. As has likely become clear, anomalies, anecdotes, and amateurism often overlap with one another in Despret’s work, largely because all three challenge the conventional methodologies of scientific practice, and, for Despret, model how we might expand our knowledge practices, making them more responsive and interesting to the animals with whom we work and share our lives. All of us are aware of the kinds of videos that can pop up on Youtube: a monkey sharing a bunch of grapes with a goat; a dog darting through traffic in order to rescue a kitten that somehow found itself in the middle of a freeway; a parrot singing Christmas carols as its human companion provides the accompaniment on the piano. Though some of these videos border on the ridiculous, they nevertheless strike us as extraordinary, demonstrating, as Despret writes, unexpected feats that result from “the common work between a human and an animal, from the mutual learning that has developed, from a productive complicity, from a game that has been patiently introduced—a dog and his owner on top of a skateboard, a cat who learns how to surprise his owner who is himself hiding; we learn what *we* are capable of with them” (Despret 2016, p. 200). The interest lies in the way such videos document the capacities of animals and humans, in specific circumstances, particularly when in relation with one another. While one cannot make an overarching statement about the diverse collection of animal videos that appear on Youtube—videos that vary greatly in terms of any insight they might offer, and in terms of the legitimacy and ethics of different relational practices—Despret seems to see Youtube as a sort of repository of anecdotal knowledge that demands to be taken seriously. Most specifically, we see countless examples of the ways that human and nonhuman animals “become with” one another, and how the relation itself can open new possibilities.

Moreover, for Despret, Youtube videos featuring surprising animal behavior represent the latest iteration of a trend that has persisted for the last several decades, most notably in the form of nature documentaries and television shows that draw attention to the life and plight of different species and individuals. She writes, “Animals, now the stars of films and TV series, are bestowed with ‘personalities’ and emotions; they become ‘characters’ through whom everyone can share in their experiences” (Despret 2016, p. 197). While this sort of programming generally does not adhere to the scientific conventions of studying animals—largely because of its tendency towards anthropomorphism and anecdotes, though also because it sometimes features humans interacting with and caring for animals—Despret explains that its rising popularity from the 1960s forward ultimately impacted the trajectory of scientific knowledge practices; it inspired approaches that “individualize the animals and that bestow upon them a real status of actors in adventures and experiments” (Despret 2016, p. 198). In other words, Despret contends that documentary footage and videos of animals do not represent a parallel set of practices, separate from legitimate science; instead,

they put pressure on and influence scientific practices, demonstrating how unconventional approaches and anecdotes that recognize the role of animals as subjects and actors in their own stories can produce meaningful results. Mitman, in his study of wildlife filmmaking, *Reel Nature*, seems to agree that documentaries about animals often constitute a sort of hybrid practice, where artistic and scientific methodologies work with and transform one another. He notes that nature films “have blended scientific research and vernacular knowledge, education and entertainment, authenticity and artifice” (Mitman 2009, p. 3). As Despret points out, by the time we get to the proliferation of animal content on Youtube, it often becomes difficult to disentangle scientific from amateur practices, since, for example, amateur videos often provoke debates in the comment section about scientific theories of conditioning and intelligence. In addition, she observes, we can find scientific studies that investigate the phenomena we sometimes see individualized in anecdotal videos on the Internet, whether they involve drunk monkeys or painting elephants.

Despret’s analysis of Youtube videos and documentaries about animals provides a useful lens for thinking about contemporary knowledge practices with animals, particularly those that are filmed and widely shared. The 2020 documentary, (Ehrlich and Reed 2020) follows documentary filmmaker and naturalist, Craig Foster, as he free dives every day for a year off the coast of South Africa in order to visit and take footage of an octopus. The responses to the film have varied, though most of the criticisms have little to do with its artistic merits or storytelling (see, for example, Richter et al. (2016))—after all, it won the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature in 2021. Instead, Foster’s engagement with the octopus over the course of the year that he filmed has sparked some debate over methodology and claims of knowledge in the study of animals. The topics up for debate include how we relate to and engage with wild animals; what we think we know or understand based on our observations and interactions; and whether a human can understand anything about an octopus, or vice versa. Some critics find Foster’s approach anthropomorphic and scientifically illegitimate, as he openly discusses how his own life experiences and state of mind affect the way he sees his relationship with the octopus. Foster clearly makes an emotional connection with the octopus and draws comparisons between her life and his own. He reflects what Cynthia Chris identifies as the tradition in wildlife filmmaking where we look to nonhuman animals, not only in order to learn about them, but also as a means of better understanding ourselves (Chris 2006, p. x). Similar to Zahavi, Smuts, and Strum, Foster does not pretend neutrality or distance as a detached observer—though he does initially try to drop a camera outside the octopus’s den to capture footage without disturbing the octopus by his own presence. In response, the octopus emerges from the den to explore the shape and texture of the new object, with her suckers toppling it over. From this point forward, we know that Foster’s engagement with the octopus will not maintain the illusion of what Mitman calls, “the spectacle of wildlife untainted by human intervention and will” (Mitman 2009, p. 4). Instead, Foster embraces the demand for a more experimental approach, coming out from behind the camera and making himself available to the gaze and curiosity of the octopus.

While Foster does not mention it, octopuses have an established record of thwarting laboratory experiments, demonstrating unexpected capacities that expose the flaws and assumptions of the experiments’ designs (see, for example, (Richter et al. 2016)). Or, in Despret’s language, it signifies the failure to ask the right questions. Of course, Foster is not conducting a laboratory experiment, nor is he collecting field observations that will support or challenge a previously established theory of octopus behavior. Foster’s experiment—one that borrows from scientific knowledge practices while also betraying them—focuses on a particular octopus, in a particular milieu, in relation with a particular human. Foster recognizes his own position as an amateur, relying on external research and his ethologist friends to provide a general knowledge base about octopus behavior, while simultaneously allowing his encounters with the octopus to dictate the way the experiment unfolds, making space for surprise. That sense of surprise propels the film forward, both for the film’s viewers and for Foster himself, who consistently communicates

his astonishment at the capacities of the octopus, and, perhaps more importantly, at her interest in engaging with him. Much like Smuts and the baboon troop she observes, Foster's establishment of trust, and his willingness to be seen, creates a space where he and the octopus can learn together, can get to know one another, can explore the possibilities offered by a less controlled, less predetermined setting. Moreover, similar to the trainers and breeders who interest Haraway, Hearne, and Despret, Foster's approach begins with care and respect, a recognition of the octopus as a subjectivity with her own interests, and as a participant in a collaborative relationship. While one could argue that Foster imposes himself, entering the octopus's habitat and appropriating her individual subjectivity for his own purposes, he clearly does not drive the relation from a position of power or authority. Instead, he makes himself available, extending an invitation to the octopus and waiting for her consent—which she might or might not give. Foster's experience with the octopus is necessarily anecdotal, but this does not detract from the film's meaningfulness, nor from its potential to contribute to the development of knowledge about the capacities of an octopus within a specific supportive environment. Instead, the anecdote serves as a testament to the possibilities of relational becoming, in this case, between an octopus and a man.

Returning to Despret, it seems that, for her, the most compelling aspect of animal documentaries, such as Ehrlich and Reed (2020) and Youtube videos, is that they suggest "the creation of a new interspecific *ethos*, of new relational modalities, that at the same time construct knowledge" (Despret 2016, p. 196). She calls this a "new ethological practice", appropriating and redefining the term "ethology" in a way that emphasizes the sharing of space by different beings who get to know one another as they come into relation (Despret 2016, p. 196). That kind of ethology has little to do with the distant regard of a scientist who creates experiments to test, study, and identify patterns of behavior in another species, without demonstrating much, if any, curiosity about the animals themselves, and the sorts of questions that might interest them. As Haraway writes in her discussion of Despret's practices of animal knowledge, "Despret's sort of politeness does the energetic work of holding open the possibility that surprises are in store, that something *interesting* is about to happen, but only if one cultivates the virtue of letting those one visits intra-actively shape what occurs" (Haraway 2016, p. 127). While Despret does not contend that all scientists fall into what she might define as strict, conventional, and incurious ethological practices, she does seem to indict the conservatism of an establishment that appears more interested in upholding its most prized theories and practices than in putting itself at risk and experimenting with new methodologies. The proliferation of animal videos demonstrates the promise of new approaches and the contribution they can make to animal knowledge—regardless, or perhaps because, of the absence of scientific conventions and rigor. The videos provide insight into companion relations—provided we take seriously the value of anomalies, anecdotes, and amateurs—and they push us to revitalize our knowledge practices, whether in conventional scientific contexts, sites of animal training or breeding, or our everyday lives.

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Notes

- ¹ Despret consistently returns to her field work with Zahavi in her writing. I will discuss the essay, "F for Fabricating Science", in What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions? later in this paper. Her more recent work, The Dance of the Arabian Babblers, is dedicated to questions raised in the field with Zahavi and other ethologists who were studying the babblers.
- ² I am making reference, along with Latour, to Karl Popper's famous notion of "falsifiability", which defines a scientific claim as one that can be proven wrong or false. See Oreskes (2019), pp. 26–28.
- ³ Latour explains that a proposition, unlike a statement, takes a position, while claiming no "definitive authority", and "it may accept negotiating itself into a com-position without losing its solidarity" (Latour 2004, p. 211). A well-articulated proposition co-exists with other propositions, contrasting the binary process whereby a statement concerning matters of fact is determined true or false.

- 4 Eileen Crist describes the “classical ethological concept of innate behaviors as ‘fixed action patterns’”, citing Konrad Lorenz and Nikolaas Tinbergen, among others (Crist 1999, p. 42).
- 5 An additional irony emerges in “N for Necessity”, where Despret describes how scientists studying whether rats are infanticidal created specific conditions in order to elicit the behavior. In other words, in an effort to elevate an “unscientific” anecdote to scientific legitimacy, the researchers constructed a situation that manifested the behavior they were trying to study (Despret 2016, pp. 105–15).
- 6 Lestel borrows this term from Crist, who identifies the tendency in ethological writing to portray animals as machines, behaving and reacting in predictable ways (Crist 1999, p. 89).
- 7 Lestel cites several scholars here who write about the concept of “storying”, including van Dooren and Rose (2012).
- 8 Classical ethological practices, following the work of Jakob von Uexküll and his Umwelt theory, reject the possibility of grasping another animal’s perspective, given the fact that different species, with different sensory organs, will have widely varying experiences of the world. Despret, though intrigued by Umwelt theory, dedicates an essay in her book to discussing the shortcomings of scientific practices that developed out of Uexküll’s work—namely that the acknowledgement of an animal’s strangeness has often limited, rather than opened, our knowledge practices and interpretations of behavior. See “U for Umwelt” (Despret 2016, pp. 161–67).

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