

Of Wolves and Men

by Chloé Mondémé

Should our relationships with animals be more diplomatic? This is what Baptiste Morizot suggests as he uses the ‘return of the Wolf’ as an opportunity for a philosophical reflection. As if to better implicitly reaffirm man’s domineering position?

Reviewed: Baptiste Morizot, *Les diplomates, cohabiter avec les loups sur une autre carte du vivant*, Marseille, Wildproject, 2016, 320 p.

Rethinking the way we interact with other life forms seems to be appropriate to the current context of the contemporary human and social sciences, and is not limited to those whose allegiance lies with the ‘animalists’. It involves a vast political (ecological) programme that affects the global relationship modern man has with nature, or in other words with himself and what surrounds him. This is the theme of the book *Les Diplomates. Cohabiter avec les loups sur une autre carte du vivant*, in which B. Morizot tries to equip the reader with new conceptual and empirical tools to envisage diplomatic ways of interacting with the wild. The controversial case of the ‘return’ of the wolf – the management of its reappearance and presence in anthropic territories – serves as a backdrop to his arguments.

Les Diplomates is a very pleasant read and this undoubtedly explains its success (it won the Fondation de l’Écologie politique *prize* as well as the François Sommer 2017 literary Prize). The curiosity of the reader, interested in the human sciences and fascinated by naturalism, is sated by the profusion of knowledge from a range of disciplines. But what really galvanizes our enthusiasm is the proposition. Couched in a rhetoric that foreshadows great solutions, it suggests “abandoning the model of human supremacy” to develop “a different paradigm of our relationship to life” (p. 23). The undertaking is far from modest, and this may explain and excuse the frustrations it may provoke at times. Although the historico-conceptual effort to map the terms of the problem is both stimulating and convincing, the practical solutions suggested, based on a disparate combination of breakthroughs in the fields of evolutionary biology and cognitive ethology, are less so. Hence we will mainly discuss a

few, chosen propositions and consider the extent to which they actually represent diplomatic solutions.

“the wolf issue is a philosophical issue” (p. 23)

Obviously behind this phrase lies the idea that the return of the wolf poses a practical, ecological and political problem, and as such, it is grist for the philosopher’s mill. It seems to be an ideal case to speculate upon. The conceptual nature of the undertaking is clearly announced at the outset and involves creating a new language and new thought patterns to allow us to reverse ‘Neolithic metaphysics’ (largely described by Paul Shepard¹) that institutes man as the sovereign guardian of the natural world. From this viewpoint, the aims are perfectly fulfilled. *Les Diplomates* is truly a philosophical essay; maybe a book less about wolves than conceptual language.

The overall argument is presented following an impeccably (implacably?) dialectical structure, from the formulation of the terms of the conflict (‘The Diplomatic Crisis’ Part I) to the suggestions for resolving it (third and last part).

The early chapters lead us through a clear and convincing presentation of the diplomatic problem that has insidiously arisen between the wolf and man since the emergence of pastoralism: domesticating some animals for farming brought man ‘into conflict with the wild’ (p. 32). As the issue is to manage a peaceful coexistence on the same territory, he uses the metaphor of diplomacy: knowing the other, managing to get as close as possible to him, learning to think like him, and possibly entering into communication with him.

The second part of the book (‘Diplomatic Intelligence’) starts with stimulating epistemological reflections on animal behaviour as an object of knowledge for the scientist. The author suggests criticisms not unfamiliar to readers of sociology of science, developed over the last thirty years by philosophers like Donna Haraway (whose works are, strangely, not mentioned), and from the French-speaking world, authors like Isabelle Stengers or Vinciane Despret. The author shares their ideas, which has the merit of drawing attention to them in a field where they may be little known.

How does one *account for* animal behaviour, or in other words, not only objectify and measure it (as a large section of ethology has done so far) but also resituate it in its own world

¹ In his numerous essays, and particularly in the one significantly entitled *Coming home to the Pleistocene* (1998) Paul Shepard, the environmentalist philosopher, sees a modification in homo sapiens’ relationship to the living world with the beginning of agriculture (a moment that has voluntarily been called the ‘Neolithic Revolution’). The shift from hunting-gathering to livestock farming-agriculture created a new paradigm, based on a production economy and the exploitation of life. P. Shepard hence sees it as the beginning of a permanently tainted relationship, and the contemporary ecological crisis is only one of its ramifications.

of meaning, to better describe, explain and understand it? This is clearly a prerequisite to a diplomatic approach, and a fascinating epistemological question for any researcher seeking to combine discourses and methods belonging to the human and life sciences.² To grapple with this methodological, and also clearly analytical and epistemological problem, the author draws from a group of ‘methods’ belonging to various scientific fields. In turn he cites Daniel Dennett’s ‘intentional strategy’, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s perspectivism, Shamanic practices, and Eduardo Kohn’s animism that becomes a sort of ‘methodological animism’ crossed at times with ‘methodological anthropomorphism’ (p. 163 and 201). The method finally invoked is tracking. While the apparently biographical experience of this practice reveals inspiring perspectives to consider ethnography as a potentially legitimate tool, this section turns out to be the least convincing. Mainly because it heads straight for a potential hurdle: the temptation to produce yet another myth of human exception, this time based on the specific practices and needs of the hunter-gatherer.

This methodological ecumenism seems to support a philosophical system, which in Shepard’s typical manner uses every possible argument, *for all logical purposes*. In particular we wonder how to successfully enact a solid, empirical programme consisting of a loose form of sociobiology or reductionist evolutionary psychology, along the lines of Tooby and Cosmides, as it seems to be suggested in the first section (p. 45, p. 48³ and p. 53 in particular), and a sociology of science inspired by constructivism (as presented p. 147 and following). The book is diplomatic indeed, in the translations and dialogues he develops between sometimes irreconcilable paradigms.

The third and last part raises capital questions of political ecology and is strongly based on evolutionist thinking.

Towards a relational... yet gradual ontology

Les Diplomates is one of the rare human sciences works in the French language to show that an overall comprehension of ecological, political and social phenomena is based on evolutionary thinking. Endorsed by thinkers belonging to the philosophy of individuation (Simondon) or *deep ecology* (Naess), the author shows the relevance of a “relational ontology” in which the human (as much as every species) is defined by the relationship he maintains with his milieu and the beings that surround him. In the specific case of the political confrontations provoked by the return of the wolf to the European mountain pastures, the author convincingly shows the extent to which the problem is neither really man nor the wolf,

² On this point, and all the epistemological considerations expressed in section two, see also the work by the philosopher of science Eileen Crist, particularly her work *Images of Animals* (1999).

³ “hackles raised, teeth bared, this is the wolf, this is man, their intrinsic natures revealed. Ecce the werewolf-diplomat” (p. 48).

but the type of historically shaped relationship that these living creatures have in these specific spaces. Hence each of the protagonists must be resituated within a constellation of constitutive relationships to better understand what unites and opposes them, and to be able to put forward a local diplomatic solution.

But in the last part, we discover that the possibility of carrying out such a conceptual and practical project – a diplomatic undertaking – is in fact based on a human exception “the cognitive salience of human intelligence” which is also an evolutionary concept as it is related to human “overadaptability”. If we seriously examine such assumptions, which are described as “highly toxic” (p. 270), we may find ourselves in contradiction with the initial proposition “of renouncing human sovereignty over the other species” (p. 23). If cognitive salience replaces the physical subjugation of all the other living species, the problem has only been deflected, but in no way resolved. And ultimately, diplomacy remains rooted in the figure of the senior diplomat/civil servant, the best equipped, the dominant. If we actually want to reverse Neolithic metaphysics, as the liminal propositions suggest, then we should question the need to reintroduce a cognitive hierarchy to justify the exceptional position of man in the scale of beings – a position that hence endows him with a moral responsibility, that of essentially being a diplomat.

Is contemporary ethology really a diplomatic solution?

One of the major arguments, implicit throughout the book, consists in seeing diplomacy as an ethic based as much on a posture (a speculative effort, perspectivism, the Leopoldian option of “thinking like”⁴), as on dialogical practices. These practices are evident in the act of communication, be it direct or indirect: one has to (re) present oneself. This is where the philosophical argument departs from theory and relies solely on the tools and methods of the sciences that have (painfully) theorized and (essentially) modeled interspecific communication. Zoosemiotics, which had its hour of glory in the 1970s, is exhumed for this purpose (p. 45), but what is sealed is mainly a marriage (not always consensual) between cognitive ethology and behavioural ecology. Looking more closely, it can be paradoxical to combine scientific methods that are not always clearly paragons of diplomacy, in this manner.

On the one hand, as we said, these traditions are not always epistemologically (and politically) compatible. For reasons mentioned in the stimulating section 3.2,⁵ it is difficult to epistemologically connect ethogrammatic reasoning to relational and integrative ecological

⁴ This is a reference to the story called *Thinking Like a Mountain*, that appeared in the book called *A Sand County Almanac*, by Aldo Leopold, (1944, pp. 138-39).

⁵ “the species is not an essence but a historical population with a subtle behavioural and adaptational malleability to conjunctures” (p. 241).

thinking, as it is advocated by environmentalist philosophy. In other words, cognitive ethology and evolutionary biology may not sit well together. The former is Darwinist when it suits it, and this is precisely not the case when it comes to evaluating the cognitive skills of animals with the yardstick of scientific protocol inherited from human developmental psychology.

In addition, it is not certain that cognitive ethology or its development in related forms (social cognition) are overall a good example of diplomacy, despite the initial claims made by the zoologist Donald Griffin⁶. The “*biofences*”⁷, mentioned as an example of a diplomatic proposition in some of Lucy King’s works, are significant. Creating obstacles that are cognitive and informational (p. 275), rather than physical, does not create a new relational equation between living creatures and only masks the frontiers of the subjugation. What we find is an apparent absence of coercion, but nonetheless a radical upheaval, an anthropological ploy, one that consists in proposing a world where the human reigns, no longer by force, but by the use of science. In fact, it is not at all clear that there has been a paradigm shift here.

Conclusion

We have already mentioned the great variety of references to authors belonging to different scientific fields. It may hence seem uncharitable to mention those who were not cited. Nonetheless, and here too, to vivify the relationships and knowledge presented, let us mention Tim Ingold’s work and his attempts to create bridges between emergentist anthropology and evolutionary developmental biology.⁸ For about ten years now, T. Ingold has been working on a critical study that consists in reflecting upon the relationships connecting biological evolution and the history of human cultural processes, and his repeated dialogues with the biologists and psychologists Mesoudi, Whiten et Laland (2007) are significant proof of his efforts.

Underlying the diplomatic proposition there is a moral proposition that clearly questions the relationships philosophy wants to, or is able to, maintain with the other human and social sciences. In particular, we question the obvious absence of sociology, including the type that deals explicitly with the politics of nature.⁹ Is it only the life sciences (biology,

⁶ In the review *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, in 1978, Donald Griffin lays the foundations of a new discipline that he chooses to call ‘cognitive ethology’. Starting from the presumption that animals experience mental states sometimes similar to those of humans, he proposes a scientific collaboration between zoologists (or ethologists) and psychologists, that decisively influences the future shape of modern ethology.

⁷ Biofences are psychological barrier systems (for example urine marking) employed to manage the movement of animal populations.

⁸ See in particular Ingold (2004).

⁹ On the issue of the wolf, see in particular Doré (2010; 2013).

ethology, cognition, social cognition) or epistemology and history (part 3.1) that would have the privilege of serving as proof.

In any event, *Les diplomates* takes the reader on a journey through a rich and varied literature. One of its great merits is certainly gathering knowledge from such a variety of disciplines. Going beyond the specific problem of the wolf, it is largely a book that deals with a stimulating subject and presents an argument of a decisive scope to reflect upon the current ecological crises.

To take this further:

- Eileen Crist, *Images of Animals : Anthropomorphism and Animal Mind*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1999.
- Antoine Doré, « L'exercice des biopolitiques. Conditions matérielles et ontologiques de la gestion gouvernementale d'une population animale », *Revue d'Anthropologie des connaissances*, vol. 7, n° 4, 2013, p. 837-855.
- Donald Griffin, « Prospects for a cognitive ethology », *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, n°49, 1978, p. 527-588.
- Donna Haraway, *When species meet*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2007.
- Tim Ingold, *The appropriation of nature: Essays on human ecology and social relations*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1986.
- Tim Ingold, « Beyond biology and culture. The meaning of evolution in a relational world », *Social Anthropology*, vol. 12, n° 2, 2004, p. 209-221.
- Tim Ingold, « The trouble with “evolutionary biology” », *Anthropology Today*, vol. 23, n° 2, 2007, p. 13-17.
- Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), trad. fr., *Almanach d'un comté des sables*, Paris, Aubier, 1995.
- Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, trad. fr, *Écologie, communauté et style de vie*, 2008, Éditions MF, collection Dehors, 1989.

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