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why do we say that cows don’t do anything?

vinciane despret

WHAT WOULD ANIMALS SAY IF WE ASKED THE RIGHT QUESTIONS?

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W
FOR WORK

Why do we say that cows don't do anything?

Do animals work? The sociologist Jocelyne Porcher, who specializes in animal farming, has made this question the object of her research. She began by asking farmers whether it makes any sense for them to think that their animals collaborate and work with them. The proposition is not an easy one—neither for us, nor for many of the farmers.

The same response pours out: no, it is only people who work, not beasts. Of course, it can be conceded that assistance dogs do, as do horses and oxen that pull loads, and a few others associated with professions: police and rescue dogs, minesweeping rats, messenger pigeons, and various other collaborators. The proposition, however, is acknowledged as barely applicable to farm animals. And yet, throughout the investigations that preceded her research, Porcher heard many stories and anecdotes that led her to think that animals actively collaborate in the work of their farmers, that they do things, that they take initiative in a deliberate way. This led her to consider that work is neither visible nor easily thinkable. It is said without being said, seen without being seen.[1]

If a proposition is not easy, it often means that the answer to the question raised by the proposition changes something. This is precisely what guides this sociologist: if we accept the proposition, it must change something. This question is not posed in her sociological practice "for the sake of knowledge"; it is a pragmatic decision, a question for which the answer has consequences (☞ **Versions**). Rare are the sociologists and anthropologists, she remarks, who have imagined that animals work. The anthropologist Richard Tapper seems to be one of the few to have done so. He considers the evolution of relations between humans and animals as having followed a similar history to those of production between humans themselves. In hunting societies, the relations between humans and

animals would be communitarian since the animals are part of the same world as the humans. The first forms of domestication would be akin to forms of slavery. Pastoralism would, according to him, reflect contractual forms of feudalism. With industrial systems, the relation is modeled after modes of production and capitalist relations.[2]

This hypothesis, though welcome, will be rejected by Porcher. It has the merit, to be sure, of opening up the idea that animals work, but at the same time it confines the relations to a singular schema, that of exploitation. Therefore, she writes, "it is impossible to think of a different development."

For what Tapper's reconstruction puts into play is the question of what we inherit. To inherit is not a passive verb, it is a task, a pragmatic act. Heritage is built and is always transformed retroactively. It makes us capable, or not, of something other than simply continuing; it demands that we be capable of responding to, and answering for, that which we inherit. We accomplish a heritage, which means the same thing as saying that we accomplish it through the act of inheriting. In English the term *remember* [se souvenir] can take account of this work, work that is more than just memory: "to remember" and "to re-member" [*recomposer*].[3] To create stories, to make history, is to reconstruct, to fabulate, in a way that opens other possibilities for the past in the present and the future.

What can a narrative—that allows the relations uniting farmers and their animals to be thought—change? To start, it would change the relation to animals and the relation to farmers. "To think the question of work," Porcher writes, "obliges one to consider animals as other than victims or natural and cultural idiots that need to be liberated despite themselves." The allusion is clear. She addresses herself to liberationists, to those who, she says, want "to liberate the world of animals," understood here as "ridding the world of animals." This critique indicates the particular stance that Porcher adopts in her work: that of always thinking about humans and animals, farmers and their beasts, together. To no longer consider animals as victims is to think of a relation as capable of being other than an exploitative one; at the same time, it is to think a relation in which animals, because they are not natural or cultural idiots, actively implicate themselves, give, exchange, receive, and because it is not exploitative, farmers give, receive, exchange, and grow along with their animals.

This is why the question "do animals work and actively collaborate in the work of their farmer?" is important, pragmatically speaking. In the absence of a history, it needs to be addressed today. Addressing this to farmers does not therefore come from a pursuit of knowledge—"what do farmers think about . . . ?"—but from a true experimental practice that Porcher invites them to participate in. If she asks them to think, and she actively asks this of them, it is not to collect information or opinions but to explore propositions with them, to provoke hesitation, to try to experiment, in the most experimental sense of the term: what does this do to think like this? And if we try to think that animals work, then what does "work" mean? How to make visible and speakable what is invisible and rarely thinkable?

I claimed that the proposition of thinking that animals work is not easy. As Porcher learned, it is even more difficult because the only place where she could ask it is precisely the place where the meaning of exploitation alone prevails. In other words, the work of animals is invisible *except in places with a lot of mistreatment of humans and animals.*

In effect, the places where the question of animal work comes to be formulated, there where it is most evident, are the worst places of livestock farming, places of farming as a production, such as industrial farming. Porcher explains this apparent paradox: an industrial farm is the place where animals are the furthest removed and distanced from their own proper world such that "their behaviors acutely appear as inscribed within a relation of work." Humans and animals are engaged in a system of "production at any cost" and of competition that promotes the consideration of an animal as a worker: the animal must "do her job" and is punished when she is seen to sabotage the work (e.g., when a sow crushes her young). Workers in these systems, particularly in intensive pig farming, come to consider their work, Porcher says, as personnel management work; this expression is rarely used, but its implicit suggestion never ceases to be present. They must select the most productive sows from the unproductive ones and verify the capacity of the animals to ensure the desired production. They represent themselves as something like "directors of animal resources," she writes, "as evidence of the diffusion of managerial thinking and the increasing role it places at the heart of animal production sectors" (☞ **Killable**). The animal, therefore, occupies a position akin to

an obscure, ultraflexible subproletariat that is exploitable and destructible at will. The distinctive trend of industrialization to move away, when possible, from living labor, which is more costly and always prone to error, is found especially in the use of robotic cleaners that replace humans as well as robotic "boars" that replace pigs to detect when females are in heat.

Conversely, the possibility that animals work in well-treated farms appears more difficult to convey. Admittedly, over the course of the study, and when forced to answer, some would conclude by telling her that perhaps, when "seen from this angle," one could think that animals work. This takes time, it demands a serious play with homonymies, it requires that one confer multiple meanings to anecdotes; it's an experimentation. At the same time, it signals that the problem of animal work takes nothing for granted. Porcher decided, therefore, to focus on the evidence itself and the possibility of making work perceptible. She modified her dispositive. She asked the cows.

Ethology has taught us that some questions only receive an answer if they are posed within concrete conditions, not only such that they allow the questions to be posed but that they make those who pose the questions sensitive to the answer and allow them to grasp the answer when it has the chance to emerge. Together with one of her students, Porcher extensively observed and filmed a cattle herd in a barn and noted every instance where the cows needed to take initiative, respect the rules, collaborate with the farmer, and anticipate the farmer's actions so as to allow him to do his job. Porcher also paid attention to the strategies that the cows invented to maintain a peaceful atmosphere, polite maneuvers, social grooming, and the act of letting a conspecific proceed ahead.

What became apparent was the very reason why the work was invisible: the work did not become noticeable, a contrario, except when the cows resisted or refused to collaborate, precisely because this resistance showed that, when all is functioning well, it is because of an active investment on the part of the cows. For when everything runs well, one doesn't see the work. When the cows go peacefully to the milking robot, when they do not jostle with one another, when they respect the order of turn, when they move away from the robot when its operation is done, when they leave the area to allow the farmer to clean their stall (if they do what is necessary to obey an order), when they do what they need to do so that

do what is expected. Everything has the look of something that functions or of a simple *mechanical* obedience (the term means what it sounds like); everything flows mechanically. It is only during conflicts where the order is disrupted, for example, when cows take their turn at the milking robot, or when they do not move out of the way to allow cleaning, or when they go elsewhere than is asked of them, when they avoid their duties, or, quite simply, when they dawdle—in short, when they resist—that one begins to see, or rather to translate differently, these situations where everything functions. Everything functions because they have done everything so that everything functions. Periods without conflict, then, are no longer natural, obvious, or mechanical, for they in fact require from the cows a total activity of pacification where they make compromises, groom one another, and offer polite gestures to one another.

A similar statement, though with some important differences, emerges from the research conducted by the sociologist Jérôme Michalon and his work with animals, mainly dogs and horses, who are enlisted as therapeutic assistants for humans who have physical or psychological difficulties.[4] These animals have a passive, "laissez-faire" attitude, but when things get difficult for them, when they "react," it becomes clear that the collaboration is based on an extraordinary capacity for abstention, an active restraint, a determination to "control" themselves that cannot be seen precisely because they have taken on a look of something "taken for granted."

In Porcher's view, everything that appears to be taken for granted now attests to an entire range of collaborative work—*invisible work*—with the farmer. It was only when paying attention to the many ways that cows resist the farmer, overturn or transgress the rules, dawdle or do the opposite of what is expected of them, that the two researchers were able to clearly see that the cows very clearly understood what they had to do and that they actively invested themselves in the work. In other words, it is through "ill will" that, by contrast, will and good will appear; through recalcitrance that cooperation becomes perceptible; through supposed error or feigned misunderstanding that practical intelligence—a collective intelligence—appears. Work is made invisible when everything functions well, or, to put it differently, when everything functions well, the implication that requires everything to function well is made invisible. Cows cheat, pretend not to understand, refuse to adopt a rhythm that is imposed on them, and test

the fact that they're participating, intentionally, in work. In this respect, I'm reminded of a remark made by Vicki Hearne, the dog and horse trainer who became a philosopher, who asked why dogs always retrieve a stick but drop it a few feet away from where one awaits. It is one way, she says, of giving to humans a measure of the limit of authority that the dog is willing to concede. It's a quasi-mathematical measure that reminds us that "not everything is taken for granted."

What is it that changes, for the cows, such that this active investment in working together becomes visible? Thinking that farmers and cows share the conditions of work—and, following Donna Haraway, this proposition could be extended to laboratory animals—shifts the way that this question is generally opened and closed.[5] This obliges us to think of beasts and people as connected together in the experiment they are in the process of living and through which they together constitute their identities. This obliges us to consider the way that they mutually respond, how they are responsible in the relationship—here *responsible* does not mean that they must accept the causes but that they must respond to the consequences and that their responses are part of the consequences. If animals do not cooperate, the work is impossible. There are not, therefore, animals who "react"; they react only if one cannot see anything other than a mechanical functioning. In operating this shift, the animal is no longer properly speaking a victim, for, once again, being a victim implies passivity, with all of the consequences attached to this, notably, the fact that a victim hardly arouses any curiosity. It is obvious that Porcher's cows arouse much more curiosity than if she had treated them like victims, because they are more lively, more real, they suggest more questions; they interest us and have the chance of interesting their breeder. A cow who knowingly disobeys is involved in an entirely different kind of relation than a cow who departs from the routine because he is stupid [*bête*] and doesn't know any better; a cow who works is involved much differently than a cow who is the victim of the farmer's authority.

If Porcher's research allows us to maintain that cows collaborate in work, can it still nevertheless be said that they work? Can it be maintained, she asks, that they "have a subjective interest in work"? Does work enhance their sensitivity, their intelligence, their capacity to experience life? This question requires that a difference be made between situations in which

only the constraint makes the work visible and those where the animals "do their bit" and make the work invisible. To develop this difference, and to account for what characterizes those farm situations where beasts and humans collaborate, Porcher turns to, and gives an original extension to, the theories of Christophe Dejours.[6]

If human work, as Dejours proposes, can be a vector of pleasure and participate in the construction of our identity, it's because it is a source of recognition. Dejours articulates this recognition in the exercise of two types of judgment: the judgment of the "usefulness" of work, which is made by its beneficiaries, clients, and customers, and the judgment of "beauty," which qualifies work that is well done and comes from peer recognition. A third judgment, Porcher suggests, should be added to these: a judgment of the bond. It is the judgment perceived by the workers as having been given by the animals, a judgment that is brought to bear on the work by the animals themselves. It is not brought to bear on the accomplished work or on the results of production but rather on the means of labor. This judgment is at the very heart of the relation with the farmer; it is a reciprocal judgment through which the farmer and the animals can recognize each other. And it's there that the contrast between the situations can be drawn, between the deadly work and destruction of identities in livestock farming where everyone suffers, and the places where humans and beasts share and accomplish things together. The judgment on the link—or judgment on the conditions of living together—makes the difference between work that alienates and work that creates, even in situations that are radically asymmetric between farmers and their animals.

This story still remains to be told, by re-creating a narrative that makes sense of the present so as to offer a future that is a bit more viable. Not an idyllic story about a bygone golden age but a story that whets the appetite for what is possible, that opens the imagination to the unpredictable and to surprise, a story for which a sequel would be desired. This is what Porcher initiates when she recounts, in the very last lines of her book, a memory from her time when she was herself a goat farmer: "Work was the place of our unexpected meeting, the possibility of our communication, when we belonged to different species who, before the Neolithic, even before Neanderthals, apparently had nothing to say and nothing to do with one another."[7] All is said, and yet nothing is.

1 For the work of Jocelyne Porcher cited throughout this chapter, please see *Vivre avec les animaux*. See also Porcher and Tiphaine Schmitt, "Les vaches collaborent-elles au travail? Une question de sociologie," *La Revue du Mauss* 35, no. 1 (2010): 235–61. For additional consultation, see Porcher, *Éleveurs et animaux: réinventer le lien* (Paris: Presses Universitaire de France, 2002), and Porcher and Christine Tribondeau, *Une vie de cochon* (Paris: Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond/La Découverte, 2008). The critique of industrial systems, as well as the work of observing cows, comes from the article published in *Revue du Mauss*.
2 Richard L. Tapper, "Animality, Humanity, Morality, Society," in *What Is an Animal?*, ed. Timothy Ingold, 47–62 (London: Routledge, 1994). Cited in Porcher, *Vivre avec les animaux*.
3 ["Remember" and "re-member" are in English in the original.—Trans.]
4 See Jérôme Michalon's doctoral dissertation, "L'animal thérapeute: Socio-anthropologie de l'émergence du soin par le contact animalier," presented and defended in Sociology and Political Anthropology, under the direction of Isabelle Mauz, at the Université Jean Monnet de Saint-Étienne, September 2011.
5 See Haraway, *When Species Meet*.
6 See Jocelyne Porcher and Tiphanie Schmitt, "Dairy Cows: Workers in the Shadows?," *Society and Animals* 20 (2012): 39–60.
7 Porcher, *Vivre avec les animaux*, 145.

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notes:

ily cere- cahiers is a collection of texts(fragments). it is a branch of the collective *it is part of an ensemble*. these texts function as starting points for dialogues within our practice. we also love to share them with guests and visitors of our projects.

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