COMMENTARY

Animals Give Us a Body We Didn't Have

An Interview with Vinciane Despret

VINCIANE DESPRET
University of Liège, Belgium

IWONA JANICKA
Center for Environmental and Technology Ethics—Prague;
Institute of Philosophy, Czech Academy of Sciences, Czech Republic

STEPHEN MUECKE
Nulungu Research Institute, Notre Dame University, Australia

The following piece is a conversation on how the dead, animals, and people animate each other. We interviewed Vinciane Despret in French, via Zoom, on May 2, 2024; Vinciane was in Brussels, Iwona was in Prague, and Stephen was in Sydney. Despret is not only a key figure in ethology and animal studies because of her empirical studies, her work also has strong philosophical implications. We explore how her work is not just contributing to these fields but changing what she calls our "cognitive routines," which means deploying sensitive practices of defamiliarizing those routines, listening to what those who "cannot speak" have to say, in particular, in this interview, animals and the dead. Going beyond human language, we discover ways of "feeling the world," or rather the worlds, of particular beings. By turning to "stories of anticipation," Despret offers an alternative take on the question of species extinction.

Iwona Janicka: There are three main themes in your work: emotions, animals, and the dead, and you treat them separately. Have you been tempted to link them up and examine, for example, the death of animals, whether it's an individual tragedy felt by someone who loses a companion animal, or a tragedy on a larger scale, such as the extinction of species or the industrial slaughter of animals?

Environmental Humanities 17:3 (November 2025)
DOI 10.1215/22011919-11942118

Vinciane Despret: With regard to the relationship between the dead and animals, my husband once said something by way of a joke to me, which was very mean, but very accurate. He said, "It's a bit easy, the things you've chosen to study, dead people and animals. You've chosen subjects who can't tell you that you're really talking nonsense. They can't talk back, so you avoid judgment." I thought that was a bit mean, but there's something to it in that it points to the risk in the practice of talking about either the dead or animals, and that is that we can always be suspected—and we always have to bear this in mind—of being ventriloquists, in other words, of speaking in the place of others, all the more so since these others can't challenge what we're saying. My husband gave the negative, critical version.

But let's consider the positive version of this story. Deleuze would respond like this: "I speak for those who cannot." That could be quite an operation. Yet it's still not quite true, because it's not so much the dead that have interested me, it's the way in which the living continue to carry their existences. And the same is true of the animals: it wasn't so much the animals themselves that I wanted to work with, it was with the way in which ethologists, scientists, breeders, or possibly their animal keepers, carry their lives, how they transform them. There are always three of us who are dealing with the dead, there are always the living who carry their existences, and with animals, there are those who talk about them.

During this initial investigation into the human dead, I learned that we put in place a host of mechanisms [*dispositifs*] to help us get through the ordeal, in particular mechanisms that enable us to activate the presence of the dead. We have rituals for summoning the dead. However, these summoning rituals have coanimation effects, that is, they are rituals that, in a way, give the dead the opportunity to be a little more active, give him or her the chance to have a tiny margin, admittedly never very large, of autonomy. When you summon a dead person, in a way, you're already giving them the opportunity to say yes or no, by which I mean to respond to your request or not (this is what I heard in the stories shared by the people I met). And all of this is made possible because the conversation can, in one way or another, be prolonged—often in dreams, or by talking to the deceased, thinking about them, feeling their presence in their objects.[1]

Now, to come to the second part of your question, the one I know interests you, the question of the link between the death of the pet, or companion species, and the question of extinctions. Why should we be interested even if we don't have a pet in our lives? What could we learn from this? For me, it all started with a very simple question, which is to understand why this loss is so difficult. Not only is it very painful, it's also a very difficult ordeal [*épreuve*], and people say so themselves. First, because this grief is not recognized, not really experienced as legitimate, it's a grief that is sometimes a little shameful. When people talk about the death of their pet, they very often add, after talking about their grief, their sorrow, or their loss, "Yes, I know, after all, it was only a dog."

1. Despret, *Our Grateful Dead.*

You can feel the social disapproval, which is even internalized by the bereaved themselves. But when I compare this with what I learned during my survey of people who had lost a close human friend, I see that there are major differences in the way they deal with this ordeal.

Stephen Muecke: So what would be your hypothesis about what is happening when people lose their companion animals?

Despret: The hypothesis is as follows. I notice that when people talk to me about the death of their companion animal, they talk a bit about the grief, they talk a bit about the loss, but very often they tell me that during the days that followed, and sometimes weeks and even longer, they continued to open the gate to let him out, even though he was no longer there. They might also keep hearing the sound of footsteps, on the floor of the room above. One gentleman told me that after his dog died ten years ago, he still hasn't vacuumed his car because he wants to keep the hairs on the carpet. There's a lady who tells me that after her cat died, she's got cold knees. I realized that this was because the cat was always on her lap while she was working at her desk. Other people tell me that after the death they continue to search with their hand for the presence of the animal at their side or that they caress its photo with their fingertips. A friend of mine tells me that her knees have been aching ever since her dog died—in fact, she doesn't go for walks any more now her dog is gone.

I realized that what all these stories are about, what is so hard for people about losing a companion animal, is that we lose a part of our bodies. It's our own bodies that are affected, and that's what all these gestures convey: opening a gate, hearing sounds, feeling cold, continuing to do things we used to do, groping for a presence next to us, still wanting to stroke them. In our tradition, when we lose a human being, we often continue to keep in touch mentally, we continue to talk, to look at photos, to carry on some form of conversation. It's true that we do things, but the conversation can continue because we were in the domain of language. We can continue to feel presences, but we know that if this presence remains, then the imagination has to be part of it. I'm just making an observation here: when we lose a companion animal—I'm talking about dogs and cats—what we lose is a relationship between our body and that animal, and we can't prolong that relationship, so we prolong it in a vacuum. It's like an amputation.

Note that one equestrian asked me why I didn't mention horses, and it's true that I hadn't thought about it. He told me that when he lost his horse, he lost his legs. Some time later he added that, in fact, every time he gets off his horse, he loses his legs. The metaphor of amputation would be an apt description of the tragedy of mourning for the animals with whom we share the intimacy of our bodies. At the same time, it makes clear what is at work in these relationships: what these animals bring to us—I'm talking about our own culture, I'm not making a generalization—is something to do with our bodies. Animals give us a body we didn't have. That's why loss is so hard, because we lose part of a body. Perhaps, with this research, something will open up for me.

Janicka: How could we relate this to thinking about the question of extinction?

Despret: I think the simplest answer I can give you is in the novella *Autobiographie d'un poulpe* [*Autobiography of an Octopus*], because there I tried to explore the question of the body and symbiosis. Before I get to that, I should point out that the question of extinctions has been masterfully framed by Thom van Dooren. I think van Dooren is the one who has posed this question best and freed us, in a way, from certain stereotypes, certain routines. And why is that? Because he says that it's not the question of death or of the last or of the species that counts, it's the question of what has been translated into French as *l'effilochage des mondes*, the dissolution, the disappearance of worlds.[2] Van Dooren raises the issue magnificently because to think of the last of the American cranes, or the last passenger pigeon, and so on, is still to have a patrimonial conception of nature. It's a bit like the petit bourgeois losing their possessions.

As long as we frame the question of extinction in terms of a lost inheritance or property [*patrimoine*], we will remain Cartesians; we will remain part of the heritage of the "masters and possessors of nature." Until we rid ourselves of the cognitive routines of this tradition, we will not be able to approach the question of other living beings with the minimum of wisdom that will be necessary. We need to get away from the question of property, the question of ownership, the question of accounting. Of course, we have to keep counting, because the numbers put us on the alert. We need statistics, because statistics can sometimes be mobilizing. There's no question of abandoning the warnings that numbers provide, and the lucidity they demand of us, but above all we must not just stop at that way of looking at things.

This means that we need other ways of thinking about our relationship with beings that are disappearing. We need to activate other types of imagination that figures and statistics cannot give us. We need other kinds of passions than sad or anguished ones.

Think, for example, of the way in which nineteenth-century psychologist Gustav Theodor Fechner saw the world. He thought of the world made up of all living things as having the capacity to feel itself [*sentant lui-même*]. The soul that gives us the experience of ourselves is in no way the exclusive property of humans. So plants "feel themselves," they smell their own perfumes in the same way that we hear ourselves singing as clearly as those who listen to our song. They feel their aliveness, they experience that they exist in a unique way. And plants, says Fechner, like all living beings, bring to the world their experience of being, their unique "enjoyment of being" [*jouissance d'être*]—I'm basing myself here on the work of Katrin Solhdju, who has given us a great interpretation of this.[3] In this sense, again according to Solhdju, the experience of the flower that Fechner proposes, this enjoyment of being alive, its way of feeling the world, no other being could have it quite like this, and it has it by being connected to this immense fabric in which

2. Van Dooren, *Flight Ways*; Van Dooren, *World in a Shell*.

3. Solhdju, "Le statut de l'humain"; Fechner, *Nanna*; Fechner, *Zend-Avesta*.

all beings "express reality as a whole." Now the idea of this world as feeling itself opens up the idea that each loss constitutes a shrinkage of the world, both in terms of the loss of unique ways of feeling and knowing and in terms of the loss of unique ways of relating to other beings. Perhaps then we might be able to think of the disappearance of an animal as the disappearance of a way a world lives itself.

I'm thinking of a passage from Éric Chevillard's 2007 novel, *Sans l'orang-outan*, in which he says that if the orangutan disappears (as he sets out in the novel), what we will lose is the sound of rain on leaves as the orangutan heard it, and the taste of fleshy fruit as only he could taste it.[4] I'm thinking that maybe we'll get rid of this property trope [*patrimonialisation*] by thinking that these are worlds that are disappearing. When the migratory passenger pigeon disappeared, a world disappeared. They had a way of looking at the clouds, a way of cleaving the air, a way of being many, a way of being too many, to put it briefly, a way of excess. These are sensations of the world, and I'm not saying they're the solution, but maybe taking this one step to the side can help us.

Muecke: In your 2021 book we mentioned, *Autobiographie d'un poulpe*, you launch into fictional narratives and speculative writing, what you call anticipation stories. Is this something you're increasingly interested in and plan to pursue?

Despret: When I talk about a narrative of anticipation, the word "anticipate," for me, has a fairly precise meaning: as when I say that "I anticipate your coming," I mean that I prepare for it, I prepare myself for this coming, I prepare to welcome it, not only I am available for when you arrive, but I put in place the conditions that will encourage you to come. A story of anticipation is a story that should have effects in the world.

Ursula Le Guin has a magnificent version of anticipation, made all the more interesting by the fact that she does so with great humor in the short story "The Author of Acacia Seeds."[5] She imagines that one day there will be linguists who will take animal writing seriously and will study animal (and even plant) poetry and lyrical and essay writing very seriously. This is a scientific world that appeals to me. So I wanted to extend this idea. Imagine, for example, roots as a way of writing, telling a story, or thinking about spider webs as a way of writing and archiving. Anticipation is the creation of a crucible, a landscape, a world in which certain things become all the more possible because we have anticipated them. As Isabelle Stengers reminds us, to fabulate [*fabuler*] means "to tell different stories, [it] is not to break with 'reality,' but to seek to render perceptible aspects of this reality usually considered accessory, to give them the power to make us think and feel."[6] So it's a question of fabulation, in an anticipatory mode, which means gambling on knowledge [*des savoirs*] by approximation, hesitant knowledge, knowledge full of nonknowledge, but which nevertheless claims to be knowledge that is worth pursuing.

4. Chevillard, *Sans l'orang-outan.*
5. Le Guin, "Author of Acacia Seeds."
6. Stengers, *Virgin Mary*, 123.

Then for me, in these fictions, I had to fight against the property-thinking that I mentioned in connection with extinctions—"we have lost more of our precious species!" In *Autobiographie d'un poulpe* I tried to experiment with the possibility of knowing octopuses by basing the story of this knowledge on the fact of living in a world of octopuses but in their absence. A community that once lived with octopuses in the manner of Haraway's compost communities (from which I also drew inspiration) will continue after the octopuses have disappeared to educate some of the community's children in such a way as to retain the gestures and relationships that make it possible to live in a world that I would call octopus-like [*poulpesque*]. The education of these children consists, for example, of teaching them to recognize lights simply by sensations of light on their skin, to taste-smell [*sentir*] the world, and of course to have an in-depth and sensual knowledge of different kinds of water, to speak a language in which the "I" is absent, a language that must express the fact that the world actively imprints sensations, which calls for a "syntax of animation" (the active voice being in this case devolved to nonhuman beings, which is the opposite of the way we generally speak. Rather than saying, "I'm waiting for the rain," they say "the rain is making us wait" [*la pluie se fait attendre*]; rather than "I have an idea" these children say, "an idea comes to me" or "an idea insists"). All this learning of new ways of being, for which I have imagined the pedagogy, are a variety of ways of making an octopus-like world exist in this world. These children continue to be educated in this way, just as their grandparents were when they really lived with octopuses, even though the octopuses have disappeared. And why is that? Because extinction in terms of an absence to weep over is not the only problem, is not the only way, is not the only way to get a fix [*une prise*] on it. What this community is experimenting with is the fact of affirming it existentially, that is to say, concretely in the way we live and educate certain children to continue to honor these beings who were the octopuses, by trying to keep a world filled with octopus sensations alive, it will be our way of honoring the dead and keeping them with us, in the bodies and in the languages of the children who are educated in this way. And if one day the octopuses return, if by some miracle there are a few left on Earth at least we will have anticipated their return. And if not, they will continue to exist in another way. It is important to fight against property-thinking and instead say: "Let's continue to make worlds exist as they made them exist, even if they're not totally octopus worlds, they're hybrid worlds between humans and octopuses." For me, this was what was important. It was this problem that I wanted to pursue and that I put into fiction, at the same time as a fiction of anticipation, that is, an anticipation of other types of scientific knowledge [*savoir*] and other modes of cohabitation.

Muecke: One last question. Readers of *Environmental Humanities* will certainly be interested in the important developments you have identified in your discipline and in ecological thinking more broadly. Which aspects deserve more attention? Which new thinkers (especially in the French-speaking world) do you find most stimulating to read?

Despret: There's Baptiste Morizot; I think he's doing some really important things. Émilie Hache, for whom I have a deep admiration, and I find that everything she does, all the texts she has given us, are fabulous, courageous, very imaginative, and even more so in her latest book, *De la génération*, in which she extends, in a feminist version, the work of David Graeber and David Wengrow as well as that of Bruno Latour by asking crucial questions about our history, in particular that of what made us go from generation to production. There's also Nastassja Martin, the anthropologist, who does some really fascinating things with a remarkable writing style that blends narrative, not fiction but storytelling, with an absolutely acute sense of narrative and politics, that sets out to describe, in minute detail, the ravages of capitalism and colonization. It's absolutely extraordinary. There is, of course, the work of Philippe Descola, with whom everyone is familiar. There's the science fiction writer Alain Damasio, who has just published a very fine little book in French on Silicon Valley. I'm afraid I might forget some people. I'm surrounded by so many people that it's always hard to choose; there are all these people who are extremely important to me.[7]

I would be remiss if I didn't mention Mathieu Duperrex, who is both a researcher and an artist, and also Camille de Toledo, who does work as both a writer and a lawyer. I have just finished reading a very fine text in which he recounts the fascinating experience of establishing a parliament for the River Loire. He recounts all the hesitations and difficulties involved in using legal tools to give the milieu the status of a person capable of demanding that the interests of those who make up the milieu be taken into account, of giving the milieu the possibility of actively resisting. Other groups have succeeded in doing this, notably in New Zealand, but in a very different legal context from France. For the moment, I have to say that things are happening, and on the French-speaking side, there are some extraordinarily promising things. There's also the exciting Charlotte Brives working on microbes. Then there are a host of really talented young thinkers who are extending the ideas of Donna Haraway, Val Plumwood, Anna Tsing, Deborah Bird Rose, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, Marisol de la Cadena, and many other ecofeminists and bringing them to the attention of the French-speaking public.[8] These are tragically dark times, but there are plenty of people writing and experimenting with exciting things.

VINCIANE DESPRET is a Belgian philosopher of science. A foundational thinker for the consolidating field of animal studies, her transdisciplinary approach is located across philosophy of science, epistemology, and behavioral science. Her research focuses on the relationship between observers and the observed in scientific research, following scientists doing fieldwork and observing how they actively relate to their objects of study. She investigates the political consequences of our theoretical choices. Some of her books have been translated into English, such as *The Dance of the Arabian Babbler* (2021), *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?* (2016), *Living as a Bird* (2021), and *Our Grateful Dead* (2021).

7. Hache, *De la génération*; Graeber and Wengrow, *Dawn of Everything*; Damasio, *Vallée de silicium*.
8. de Toledo, *Le fleuve qui voulait écrire;* Brives et al., *With Microbes*.

IWONA JANICKA is research team leader at the Centre for Environmental and Technology Ethics—Prague and senior researcher at the Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences. She works in twentieth- and twenty-first-century continental philosophy: environmental philosophy, political philosophy, and feminist philosophy, with a particular focus on the questions of social transformation. She is the author of *Theorizing Contemporary Anarchism. Solidarity, Mimesis and Radical Social Change* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

STEPHEN MUECKE is a senior research fellow at the Nulungu Research Institute Notre Dame University, Broome, emeritus professor of ethnography at the University of New South Wales, and a fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. In 2020 he and Paddy Roe published a Latourian ethnography: *The Children's Country: The Creation of a Goolarabooloo Future in North-West Australia* (Rowman and Littlefield).

Acknowledgments

This publication is an outcome of the project "Establishing the Center for Environmental and Technology Ethics—Prague (CETE-P)" which has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe Framework Programme under Grant Agreement no. 101086898 / HORIZON-WIDERA-2022-TALENTS-01.

References

Brives, Charlotte, et al., eds. *With Microbes*. Mattering Press, 2021.

Chevillard, Éric. *Sans l'orang-outan*. Minuit, 2007.

Damasio, Alain. *Vallée du silicium*. Seuil, 2024.

de Toledo, Camille, ed. *Le fleuve qui voulait écrire: Les auditions du parlement de Loire*. Les Liens qui Libèrent, 2021.

Despret, Vinciane. *Autobiographie d'un poulpe: Et autres récits d'anticipation*. Actes Sud, 2021.

Despret, Vinciane. *Our Grateful Dead: Stories of Those Left Behind*. Translated by Stephen Muecke. University of Minnesota Press, 2021.

Fechner, Gustav Theodor. *Nanna oder über das Seelenleben der Pflanze*. Voß, 1848.

Fechner, Gustav Theodor. *Zend-Avesta. Oder über die Dinge des Himmels und des Jenseits. Vom Standpunkt der Naturbetrachtung*. Voß, 1851.

Graeber, David, and David Wengrow. *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*. Penguin Books, 2022.

Hache, Émilie. *De la génération: Enquête sur sa disparition et son remplacement par la production*. La Découverte, 2024.

Le Guin, Ursula K. "The Author of Acacia Seeds." In *The Real and the Unreal: Selected Stories from Ursula K. Le Guin, Volume 2*. 1974. Small Beer Press, 2012.

Solhdju, Katrin. "*Le statut de l'humain chez* Gustav-Theodor Fechner," in *Le dictionnaire des anthropologues,* edited by Piette Albert and Lequin Mathilde. Presses universitaires de Nanterre, 2022.

Stengers, Isabelle. *The Virgin Mary and the Neutrino: Reality in Trouble*. Translated by A. Goffey. Duke University Press, 2023.

van Dooren, Thom. *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction*. Columbia University Press, 2014.

van Dooren, Thom. *A World in a Shell: Snail Stories for a Time of Extinctions*. MIT Press, 2022.