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## When Animals Talk Back

*Don Kulick*

**O**n a beautiful autumn day in 2019, I found myself in southern England, sitting in a straight-backed chair, in a light, high-ceilinged hall that looked as if it normally is used as an exhibition space. In my lap, I was holding an 8×10 glossy photograph of Buddy, an adorable brown cockapoo: a breed of dog that is a blend of cocker spaniel and poodle.

I was looking down at the photo, concentrating. Buddy's person (note: *not* his owner), Heather, an angular Scottish woman in her 50s, sat opposite me, clutching a similarly glossy photograph of my embarrassingly rotund ginger cat, Buncake. Like me, Heather was staring down at the photo, focusing intently. We were both seeking contact.

Heather and I were nearing the end of day one of the two-day workshop on animal communication that we and 30 other people paid more than £200 (about \$280) to attend. I was there as an anthropologist eager to explore the range of ways in which people, these days, are relating to animals. The other participants — overwhelmingly female, white, and middle-class (that workshop fee speaks for itself) — were there to understand their pets better. Or they wanted to contact former dogs, cats, rabbits, horses or gerbils who have “gone spirit,” to find out how the animals are getting on in the afterlife.

The workshop was led by Pea Horsley, one of the United Kingdom's most widely known animal communicators and the author of three books on the topic. She was instructing us how to communicate with animals through telepathy.

“Telepathy” comes from a Greek word that means “distant feeling” or “distant perception.” Most people associate the term with mind readers and fortune tellers. And, indeed, animal communicators like Pea used to be called “pet psychics.” Pea dislikes that label, though, as do most others who work professionally in this field. She objects to the hocus-pocus sound of the word “psychic.” And more than that, she takes exception to the word's clubby suggestion that the ability to connect with animals requires a special calling or an exceptional talent.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Everybody can communicate telepathically with animals, Pea began the day by assuring us. Children communicate freely and effortlessly with them, she explained. Indigent people, she said, do, too. But the demands of modern life have quashed virtually everyone else's ability to connect. We are raised to think that our links to the non-human world are merely imagined. They are fake, they are play, we are told. They are pretend.

But that view, Pea insisted, is wrong.

Animal communicators aren't “horse whisperers” or “dog whisperers,” Pea said, partly because telepathy means that one doesn't need to be in the presence of the animal with whom one is communicating. A photograph will do just fine; in fact, it is often better, because contact with an actual animal may be distracting or discouraging. And just as physi-

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Image 1. Pea Horsley and friend. Photo by Sieghilde Krenn; [animalthoughts.com](http://animalthoughts.com).

cal distance is no hindrance to successful communication, neither is spiritual or celestial distance. Animals who have “transitioned into non-physical form” are accessible, too.

But the real difference between an animal communicator and a horse or dog whisperer is that animal communicators don’t treat animals like “passive bystanders” and just read their body language to try to intuit what they might be thinking. Animal communicators go “deeper,” Pea explained. They have actual conversations with animals.

My fellow workshop participants and I had paid Pea to help us get the conversation started.

Pea; Buddy the cockapoo’s Scottish person, Heather; and everyone else sitting in that high-ceilinged hall studiously gazing down at photos of present or past pets are on the fringe of an unprecedented interest in knowing non-human animals. The past two decades have seen a seismic shift in the understanding of what animals are, what

they perceive and think and what they are capable of. Although biologists and ethologists like Jane Goodall, Barbara Smuts and Frans de Waal have made vital contributions to this shift, the ones who largely are responsible for the current tsunami of writing about animals are philosophers, humanities and social science scholars, equestrian trainers, behaviorist scholars who work in the field of “canine science,” people on the autism spectrum and therapists who work with them and animal communicators like Pea Horsley.<sup>1</sup>

All of these very different people have tapped into a surging fascination and engagement with animals, and in their different ways, they have eagerly stoked that engagement. Scholarly conferences on animals are proliferating; humanities scholars in universities around the world are creating programs and departments of animal, posthuman, transhuman or multispecies studies, and books about animals are flooding the market

with nearly the same intensity as Scandinavian crime novels.

The new *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* is a dog named Max, or Bella.<sup>2</sup>

### Why Animals Now?

What is behind this outpouring of interest in animals?

One factor is certainly the alarming realization that humans are killing them off. Between 1970 and 2014, the World Wildlife Fund reports, the global wildlife population shrank by 60 percent.<sup>3</sup> Books such as science writer Elizabeth Kolbert's Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Sixth Extinction* alert readers to the fact that "it is estimated that one-third of all reef-building corals, a third of all freshwater mollusks, a third of sharks and rays, a quarter of all mammals, a fifth of all reptiles, and a sixth of all birds are headed toward oblivion,"<sup>4</sup> in addition to amphibians like frogs, which are the world's most endangered class of animal. A recent book, *Extinction Studies*, was edited by members of the Extinction Studies Working Group, which includes scholars such as Thom van Dooren, an Australian professor of environmental humanities who calls himself an "ethnographer of extinction."

He isn't talking about trilobites, or dinosaurs.<sup>5</sup>

Another reason for the interest in animals is that more is known about them now than in the past. In an essay titled "Beasts, Brutes and Monsters" published in the late 1980s, philosopher Mary Midgely tartly dismissed much of the scientific work on animals by pointing out that attempts to explain everything animals do in terms of preprogrammed

instinct "has only been made to look plausible by constant misdescription — by abstract, highly simplified accounts of what creatures do, which are repeatedly shown up as inadequate when anybody takes the trouble to observe them longer and more carefully."<sup>6</sup>

Since then, fields including ethology, animal behavior and evolutionary biology have taken the trouble to observe animals longer and more carefully, and their observations have razed many of the seemingly impervious boundaries between humans and animals. Tool making? Chimpanzees, crows, dolphins, sea otters and octopuses (those crafty cephalopods) are among the non-human animals that do that, too. Self-consciousness? Elephants, magpies, great apes and dolphins all recognize their own reflection in a mirror, a capacity that psychologists claim indicates a sense of self or individuality (although the recent discovery that some species of fish — and even, unnervingly, a species of ant — seem to recognize *their* reflection, has complicated that conclusion).<sup>7</sup> Morality? Rats won't take food if they know their doing so will cause pain to other rats. Elephants mourn their dead. Chimpanzees console the loser in a fight.

Another reason for the current interest in animals is because many people throughout the world live with them more intimately than almost ever before. In the United States, for example, the pet population is somewhere between 77 and 90 million dogs and 58 and 94 million cats (the figures vary because surveys conducted by the American Pet Products Association, a commercial organization devoted to selling things, report significantly higher numbers than the American Veterinary Medical Association). Between 57 and

68 percent of all U.S. households own some sort of pet. Surveys consistently show that overwhelming numbers of pet owners consider their pets to be like children or family members. Pets have moved out of backyards and into beds. They've become "companion animals."

In the world of academics, the explosion of interest in animals is a consequence partly of the fact that *human* animals are becoming increasingly difficult to study. Calls for people to refrain from representing or studying groups to which they do not themselves belong are putting a chill on social science research — certainly the kind of research that forms the

backbone of a discipline like anthropology. Ethical review boards that interpret all human research according to clinical protocols and privacy protection laws such as the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation are making research on human beings fraught, uncertain and subject to litigation.

Animals, on the other hand, don't denounce, have Twitter accounts or organize protests. Nor do they sue.

Another important reason for academic interest in animals is the profound impact decades of animal rights activism have had on how researchers think about animals. It has become increasingly difficult to remain



*Image 2. Buncake reaching out. Author's private collection.*

unaware of the intolerable cruelty humans routinely inflict on non-human animals: by confining them in factory farms or zoos; by harpooning, clubbing or shooting them for fun or profit; and, not least, by slaughtering them industrially on a frankly unimaginable scale. The magnitude of such brutality has seeped into the ivory tower, and after having spent the past 2,000 years proclaiming that animals are inferior to humans because they lack language, reason, a soul, shame, manners, civilization, the ability to cry or blush or laugh or lie and so on, philosophers and others are now beginning to explore, instead, the kinds of capabilities and vulnerabilities that humans *share* with non-human animals.

### Respons-ability

A recent spate of books about animals includes Alexandra Horowitz's *Our Dogs Ourselves: The Story of a Singular Bond*, Clive D. L. Wynne's *Dog Is Love: Why and How Your Dog Loves You*, Richard Louv's *Our Wild Calling: How Connecting with Animals Can Transform Our Lives — And Save Theirs* and Lars Svendsen's *Understanding Animals: Philosophy for Dog and Cat Lovers*.<sup>8</sup> These authors work in different fields: Wynne and Horowitz are behavioral and cognitive scientists, Louv is a journalist who wants to connect readers to nature and Svendsen is a philosopher. All of these books are chatty, and they are all filled with reports of the latest findings of what canine scientists, behavioral biologists, geneticists and animal psychologists have discovered about animals and their capabilities.

Horowitz, who has published two other books about dogs, writes for readers who

are already familiar with her work and for fellow dog lovers. "But where is your friend right now, as I write this and you read it?" she asks knowingly. "Perhaps near you, on your own sofa."<sup>9</sup> Her book is a series of reflections on life with dogs. Chapters meander from musings on popular dog names — "in the US, naming a dog is done with as much, if not more, care as naming a human child"<sup>10</sup> — through reflections on problems with the idea that dogs are property, to distaste for breeding practices that knowingly produce dogs who can't breathe or go deaf, to anger at how, in the United States, surgical sterilization of dogs has become right-thinking dogma. Her main bone of contention is that much of human behavior toward dogs seems directed at ridding them of the very animal-ness that makes them so desirable in the first place.

Wynne's book about dogs is, itself, dog-like. It is animated by enthusiastic panting about how the discoveries he surveys on things including brains, genes and evolution are "amazing," "mind-blowing," "head spinning," "stunning," "remarkable" and "revolutionary." The subtitle of the book, *Why and How Your Dog Loves You*, says what's in the tin. Wynne takes readers on a whirlwind tour of wolf parks, psychology experiments, brain scans and genetic sequencing — with brief detours to a kibbutz in Israel and a remote rainforest settlement in Nicaragua — to try to show, scientifically, that dogs are hard-wired to love humans.

Louv, who wants readers to "recognize the psychological and spiritual space we share with other animals," does something similar.<sup>11</sup> His busy book shuttles among researchers, poets, ecopsychologists, occupational therapists, indigenous healers, professional explorers,

conservationists, animal trainers and many others who have stories to tell about how relationships with animals can heal the world and make it a better, more caring place.

The breathlessness of books such as Wynne's and Louv's makes one grateful for the measured prose of a philosopher like Svendsen, whose volume is a thoughtful meditation on the extent to which humans can ever understand animals. (Not really, is his considered conclusion, but we should still try nevertheless.)

If these books have a common theme, it is "responsibility," a word with two senses. The most obvious sense — an obligation to treat animals with dignity and respect — is not especially novel. Ecofeminists like Carol Adams and philosophers like Peter Singer, as well as activist groups including People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, founded in 1980 and best known by its acronym PETA, have been chastising humans for decades about how abominably we treat animals. The castigation continues. "Dogs trust us, yet in so many ways we let them down," laments Wynne.<sup>12</sup> They deserve better. Horowitz agrees. She observes that dogs depend on us and enrich our lives. And yet we punish them, mutilate them (we crop their tails and ears, we forcibly sterilize them), we abandon them. We breed them into illness. This needs to stop, she says. Humans need to "straighten up."<sup>13</sup>

This kind of exhortation occurs in one form or another in all of these books. But what distinguishes much of the writing appearing now from what has come before is an emphasis on the second meaning of "responsibility." That meaning is: our ability to respond. Richard Louv quotes A. A. Milne, of

Winnie the Pooh fame, as having observed, "Some people talk to animals. Not many listen though. That's the problem."<sup>14</sup>

### What's New, Pussycat?

At first glance, a call to pay attention when animals talk back might not seem so new. After all, for about 20 years in the 1960s and 1970s, people were extremely interested in listening to animals. Chimpanzees, bonobos and at least one gorilla (the famous Koko, who sadly passed away in 2018 at age 46) were taught to communicate with humans via sign language, plastic chips or geometric shapes called lexigrams. Dolphins, it was rumored, could talk, although those rumors suffered a serious setback when the dolphin laboratory from which they emerged was closed down because it was discovered that the scientists who worked there were having sex with the dolphins and giving them LSD.<sup>15</sup>

The idea of talking with animals lives on in popular culture — doggedly, one might say. A new Doctor Doolittle film starring Robert Downey Jr. was released in 2020, and a novel about an Estonian man who can talk to snakes, *The Man Who Spoke Snakish*, has become an international bestseller since it was published in 2016.

Scientific enthusiasm over animals speaking like humans, however, turned out to be short-lived. When critics started examining the evidence that apes and other animals could talk, they discovered that the claims researchers made in publications and divulged to journalists and donors were not actually supported by data — what little of it there was, that is. Koko's trainer Francine

Patterson, for example, claimed that Koko used her sign language to joke, construct metaphors, engage in fantasy play, compose insults, make puns and even rhyme. This was all fun and intriguing — and Koko was undeniably irresistible, especially when she was photographed cradling the adorable little kittens that she supposedly doted on so much. But no one has ever been able to independently confirm Koko’s linguistic prodigy, because Patterson has declined to release the transcripts and films of the unedited raw data that supposedly document it.

For authors writing today, a more serious problem than the reliability of the animal language data is that research that attempted to teach human language to animals wasn’t really concerned with animals. The psychologists who tried to get apes to

communicate did so mostly because they wanted to know about humans. Their goal was to discover something about cognition and the evolution of language. Researchers wanted to know whether language is truly a uniquely human capacity. They wanted to discover the relationship between higher cognitive capacities and the development of language in humans.

What has changed is this concern. Nowadays, no one cares much anymore whether animals can be taught to speak like humans; no one, in fact, expects them to. Interest has shifted from *cognition* and questions about how different humans are from animals to *ethics* and questions about how humans can respect animals and live together with them in mutually satisfying ways.

And so we need to listen.



Image 3. Kanzi the bonobo, one of the most famous language-learning primates, chatting with psychologist Sue Savage-Rumbaugh. Photo by William H. Calvin, Ph.D., licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.

## When We Listen, What Do We Hear?

More than 20 years ago, literary scholar and Harvard professor Marjorie Garber wrote a witty, erudite tome about dogs and the many kinds of investments that humans have in them. Her book, *Dog Love*, trawled through culture, both high (Shakespeare, Woolf, Mann) and low (Scooby-Doo, *101 Dalmatians*), and it offered gimlet-eyed aperçus about everything from projection (“dogs act as mirrors for our own beliefs about what would constitute a truly humane society”) to sex (“Kinsey asked twenty thousand Americans how often they had sex with animals. His genius as an interviewer lay in this kind of formulation: not ‘have you ever had sex with animals?’ — a question guaranteed to produce adamant denials — but ‘how often, and under what circumstances’”).<sup>16</sup>

In a spirit similar to psychologists’ attempts to teach apes human language, *Dog Love* was interested in what human engagement with dogs reveals about humans. “Does the modern attachment to dogs and dog stories tell us something about the present state of *human affairs*?” Garber wondered. “Are we asking dogs to act out our own stories so as to take a new look at ourselves?”<sup>17</sup>

Those questions still deserve to be asked, perhaps especially now, when pets — not unlike the people who look after them — are growing increasingly obese, are routinely being given pharmaceuticals to help them deal with anxiety and depression and are offered a rich array of cosmetic surgery — everything from Neuticles, a testicular implant advertised as a prosthesis that “allows your precious pet to retain his natural look, self-

esteem and aids the pet and the pet’s owner with trauma associated with altering,” to nose jobs that attempt to ameliorate the breathing disorders that dogs like pugs inherit through inbreeding and that Alexandra Horowitz describes so indignantly.<sup>18</sup>

These days, though, the question of what dogs and other animals tell humans about ourselves seems very 1990s, the philosophical equivalent of grunge music or frosted-tipped hair. Instead, the question on everybody’s lips now is what dogs and other animals tell humans about *them*.

There seems to be no shortage of people stepping up to bat to reveal what animals have to say about themselves. And what they say depends entirely on who is listening. Animal communicators such as Pea Horsley hear animals who sound an awful lot like people. Professional communicators acknowledge that animals have physical forms and lifestyles that are not human and, therefore, they “cannot be expected to talk about human activities that are not applicable to them, like golf or the stock market,” as Penelope Smith, a pioneering communicator, explains on her website, *animaltalk.net*.<sup>19</sup> But little else seems to distinguish the different species.

According to animal communicators, like humans, animals have definite likes and dislikes on a wide variety of topics, from the suitability of their names to the behavior of their people. Animals have favorite colors, they are offended by rudeness, they can have their feelings hurt and they make plans for the future. They fib, they know what age they are and they experience gender. In *The Language of Animals: 7 Steps to Communicating with Animals*, communicator Carol

When I said I love you in the connection he said do you... another one. I'm feeling important people wanting to communicate with me. I enjoy my life, I feel special in my life no-one messes me around. I'm really happy to be in your home, I'm made to feel important I get all my needs fulfilled. You don't need to fuss about me I'm very contented, I get plenty of attention. Doesn't like strangers so much only trusts those he knows, I can hit out with my claws if someone pushes me when I'm not ready takes me a while to trust someone, like to investigate "suss things" out before I do them. Cautious cat but will give affection but only on my terms doesn't like to be forced affection on especially people he doesn't know. Thankful you are in his life and HE PICKED YOU very alert cat, very aware of energies in the home and when someone doesn't have nice energy.

Image 4. Buncake's telepathic message, transmitted to Heather at the animal communication workshop attended by the author. Photo by author.

Gurney describes a session in which she understood that a young horse “was disappointed with the fact that he was a colt and not a filly.”<sup>20</sup> Animals have a range of different personalities and they experience, Gurney tells readers, “the full range of emotions we do. They experience grief, sorrow, joy, confusion, frustration, anger, disappointment, fear and love.”<sup>21</sup>

Animal communicators say that animals convey their preferences, personalities and emotions — to those who know how to listen — in a variety of ways. Pea Horsley's most recent book, *Animal Communication Made Easy: Strengthen Your Bond and Deepen Your Connection with Animals*, says that some people receive “footage as if they're watching a video.”<sup>22</sup> Others take

in olfactory and taste sensations. But actual language is very frequent, especially if the human doing the communicating is a verbal person. In *Learning Their Language: Intuitive Communication with Animals and Nature*, communicator Marta Williams advises aspiring communicators to “ask for complete sentences” if their animal interlocutor is being too terse.<sup>23</sup> But individual animals, it turns out, can also be tiresomely loquacious: Carol Gurney recalls, “I remember talking with one rabbit who had so much to say that I had to ask him if we could continue the next day. I was exhausted!”<sup>24</sup> Some particularly pedantic animals even split semantic hairs: Janine Adams's book, *You Can Talk to Your Animals: Animal Communicators Tell You How*, relates that a cat named Annie once disputed

a story about how her person and that person's husband had taken Annie for a trip in the car. Upon hearing her person tell the animal communicator this story, Annie the cat was quick to point out to the communicator, "They didn't take me on a trip. They took me on a ride. A trip is when you get out of the car."<sup>25</sup>

It's easy to make fun of stories like these, and yes, they commit that seemingly damning sin of anthropomorphizing animals and making them seem human. But as philosopher Lars Svendsen sensibly points out, people anthropomorphize everything, including other people, in order to interpret their behavior. Let's anthropomorphize more, animal communicators seem to say. Let's go wild. Maybe seeing animals as prolix, schoolmarmish or transgendered might open people's eyes and make them less crassly ignorant of the kinds of indignities and suffering we impose on them.

Whatever view one may have about that, it is clear that the connection communicators say they establish with animals bespeaks an attention to and a love for animals that canine scientists, philosophers and everyone else currently writing about animals all share and encourage. And the claims animal communicators make about reading animals' minds strike me as no more inherently unbelievable or irrational than animal psychologist Clive Wynne's ingenuous assertion that laboriously training dogs to stay calm and lie still in the confines of an MRI machine miraculously means that "their brain can now speak to us directly."<sup>26</sup>

Minds or brains, telepathy or magnetic resonance imaging ... à chacun son goût. Why not be ecumenical and welcoming? Let

a thousand flowers bloom, I say, when the common goal is to establish grounds to treat non-human animals more respectfully and less cruelly.

Reducing cruelty is the explicit goal of Temple Grandin, a professor of animal science at Colorado State University. Grandin listens to animals, and as a person with autism, she argues that she has a heightened ability to understand them because of the structure of her brain. In books like *Animals in Translation: The Woman Who Thinks Like a Cow*, Grandin argues that "autistic people are closer to animals than normal people are."<sup>27</sup> She claims that people on the autism spectrum share certain characteristics with animals, such as attention to visual detail and a lack of mixed emotions. These kinds of similarities, she says, "puts autistic people like me in a perfect position to translate 'animal talk' into English. I can tell people why their animals are doing the things they do."<sup>28</sup>

A television celebrity who has made a lucrative career out of listening to animals is Cesar Millan, the "dog whisperer." On his TV show and in his book, *Cesar's Way: The Natural, Everyday Guide to Understanding and Correcting Common Dog Problems*, Millan informs us that humans need to learn to "'speak' their dog's language — the language of the pack." This language consists of what Millan calls "the truly universal, interspecies language ... called energy." Sounding very much like an animal communicator, Millan says that humans tend to forget this universal language of energy "because we are trained from childhood to believe that *words* are the only way to communicate." In order to successfully live with dogs, humans need to understand that dogs

“read us loud and clear, even when we’re unaware that we are communicating.” The training Millan provides for humans consists of getting them to control the “energy” they emit, show the dog they are the leader of the pack and insist that their dogs respond with “calm-submissive energy.”<sup>29</sup>

Equestrian trainers are also on board. Monty Roberts writes books about his

method, called “Join-Up,” which he describes in *Horse Sense for People* as “a consistent set of principles using the horse’s own language.”<sup>30</sup> Pat Parelli coined the term “natural horsemanship,” now widely practiced among horsey people around the world, in a book of the same name, in order to mark the stark difference between his method of training horses — which advises trainers that



Image 5. Pesky macaques. Author’s private collection.

they “need to think like horses in order to understand and communicate with them” — and the old punitive techniques that involved “breaking” horses by punishing and humiliating them.<sup>31</sup>

All of these works seek to persuade us that thinking like a cow to understand cows, communicating with canine energy to get dogs to obey or using a horse’s own language to train horses constitute the new paradigm of approaching animals “responsibly.” A critical observer might note that Grandin, Millan and everyone else I’ve just mentioned all use their insights about animals to subdue and dominate them. Or worse: Grandin’s empathic connection with cows has resulted in her ability to design what she herself calls “a really efficient slaughter plant” where cows and other livestock animals are led to their deaths, to end up on our barbeque grills and rendered in our pet food.<sup>32</sup>

On the other hand, I suppose we all might agree that it is more respectful to communicate with horses or dogs than to beat them into submission. And if a cow on her way to be slaughtered might avoid experiencing excessive anxiety before she is constrained in a chute and shot between the eyes with a metal bolt, I’m not going to object.

Eva Meijer, though, does object. Meijer is a Dutch philosopher and animal rights activist who recently published two books on animals: *When Animals Speak: Toward an Interspecies Democracy*, an academic volume containing arcane discussions of philosophers such as Derrida, Heidegger and Wittgenstein, and *Animal Languages*, an English-language translation of a book previously published in Dutch, and which is essentially the first book shorn of the philosophers and repackaged for a more popular audience.

Meijer insists that the ways animals communicate with one another — whistles, growls, hoots and howls, scents, pheromones, changes of skin color and texture (if one is an octopus) and a wide array of bodily gestures like rubbing, licking, sniffing, touching and so on — aren’t *like* language, they *are* language. And like other languages, she says, animal languages are embedded in structures of power in which human animals hold all the cards. Meijer is critical of writers who dilate upon the joys of training animals, because in her view, they tend to focus inordinately on relations between individual people and their individual pets. That kind of myopic attention to people’s relationship with companion animals leaves unchallenged the broader political structures that shape those relations — such as the ones that ensure that humans continue to eat animals and kill millions of them every year.

Meijer makes similar points to the other authors I’ve been discussing in both of her books. Like them, she wants humans to act more responsibly in relation to animals. But Meijer frames this responsibility in explicitly political terms, and this allows her to turn her attention to what arguably are the most interesting — certainly they are the most challenging — animals for questions of responsibility, namely, pests.

I recently participated in an academic conference on animal-human relations, and I was struck by how many of the presentations flattered the participants — in a way not dissimilar to how so many of the books now appearing about animals flatter their readers — by describing inspiring research on dogs and cats, horses and songbirds, cows and seals that shows how

humans increasingly are beginning to open up, commune with and embrace our biosphere. The only lectures at the conference that had any bite were about ugly, invasive animals such as wild boars in Europe, Ebola-bearing bats or the weirdly smiling, fatally toxic, silver hareheaded puffer fish that recently entered the Mediterranean Sea from the Red Sea, slipping in through the Suez Canal.

Meijer is particularly attuned to animals like those. Macaque monkeys who harass parkgoers in Singapore, stray dogs who sneak onto subway trains in Moscow and Greylag geese who settle by the tens of thousands in the wetlands adjacent to Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport — and who thereby constitute a potential risk for flight safety — are examples she discusses at length. Her conclusion is that animals like those display a distinctively political agency. She says, for example, that the stray Muscovite dogs “are questioning the fact that the metro is reserved for humans and are seizing the right to travel by underground train.”<sup>33</sup>

That is a contentious inference, and it is nothing if not debatable. But by pulling focus away from the intimate and the familiar, Meijer expands the range of issues — and the range of beings who people need to listen to — if we are serious about behaving responsibly. She also provides a welcome irritant to the earnest domestic smugness that lingers over much current writing on animals.

### So What Are They Saying

So now that animals seem to have our collective ear, what, at the end of the day, are

they saying? According to everyone currently writing about the topic, animals are insisting that humans have obligations toward them that they are falling despairingly short of fulfilling. Most of all, animals seem to want us to once and for all abandon the fateful Cartesian delusion that they don't think, desire, plan or reflect. The people who are listening to them hear them asking us to pay attention to them, to continue observing them and learning about them in order to appreciate — in a way human that beings under the sway of Aristotelian convictions of superiority and Christian dictates to dominate them never before have done — their skills and capabilities, their talents, their aptitude and their prowess.

By doing so, perhaps we will come to value them more and to acknowledge even further the profound stake we share in both their vitality and their vulnerability.

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### Notes

1. For an overview of much of this work, see Don Kulick, “Human-Animal Communication,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 46 (2017): 357–378.

2. Another source of information and wonder about animals, of course, is television documentaries such as those featuring David Attenborough or popular films like the 2020 Academy Award winning *My Octopus Teacher* (2020, directed by Pippa Ehrlich and James Reed).

3. *Wildlife Conservation: Overview*. Washington D.C.: World Wild Life, 2018. <https://www.worldwildlife.org/initiatives/wildlife-conservation>.

4. Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 17–18.

5. Deborah Bird Rose, Thom van Dooren, and Matthew Chrulew, eds. *Extinction Studies: Stories of Time, Death and Generations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

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