

A Curious Practice

Interesting research is research conducted
under conditions that make beings interesting.

—Vinciane Despret

To think with an enlarged mentality means that one trains
one's imagination to go visiting.

—Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*

Vinciane Despret thinks-with other beings, human and not. That is a rare and precious vocation. Vocation: calling, calling with, called by, calling as if the world mattered, calling out, going too far, going visiting. Despret listened to a singing blackbird one morning—a living blackbird outside her particular window—and that way learned what importance sounds like. She thinks in attunement with those she thinks with—recursively, inventively, relentlessly—with joy and verve. She studies how beings render each other capable in actual encounters, and she theorizes—makes cogently available—that kind of theory and method. Despret is not interested in thinking by discovering the stupidities of others, or by reducing the field of attention to prove a point. Her kind of thinking enlarges, even invents, the competencies of all the players, including herself, such that the domain of ways of being and knowing dilates, ex-

pands, adds both ontological and epistemological possibilities, proposes and enacts what was not there before. That is her worlding practice. She is a philosopher and a scientist who is allergic to denunciation and hungry for discovery, needy for what must be known and built together, with and for earthly beings, living, dead, and yet to come.

Referring both to her own practice for observing scientists and also to the practices of ethologist Thelma Rowell observing her Soay sheep, Despret affirmed “a particular epistemological position to which I am committed, one that I call a virtue: the virtue of politeness.”¹ In every sense, Despret’s cultivation of politeness is a curious practice. She trains her whole being, not just her imagination, in Arendt’s words, “to go visiting.” Visiting is not an easy practice; it demands the ability to find others actively interesting, even or especially others most people already claim to know all too completely, to ask questions that one’s interlocutors truly find interesting, to cultivate the wild virtue of curiosity, to retune one’s ability to sense and respond—and to do all this politely! What is this sort of politeness? It sounds more than a little risky. Curiosity always leads its practitioners a bit too far off the path, and that way lie stories.

The first and most important thing at risk in Despret’s practice is an approach that assumes that beings have pre-established natures and abilities that are simply put into play in an encounter. Rather, 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. They are not who/what we expected to visit, and we are not who/what were anticipated either. Visiting is a subject- and object-making dance, and the choreographer is a trickster. Asking questions comes to mean both asking what another finds intriguing and also how learning to engage *that* changes everybody in unforeseeable ways. Good questions come only to a polite inquirer, especially a polite inquirer provoked by a singing blackbird. With good questions, even or especially mistakes and misunderstandings can become interesting. This is not so much a question of manners, but of epistemology and ontology, and of method alert to off-the-beaten-path practices. At the least, this sort of politeness is not what Miss Manners purveys in her advice column.

There are so many examples of Despret learning and teaching polite inquiry. Perhaps the most famous is her visit to the Negev desert field site of the Israeli ornithologist Amotz Zahavi, where she encountered Arabian babblers who defied orthodox accounts of what birds should

be doing, even as the scientists also acted off-script *scientifically*. Specifically, Zahavi asked in excruciating detail, what matters to babblers? He could not do good science otherwise. The babblers' practices of altruism were off the charts, and they seemed to do it, according to Zahavi, for reasons of competitive prestige not well accounted for by theories like kin selection. Zahavi let the babblers be interesting; he asked them interesting questions; he saw them dance. "Not only were these birds described as *dancing* together in the morning sunrise, not only were they eager to offer presents to one another, not only would they *take pride* in caring for each other's nestlings or in defending an endangered comrade, but also, according to Zahavi's depiction, their relations relied on trust."²

What Despret tells us she came to know is that the specific practices of observation, narration, and the liveliness of the birds were far from independent of each other. This was not just a question of worldviews and related theories shaping research design and interpretations, or of any other purely discursive effect. What scientists actually do in the field affects the ways "animals see their scientists seeing them" and therefore how the animals respond.³ In a strong sense, observers and birds rendered each other capable in ways not written into preexisting scripts, but invented or provoked, more than simply shown, in practical research. Birds and scientists were in dynamic, moving relations of attunement. The behavior of birds and their observers were made, but not made up. Stories are essential, but are never "mere" stories. Zahavi seemed intent on making experiments *with* rather than *on* babblers. He was trying to look at the world *with* the babblers rather than *at* them, a very demanding practice. And the same demands were made of Despret, who came to watch scientists but ended up in a much more complex tangle of practices. Birds and scientists do something, and they do it together. They become-with each other.

The world in the southern Israeli desert was composed by adding competencies to engage competencies, adding perspectives to engage perspectives, adding subjectivities to engage subjectivities, adding versions to understand versions. In short, this science worked by addition, not subtraction. Worlds enlarged; the babblers and the scientists—Despret included—inhabited a world of propositions not available before. "Both humans and babblers create narratives, rather than just telling them. They create/disclose new scripts."⁴ Good questions were posed; surprising answers made the world richer. Visiting might be risky, but it is definitely not boring.

Despret's work is full of literal collaborations, with people and with animals, not simply metaphors of thinking with each other. I admit I am drawn most by the collaborations that entangle people, critters, and apparatuses. No wonder that Despret's work with sociologist Jocelyne Porcher and the farmers, pigs, and cows in their care sustains me. Despret and Porcher visited cow and pig breeders on nonindustrial French farms, where the humans and animals lived in daily interaction that led sober, nonromantic, working breeders to say such things as, "We don't stop talking with our animals."⁵ The question that led Despret and Porcher to the farmers circled around their efforts to think through what it means to claim that these domestic food-producing animals are *working*, and *working with* their people. The first difficulty, not surprisingly, was to figure out how to ask questions that interested the breeders, that engaged them in their conversations and labors with their animals. It was decidedly not interesting to the breeders to ask how animals and people are the same or different in general. These are people who make particular animals live and die and who live, and die, by them. The task was to engage these breeders in constructing the questions that mattered to them. The breeders incessantly "uprooted" the researchers' questions to address the queries that concerned them in their work.

The story has many turns, but what interested me most was the insistence of the breeders that their animals "know what we want, but we, we don't know what they want."⁶ Figuring out what their animals want, so that people and cows could together accomplish successful breeding, was the fundamental conjoined work of the farm. Farmers bad at listening to their animals, bad at talking to them, and bad at responding were not good farmers in their peers' estimation. The animals paid attention to their farmers; paying equally effective attention to the cows and pigs was the job of good breeders. This is an extension of subjectivities for both people and critters, "becoming what the other suggests to you, accepting a proposal of subjectivity, acting in the manner in which the other addresses you, actualizing and verifying this proposal, in the sense of rendering it true."⁷ The result is bringing into being animals that nourish humans, and humans that nourish animals. Living and dying are both in play. "Working together" in this kind of daily interaction of labor, conversation, and attention seems to me to be the right idiom.

Continually hungry for more of Despret's visiting with critters, their people, and their apparatuses—hungry for more of her elucidations of "anthropo-zoo-genesis"⁸—I have a hard time feeling satisfied with

only human people on the menu. That prejudice took a tumble when I read *Women Who Make a Fuss: The Unfaithful Daughters of Virginia Woolf*, which Isabelle Stengers and Vinciane Despret wrote together with an extraordinary collective of bumptious women.⁹ “Think we must!” cries this book, in concert with the famous line from Virginia Woolf’s *Three Guineas*. In Western worlds, and elsewhere too, women have hardly been included in the patriline of thinking, most certainly including the patriline making decisions for (yet another) war. Why should Virginia Woolf, or any other woman, or men for that matter, be faithful to such patriline and their demands for sacrifice? Infidelity seems the least we should demand of ourselves!

This all matters, but the question in this book is not precisely that, but rather what thinking can possibly mean in the civilization in which we find ourselves. “But how do we take back up a collective adventure that is multiple and ceaselessly reinvented, not on an individual basis, but in a way that passes the baton, that is to say, affirms new givens and new unknowns?”¹⁰ We must somehow make the relay, inherit the trouble, and reinvent the conditions for multispecies flourishing, not just in a time of ceaseless human wars and genocides, but in a time of human-propelled mass extinctions and multispecies genocides that sweep people and critters into the vortex. We must “dare ‘to make’ the relay; that is to create, to fabulate, in order not to despair. In order to induce a transformation, perhaps, but without the artificial loyalty that would resemble ‘in the name of a cause,’ no matter how noble it might be.”¹¹

Hannah Arendt and Virginia Woolf both understood the high stakes of training the mind and imagination to go visiting, to venture off the beaten path to meet unexpected, non-natal kin, and to strike up conversations, to pose and respond to interesting questions, to propose together something unanticipated, to take up the unasked-for obligations of having met. This is what I have called cultivating response-ability. Visiting is not a heroic practice; making a fuss is not the Revolution; thinking with each other is not Thought. Opening up versions so stories can be ongoing is so mundane, so earth-bound. That is precisely the point. The blackbird sings its importance; the babblers dance their shining prestige; the storytellers crack the established disorder. That is what “going too far” means, and this curious practice is not safe. Like Arendt and Woolf, Despret and her collaborators understand that we are dealing with “the idea of a world that could be habitable.”¹² “The very strength of women who make a fuss is not to represent the True, rather to be

witnesses for the possibility of other ways of doing what would perhaps be ‘better.’ The fuss is not the heroic statement of a grand cause . . . It instead affirms the need to resist the stifling impotence created by the ‘no possibility to do otherwise, whether we want it or not,’ which now reigns everywhere.”¹³ It is past time to make such a fuss.

Despret’s curious practice has no truck with loyalty to a cause or doctrine; but it draws deeply from another virtue that is sometimes confused with loyalty, namely, “thinking from” a heritage. She is tuned to the obligations that inhere in starting from situated histories, situated stories. She retells the parable of the twelve camels in order to tease out what it means to “start from,” that is, to “remain obligated with respect to that *from* which we speak, think, or act. It means to let ourselves learn from the event and to create from it.” In a sort of cat’s cradle with powerful fables, Despret received the parable from Isabelle Stengers, and then she relayed it to me in early 2013. I relay it back to her here. To inherit is an act “which demands thought and commitment. An act that calls for our transformation by the very deed of inheriting.”¹⁴

In his will, the father in this story left his three quarrelsome sons a seemingly impossible inheritance: eleven camels to be divided in a precise way, half to the eldest son, a quarter to the second son, and a sixth to the third. The perverse requirements of the legacy provoked the confused sons, who were on the verge of failing to fulfill the terms of the will, to visit an old man living in the village. His savvy kindness in giving the sons a twelfth camel allowed the heirs to create a solution to their difficult heritage; they could make their inheritance active, alive, generative. With twelve camels, the fractions worked, and there was one camel left over to give back to the old man.

Despret notes that the tale she read left actual camels out of the enlargement and creativity of finding what it means to “start from.” Those storied camels were conventional, discursive, figural beasts, whose only function was to give occasion for the problematic sons to grow in patriarchal understanding, recapitulating more than a little the history of philosophy that Despret—and I—inherited. But by listening, telling, and activating that particular story her way, she makes something that was absent present. She made an interesting, curious fuss without denouncing anybody. Therefore, another heritage emerges and makes claims on anyone listening, anyone attuned. It isn’t just philosophy that has to change; the mortal world shifts. Long-legged, big-lipped, humped camels shake the dust from their hot, hard-worked hides and nuzzle the

storyteller for a scratch behind the ears. Despret, and because of her, we, inherit camels now, camels with their people, in their markets and places of travel and labor, in their living and dying in worlds-at-stake, like the contemporary Gobi Desert.¹⁵ We start from what is henceforth a dilated story that makes unexpected demands to cultivate response-ability. If we are to remain faithful to starting from the transformed story, we can no longer not know or not care that camels and people are at stake to each other—across regions, genders, races, species, practices. From now on, call that philosophy, a game of cat's cradle, not a lineage. We are obligated to speak from situated worlds, but we no longer need start from a humanist patriline and its breath-taking erasures and high-wire acts. The risk of listening to a story is that it can obligate us in ramifying webs that cannot be known in advance of venturing among their myriad threads. In a world of anthropozoogenesis, the figural is more likely than not to grow teeth and bite us in the bum.

Despret's philosophical ethology starts from the dead and missing as well as from the living and visible. She has studied situated human beings' mourning practices for their dead in ways strongly akin to her practice of philosophical ethology; in both domains, she attends to how—in practice—people can and do solicit the absent into vivid copresence, in many kinds of temporality and materiality. She attends to how practices—activated storytelling—can be on the side of what I call “ongoingness”: that is, nurturing, or inventing, or discovering, or somehow cobbling together ways for living and dying well with each other in the tissues of an earth whose very habitability is threatened.¹⁶ Many kinds of failure of ongoingness crumble lifeways in our times of onrushing extinctions, exterminations, wars, extractions, and genocides. Many kinds of absence, or threatened absence, must be brought into ongoing response-ability, not in the abstract but in homely storied cultivated practice.

To my initial surprise, this matter brought Despret and me together with racing pigeons, also called carrier pigeons (in French *voyageurs*) and with their avid fanciers (in French *colombophiles*, lovers of pigeons). I wrote an essay for Despret after an extraordinary week with her and her colleagues in the chateau at Cerisy in July 2010, in which I proposed playing string figure games with companion species for cultivating multispecies response-ability.¹⁷ I sent Despret a draft containing my discussion of the wonderful art-technology-environmental-activist project by Beatriz da Costa called PigeonBlog, as well as a discussion of the communities of racing pigeons and their fanciers in Southern California.

Pigeon racing is a working-class men's sport around the world, one made immensely difficult in conditions of urban war (Baghdad, Damascus), racial and economic injustice (New York, Berlin), and displaced labor and play of many kinds across regions (France, Iran, California).

I care about art-design-activist practices that join diverse people and varied critters in shared, often vexed public spaces. “Starting from” *this* caring, not from some delusional caring in general, landed me in innovative pigeon lofts, where, it turned out, Despret, attuned to practices of commemoration, had already begun to roost. In particular, by leading me to Matali Crasset's *Capsule*, built in 2003 in the leisure park of Caudry, she shared her understanding of the power of holding open actual space for ongoing living and working in the face of threatened absence as a potent practice of commemoration.¹⁸ The Beauvois association of carrier pigeon fanciers asked Crasset, an artist and industrial designer, to build a prototype pigeon loft that would combine beauty, functionality for people and birds, and a pedagogic lure to draw future practitioners into learning demanding skills. Actual pigeons had to thrive inhabiting this loft; actual colombophiles had to experience the loft working; and actual visitors to the ecological park, which was rehabilitating exhausted farmland into a variegated nature reserve for recuperating critters and people, had to be infected with the desire for a life transformed with avian voyagers. Despret understood that the prototype, the memorial, had to be *for* both the carrier pigeons and their people—past, present and yet to come.¹⁹

Neither the critters nor the people could have existed or could endure without each other in ongoing, curious practices. Attached to ongoing pasts, they bring each other forward in thick presents and still possible futures; they stay with the trouble in speculative fabulation.