

\*For the published version of this book review, please see the following:

[doi: 10.5840/envirophil20232013](https://doi.org/10.5840/envirophil20232013)

**Annabelle Dufourcq. *The Imaginary of Animals*.** London and New York: Routledge, 2022. 271 pages. ISBN: 978-0-367-77297-0 (hardcover). U.S. \$160.00

**Reviewed by Chandler D. Rogers, Gonzaga University**

Behind or perhaps beneath the persistence of animals in human dreams, phantasies, myths, images, and symbols is what Annabelle Dufourcq calls the *imaginary of animals*: the pre-personal or anonymous ontological source from which the subjective imaginations of human and nonhuman animals derive. Dufourcq maintains that this imaginary realm is ontologically originary, specifying at one point that her insistence on derivation is not a claim about Jungian archetypes. Rather than referring to the animals' mode of being as *unconscious*, she employs throughout the term *oneiric* (of dreams or dreaming), in reference to the manifold ways that animals present themselves to one another and to us.<sup>1</sup> She suggests that animals themselves are expressions of “an oneiric thought that forms below the conscious-unconscious duality and constitutes the living heart even of the highly lucid and reflexive forms of human thinking” (232). In contrast with what she refers to as the more standard rationalist, or reductive-objective scientific approach to animals and imagination, which favors human thought to the detriment of animal awareness, Dufourcq addresses oneiric thought by employing what she refers to as a subjective-poetic, or mythological-imaginative approach.

The mainstream scientific approach relates to animals as objects to be analyzed and eschews any hint of anthropomorphism, or the subjective imposition of human attributes and values onto nonhuman animals. Such a view offers little room for imaginative engagement with actual animals. Dufourcq sides with students of animal behavior like Barbara Smuts and Frans de Waal, by contrast, in their empathetic approach to animals, and criticisms of the objectivist fear of drawing upon subjective ways of knowing and engaging.<sup>2</sup> Dufourcq proposes a revolution in our conception of what knowledge is, or can be: we need an archeological shift toward awareness that both human imagination and animal imagination are rooted in the animal imaginary. Implicit here is the suggestion that “highly lucid and reflexive forms of human thinking” can be traced back to this more originary realm (232). Within the non-dual ontological frame that she offers, human and animal imaginations are said to shape and inform one other, being interwoven in chiasmic relations of mutual influence.

---

<sup>1</sup> In doing so she draws upon a tradition of employing the term in the field of biosemiotics, plus the late Merleau-Ponty's usage of this term in the same manner in his *Nature* lectures. See especially Chapter 4 of *The Imaginary of Animals*, alongside Dufourcq's excellent chapter “Merleau-Ponty and Biosemiotics: From the Issue of Meaning in Living Beings to a New Deal between Science and Metaphysics,” in *Merleau-Ponty and Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. Emmanuel Alloa, Frank Chouraqui, and Rajiv Kaushik (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019), 145-167.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Frans de Waal, “Anthropomorphism and Anthropodenial: Consistency in Our Thinking about Humans and Other Animals,” *Philosophical Topics* 27:1 (1999), 255-280.

Even as our constructions drive wild animals out to the margins of human society—illustrating Derrida’s claim that the goal of civilization is a world without animals—nevertheless animals continue to exhibit an oneiric influence upon the human imaginary.<sup>3</sup> Their images haunt our dreams, our art, and the metaphors that structure our discourse. This is, I believe, the thesis of *The Imaginary of Animals*: that human thought is rooted in the animal imaginary, and that animals necessarily exhibit a profound power over human thought. We will consider a few literary examples in the paragraphs to follow. By implication, we would do well to recognize this chiasmic relation, to embrace imagination as an embodied way of knowing which gives us access to other animal modes of existence, and to develop a more empathetic, and in particular, *phenomenological* approach to addressing actual nonhuman animals.

*The Imaginary of Animals* expresses compellingly, without claiming to do so, what Merleau-Ponty left unsaid in his late writings.<sup>4</sup> Opaque notions like the hidden or wild *logos*, lateral transcendence, and the suggestion that animals are most aptly addressed through myth have been infused with layers of deepened meaning the more I have sat with Dufourcq’s arguments. The congruence is not accidental: her account is dependent upon some of the same works by ethologists and early biosemioticians analyzed by Merleau-Ponty in his *Nature* lectures. Dufourcq makes it clear from the outset that her own approach resists any attempt to undermine or obfuscate the subjectivity of humans *and* other animals; although the boundaries between oneself and other animals are never quite stable, and the self is a certain sense a product of the imagination.

After discussing her position through careful engagement with relevant work in the fields of biology, biosemiotics, and ethology, Dufourcq continues to engage with work in philosophy, poetry, art, and ecocriticism. In *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, Derrida “define[d] animal thought as poetry” (3). The field of ecocriticism has seen an emerging trend in *zoopoetics*, whose proponents “intend to demonstrate that non-human animals actively contribute to human poetry and that they essentially consist in the entanglement between ‘real animals’ and ‘literary animals’” (2). Dufourcq provides an ontological account that could be said to ground both claims. Rather than conceiving of human language as qualitatively different from animal expression, she maintains that the metaphors and images that shape and inform our thinking are not just figments of our own subjective imaginations. Rather, these have a biological history, emerging through our perceptions of the actions and images of *actual animals*. Our linguistic symbolism is rooted in the symbols that the animals themselves, in their self-presentation, express; and it is these images that we find haunting our dreams, myths, and artwork. Throughout the book one finds examples and illustrations drawn from literary texts (such as Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals* and Bateson’s dialogical *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*), film (Laughton’s *The Night of the Hunter*), poetry (especially Lautréamont’s *Songs of Maldoror*), and on a couple of occasions indigenous storytelling (involving the significance of animal appearances in the dreams of Ojibwa).

---

<sup>3</sup> See especially Annabelle Dufourcq, “Is a World Without Animals Possible?” in *Environmental Philosophy* 11:1 (2014). Indeed, that entire volume (11:1) of *EP*, guest-edited by Dufourcq, encircles relevant questions.

<sup>4</sup> With this line I am intentionally echoing Levinas’s appraisal of Merleau-Ponty, in reference to Husserl’s unpublished texts (cf. Emmanuel Levinas, “Intersubjectivity: Notes on Merleau-Ponty,” in *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith [Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991], 57). In my view, *The Imaginary of Animals* articulates compellingly what remained unsaid in Merleau-Ponty’s *Nature* lectures, his working notes to *The Visible and the Invisible*, and also, possibly, to still earlier texts and notes, for example, his lectures on *Institution and Passivity*.

Dufourcq cites the biosemiotician Timo Maran, among others, as offering scientific backing to support the ontological account she is developing. Maran maintains that the codes according to which life operates are not rigid, designated structures, but are instead “quite poetical” (4).<sup>5</sup> Lamenting the short-sighted reductionism that has characterized the dominant scientific approach, the zoologist Adolf Portmann recognized that “modern biology has been driven by the belief that the riddle of life shall be solved by the penetration further and further into invisible components and microscopic structures” (136). He regrets that in conjunction, “the macroscopic level and the phenomenal dimension of animals have been more and more consistently neglected by zoology” (137). Portmann’s own phenomenological orientation leads him to theorize that animal forms develop directly in relation to the eyes that see them. *Image*, in other words, is an essential feature of animal (self-) expression. Dufourcq comments, “animals consist in self-depiction. They must appear. An animal presents herself to the face of the world, and an infinite number of receivers will deal with this nascent meaning: Interaction begins, theater begins” (142). Already in the (imaginary) realm of animal presentation, then, one finds the beginnings of *art*. And again, we can claim access to these modes of animal imagination precisely because, as Dufourcq sets out to illustrate, “human thought is rooted in animal imagination” (21).

What has impressed me most about this work is the scholarly care with which Dufourcq articulates the positions of others before engaging critically with them. Interlocutors of interest include the evolutionary anthropologist Michael Tomasello and his theory of true imitation, the social anthropologist Tim Ingold and his ontology of dwelling, the early ethologist Jakob von Uexküll and his celebrated notion of the animal *Umwelt*, and the phenomenology-influenced ethology of F. J. J. Buytendijk. She offers an intriguing exposition of *the animal imaginary* as she finds it surfacing between the lines of Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, and later addresses relevant work from the zoologist Adolf Portmann, biosemioticians Jesper Hoffmeyer and Timo Maran, and the anthropologist Gregory Bateson.

Dufourcq’s fifth chapter crafts an especially careful, contextualized presentation of Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of *becoming animal* as found in *A Thousand Plateaus*, in dialogue with Bachelard’s theory of motor imagination and muscular lyricism. She introduces Bachelard’s analysis of Lautréamont’s *Songs of Maldoror*, a poem replete with animal metaphors and metamorphoses. Bachelard claims that Lautréamont’s poem engages our imagination through its unique uses of rhythm and imagery, that it taps into our animality, and that is able to “communicate new attitudes to our body and infest it through contagion” (183). Dufourcq draws from Bachelard’s additional writings on the imagination of elements to argue that “the imagination at work in *The Songs of Maldoror* is what Bachelard calls ‘material imagination’ and ‘dynamic imagination,’” both of which “insist on the possibility for the daydreamer to penetrate the sensible matter of elements, from which beings actually emerge” (184). This suggestion coincides, in many ways, with Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis of the molecular becoming that underlies—and is taken to be *more real* than—static molar essences.<sup>6</sup> Concerned to overturn any conception of fixed or eternal

---

<sup>5</sup> Dufourcq cites Moran: “[‘]It is plausible to assume that codes on the ecological level are not strict regulations, but rather ambiguous and fuzzy linkages based on analogies and correspondences. (...) Ecological codes do not resemble human linguistic codes or algorithms, but are rather like archetypal imagery or patterns” (4).

<sup>6</sup> Bachelard’s psychoanalytic approach diverges in its claim that thought emerges from muscular imagination: “Against this backdrop, Bachelard’s claim that ‘there is nothing in the understanding that was not first in the muscles’ can become more intelligible” (187).

(molar) essences, and maintaining by contrast that there is *only* (molecular) becoming, denial of the reality of “‘ideas’ in the psychological or platonic sense of the term” leads Deleuze “to emphasize more and more a machinic terminology that refers as little as possible to thoughts, subjects, meaning in the world, and meaning for us” (195). The upshot is that for Deleuze, by contrast with Bachelard, the individual imagination is radically displaced in favor of “an anonymous imaginary that precedes *my* imagination.”<sup>7</sup> The notion of *becoming animal*, in other words, expresses “a harsh contempt for [any] relation that would enhance...individual subjectivity and agency in animals” (181). Against Deleuze, Dufourcq defends the legitimacy of Bachelard’s supposition: she wants to acknowledge the emergence of subjective—animal and human—imagination from an anonymous ontological imaginary, while also maintaining that human and animal imagination stand in a chiasmic relation of mutual influence.

Emphasizing a common ground of *becoming* without wholly undermining individual subjectivity and the agency of animals is quite close to Donna Haraway’s refined perspective in *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003) and *When Species Meet* (2008). Dufourcq makes the comparison explicit. In Haraway’s earlier “Cyborg Manifesto,” the figure of the cyborg had emerged “together with a strong suspicion toward the concepts of subject and choice” (201). But in Haraway’s more recent works, oriented toward the animal, her own care for actual animals leads her to acknowledgment of and respect for animal intersubjectivity. In *When Species Meet*, Haraway disparages Deleuze and Guattari’s lack of concern for and attention to actual nonhuman animals, theorizing instead that human and animal subjects are formed through what she calls *invitations to dance*. Dufourcq summarizes: “the other is thus another ‘I’ that must be *solicited* as a ‘you’” (205).

Overall, Dufourcq has given me much to reflect upon in my own thinking about human-animal relations, and the philosophy of nature. Her Conclusion offers fascinating reflections on the implications of her ontological account in critical dialogue with recent texts such as John Berger’s “Why Look at Animals” and Jacques Cauvin’s *The Birth of the Gods and the Origin of Agriculture*. Her engagement with Cauvin is especially fascinating. One obvious avenue for further research would be to put *The Imaginary of Animals* into more direct dialogue with Merleau-Ponty’s theory of expression, especially through Veronique Fôti’s *Tracing Expression in Merleau-Ponty* and David Morris’s *Merleau-Ponty’s Developmental Ontology*.<sup>8</sup> Dufourcq notes with gratitude that her ideas have developed in ongoing conversation especially with Louise Westling, and also with Ted Toadvine. Explicit comparison with Westling’s *The Logos of the Living World* and Toadvine’s *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature* would elucidate the work’s Merleau-Pontian inspiration.<sup>9</sup> Another avenue would be to compare *The Imaginary of Animals* with recent research on animals

---

<sup>7</sup> Whereas Bachelard “shows how meaning and thought are born from rhythms, trajectories, and motor patterns” Deleuze “offers an ontological framework where the muscular lyricism tentatively described by Bachelard can appear as the core of beings, somehow the most real aspect of reality” (197).

<sup>8</sup> Veronique Fôti, *Tracing Expression in Merleau-Ponty: Aesthetics, Philosophy of Nature, and Ontology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2013), and David Morris, *Merleau-Ponty’s Developmental Ontology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Louise Westling, *The Logos of the Living World: Merleau-Ponty, Animals, and Language* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), and Ted Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009).

and dreaming, and in specific, with David Peña-Guzman's book *When Animals Dream*.<sup>10</sup> My suspicion is that Dufourcq's account will offer an ontological framework within which to conceptualize the role of "the hidden world of animal consciousness" that has been addressed by Peña-Guzman.

Although Dufourcq's ultimate claims are ontological, I would have appreciated more clarity concerning her account's ethical implications. Shifting the focus from rational, objectivistic reductionism toward the imagination, and indeed toward the imaginary that undergirds human abstract thought, is an important step toward inter-animal ethical compassion. Enhanced imagination will enable increased empathy with other animals, and this invites opportunities for a more caring world.<sup>11</sup> Resisting the counter-tendency to overemphasize an anonymous ontological substratum, as what is most real, by contrast with hubristic illusions of individuality, offers another critical step toward compassion. Invitations to dance, as constitutive of subjectivity, plus expanding "the spectrum of subjectivity," together would comprise a vital part of an ethically oriented project.

To expand a bit on this critique, it seems to me that throughout *The Imaginary of Animals* there stands a silent tension: in the background is indeed a spectrum of animal subjectivity, ranging from the less complex, as containing only nascent meanings, to the more complex and meaningful. Examples given of invitations to dance, for example, characteristically involve highly intelligent mammals (dolphins, apes, and canines). But as we venture into ethical implications, one might raise the critique that here empathy is to be extended to animals that are enough like us to solicit attention (and presumably, to evoke care and compassion). When it comes to animals on the less complex, less meaning-oriented side of the spectrum of complexity, Dufourcq's ontological claim is that symbols appear already in the (imaginary) realm of animal self-presentation, even beyond the domain of intentionality. What would be the ethical counterpart? Responding to Berger's thesis, she contends: "We look at animals because they solicit and enhance our imagination" (234). On the surface this point is well-taken. But why should we offer care and compassion, beyond self-interest, or in other words, beyond caring about enhancing merely our own imaginations?<sup>12</sup> Might we not say that human projects of domination, and the axiological anthropocentrism that coincides with the inhumane treatment of animals, devalue something in us? That they undermine what it is to be fully human?<sup>13</sup> These ethical questions call for additional layers of investigation.

In sum, notwithstanding a few critical remarks and questions, this book is a compelling addition to the literature on human-animal relations. Even as studies of empathy in this field have been gaining prominence, the lens of *imagination* and the conception of an animal imaginary are unique thus far to *The Imaginary of Animals*. Those with interests in ecophenomenology, ecocriticism, animals and animality, imagination, and ontological issues in the philosophy of nature will find

---

<sup>10</sup> David M. Peña-Guzman, *When Animals Dream: The Hidden World of Animal Consciousness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022).

<sup>11</sup> It invites, but does not guarantee compassion; as a counterexample, consider the hunter who utilizes empathy in order to catch and kill more efficiently.

<sup>12</sup> Elsewhere I have developed a critique of attempts at forging an alliance with Spinoza for the sake of an (inter-) animal ethics, which must ultimately appeal to the maximization of human pleasure and power. Cf. Chandler D. Rogers, "Being Consistently Biocentric: On the (Im)possibility of Spinozist Ethics," *Journal for Critical Animal Studies* 18:1 (2021), 52-72.

<sup>13</sup> Otherwise, why call such acts *inhumane*?

much to agree with, and surely much to be challenged by, as they sift through the layers of this deep, compelling, and rewarding text.