

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Eva Meijer

JVN [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down for a 40 minute conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by philosopher and writer Eva Meijer, where I ask her: Can animals understand us? Welcome to Getting Curious, this is Jonathan Van Ness. I am so excited for our episode this week. I mean I'm always excited for an episode, but this one is especially special, so I'm not gonna beat around the bush too much. I want to welcome our guest, but Eva I'm going to introduce you a little bit so that people understand your prowess. So Eva Meijer is an artist, you're a writer, a philosopher, a singer-songwriter, and you're also the author of 10 books of short stories, novels and poetry. And your work has been translated into, count them, 18 languages. You don't literally have to count them. But what we're going to talk about today is one of your books, which is all about animal communication, that has just been released for the first time in English by MIT Press, genius, called 'Animal Languages.' And when I read about that, I was like, we gotta have Eva on. We got to learn about animal communication, and, just fascinated. So welcome and thank you so much for all of your work.

EVA MEIJER [00:01:18] Thank you. I'm very glad to be here today.

JVN [00:01:22] So I remember when I was a little kid and my step dad said to me one time about our two dogs, whose names were Jenny and Whitney, he was like, "Well, you know, animals can't think because they don't have language." And for the first time in my life, I remember thinking, like, "What are words, and, like, what is language," because I'm thinking that that's weird right now, as you're telling me that, but if, you know, if I'm scratching Jenny or Whitney, which were our dogs and they think, oh, that feels nice and they want more pets and they you know nuzzle, you know your hand like with their head, like what makes them think that they want more pets if they don't have words? And so I was like, "What's going on in their brains that they don't have words. I don't, I don't necessarily believe it." So what is, what is going on in dogs and cats' brains? And then we're going to get to everybody's languages, but, like, how do you think if you don't have, like, a language that we understand is a language?

EVA MEIJER [00:02:26] Yeah that's a very good question, and I think that a lot of people are in the position that you describe. So on the one hand they think that non-human animals or more than human animals cannot think because they cannot speak, but on the other hand, they feel that they can communicate with them in many ways and that sort of puzzles them. And I think that we're in a really interesting time right now when it comes to animal science, because there's this strange thing with animal scientists that is maybe not very strange, but they tend to only research the things that they think that are there. So for

a very long time they thought that animals didn't speak, so they didn't have language and they were interested in, perhaps, in how their modes of communication could help shed light on human language. So, for example, chimpanzees and parrots and dolphins were studied and they were trying to teach them to speak in human words. And this was basically not to get a grasp on their languages, but it was to better understand human language, to figure out whether human language is the product of nature or culture.

But in this time, the ideas about animal minds and also they're in our lives in broader ways-- animal cultures, animal languages, animal emotions--the ideas about these are really changing and scientists are now studying their language as language, and that is teaching us a lot about what they think, how they express themselves, how they perceive us, because there are a lot of animals that speak about us, humans I mean us. It's also difficult, right, because us I mean, who is us? That's just me and my dogs and my ten ex-lab mice, you know, that's my us. But then when I tend to sometimes say us when I speak about humans. So, no, animals speak about humans, prairie dogs do that and they, for example, describe humans in detail when they walk onto their territory and they tell each other that it's a human being, how tall they are -

JVN [00:04:43] Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. Where do you live? Where are you right now?

EVA MEIJER [00:04:47] I live in the Netherlands, yes.

JVN [00:04:48] And you were born and raised there?

EVA MEIJER [00:04:50] Yes.

JVN [00:04:51] Did you all have the 'Golden Girls' on TV?

EVA MEIJER [00:04:55] We did, yes, in the, at least in the nineties.

JVN [00:04:58] Eugh, yeah, great time. So, ugh, remember Sophia when she would say 'picture it,' but however you say that translated into Dutch, um, where are the prairie dogs? How are they talking about us? Where do they live? What does it look like? I feel like they live in tunnels, right? Don't they dig tunnels?

EVA MEIJER [00:05:16] Yeah, they're a species of ground squirrel so they live under the ground and they, they stay in the, in the same tunnel system for their whole life. So it's like humans who live in a small time town and never, never leave that. And they have different rooms-

JVN [00:05:34] They have different rooms?!

EVA MEIJER [00:05:36] They have different rooms.

JVN [00:05:37] What do they do? How big are the rooms?

EVA MEIJER [00:05:40] What do they do, they do all kinds of stuff in their rooms. They have babies so they probably also have rooms for having sex, but also for playing. There's just, there's different rooms Anyway, because they always stay in the same tunnel system they are very easy prey for predators because they do not need to go out to eat.

JVN [00:05:57] I know that you're like an expert in like a jillion animals, but my brain is ravenous for details. How far down in the ground are these tunnels? How big are the rooms? Do you know how big the rooms are?

EVA MEIJER [00:06:08] [LAUGHS] I don't know how big the rooms are.

JVN [00:06:09] We gotta have a prairie dog episode. You have completely got me obsessed with prairie dogs.

EVA MEIJER [00:06:14] But then you have to, you have to invite Con Slobodchikoff because he's a scientist and he studied these prairie dogs for 25 years. And he thought, "Well, let's see what they are communicating about," because in the beginning he didn't really see it as language and they communicate in sort of small [MAKES NOISE]. It's a bit like guinea pigs, but you can [LAUGHS], and, and it all sounds the same to us, right. You know, we can't really differentiate between one sound or another sound. But he was just filming them and recording the audio and they were doing all these tests so people would walk in with yellow t-shirts and then blue T-shirts, and then they found out, "Oh, they're speaking about the color of their t-shirt." People would walk onto their territory with, carrying something you know like an umbrella, and they were talking about that umbrella.

When a dog came onto their territory, they were like, "Oh, that's a dog," and they knew whether or not it was a dog that they knew about or an unfamiliar dog and so on and so on. And they also did an experiment with strange oval things coming from the sky, from cardboard or something I don't know, and they also made up new words for these unknown predators. They also do a kind of wave where they jump up and it's called the jump-yip and they say, 'yip,' and they sort of they really do it as a wave and they do that when a snake leaves their territory or something. So the thing is, yeah, so they have these really

elaborate alarm bells and they also, for example, have a form of social chatter, but we don't know what they are talking about because the research hasn't advanced that well.

But the interesting thing is that it's not that this language of these prairie dogs is so complex but, or that it's so unique, but that it's well-studied because for most animal species we know very little. For example, when people always think that humans are the only beings who use names but it turns out that many other animals also have names. For example, dolphins have names, parrots have names, parrots also speak in dialect so they have, like, different dialects and sometimes can speak both. Bats have names; bats like to argue or they, maybe they don't like it, but they do it a lot, and then when one of the bats flies away, you can hear the other bats discussing that bats for a long time, so they like to gossip.

JVN [00:08:51] But how do we know that? How do you know that about the bats? Like 'cause there's just like a bunch in a lab and then they like, like-

EVA MEIJER [00:08:58] No, it's not actually in a lab, and I think that that's something else that's changing in the study of animal languages and animal culture. So I think that scientists are becoming increasingly aware of the fact that when you study animals in labs, that's going to make a huge difference on how they can express themselves. And also it's going to distort your image of things like language because what are they going to say you know, when you're scared, imagine you're a bird and they put you in a cage without your social group or something, then you're just sitting there and, you know, you can't do what you always do there. Studies about pigeons that show that they are actually much more intelligent when they're studied in their own social circle and doing the things that they always do in their life than when you take them out of that and, and, and put them in a laboratory or something.

So, so, there are many scientists who study one aspect of the language of one animal. I was speaking about names; chickens, for example, name their humans. So when they live with different humans, they give them names. Because I was speaking about animals who speak about humans [LAUGHS] and there was this article in 'The Guardian' a couple of days ago about whales in the 19th Century who were also already speaking about humans. So they've been doing that for centuries. They were discussing attacks, so when the, when there were these whale hunts, they would tell each other about that and leave these places. So in terms of animal languages, it's a very exciting time, but there's a lot that we don't know yet. And the things that I discussed so far are mostly, like, alarm calls, are, they sort of resemble human language, they're, you know, they're, they're using sounds and some animals also can speak in human language.

But of course, animal language is much broader than that. It may include colors; the Caribbean reef squid, for example, communicate with light patterns on their skin and when they see someone they like, they, they might flirt with them on one side of their body, and then when another squid comes that wants to maybe also flirt with that other squid and they can say back off so they can speak to two people at once. But the funny thing is that scientists were completely unable to figure out what they were doing with these colors until they decided to study it as a language. And then it turned out that this, these fast-changing color patterns on the sides of the squid had a kind of grammar and verbs and nouns and all of these things, and now they're sort of figuring out what they're saying. So there's color, but then there's also sense, you know many insects communicate with sense and have very complex ways of doing it. There's bodily movement, people know, often know that bees dance to, er, speak to each other.

JVN [00:12:10] Yes! We learned about this on an episode with "How can we be less rude to bees." And we learn that when bees are looking for their, like pollen, they can literally come back and say, ok, you're going to go like up two miles and make a right and with how they like fly and like flex their little butt with the stingers in it like that and tell us that, and then, that's why they're kind of struggling with like, the bees where they transport all over the place because like they get disoriented and then they can't really tell each other like where to go because they're all like jumbled around and confused.

EVA MEIJER [00:12:39] That's true. And the thing is that they only, they don't just speak to each other about where the location is, but they also discuss these locations because some locations are better than others. So the scouts go out and then with the intensity of their, their dance, they tell the others, "This is a really good place!" And then the other one says, "Well, this one is [MAKES NOISE]," and then the other one says, "But this is even better." And sometimes they go back, then they send others to these places and they go back and they can say like, "Oh, well, no, it's amazing, we need to go."

JVN [00:13:11] If, like, three scouts come back at once, can like four or five bees have a conversation like around you know the table, so to speak, or is it more like one-on-one?

EVA MEIJER [00:13:20] No they speak in a group. there's even some scientists that say it's a very good model for democracy because it's really fair in a sense and, and they just discuss it until they reach an agreement.

JVN [00:13:34] Ah, ah, obsessed. Ok, so there's bees. Ok, because, you know, one other thing I just thought of that's kind of like rude but I think, like it's a bit like superiority complex, a bit like selfish, like, just what I heard you saying about, like, how we only really historically studied animals' language to better understand our own. And, there's been this,

like, kind of consistent, at least in my life, I noticed like a consistent effort to differentiate, like, human animals like as better than or superior to non-human animals and so I just noticed that, and this is just so fascinating to hear about the complexity of languages within animals. So we've heard a little bit about prairie dogs, we've heard a little bit about bees, what about, like, snakes? Like, I don't really like snakes. I'm really scared of them. Like, are they going to fucking bite me? Like, what do they say? Do they talk shit about people? Are they like, I'm going to go fucking bite her ass? Or like, what do they say?

EVA MEIJER [00:14:38] Well, about biting someone's ass, we do know that African bees, they are a specific kind of bees, they do actually, when one of them gets attacked, they will call all the others and they can kill people and they do actually; people die from that. So beware of, of making the African bee mad. Your question about snakes, I don't know if, if they communicate about these things. I think we don't know; I don't think it has been studied yet. So they, they, of course, have ways of communication, they use pheromones, but also bodily movement and touch. All, I mean, all of us, animals use pheromones of course, but, or most, I don't even know if that's all. But so, so yes, they are not like these kind of things that move or something, they do, they do perceive and, and interact, but I don't know how they, how they communicate with one another about human beings.

JVN [00:15:45] Can you tell us about, like, parental-child communication that's interesting in the animal kingdom? I was learning about dog behavior with our dog trainer and she was saying how, like, when you try to force human language and human understanding on a dog, that's where we a lot of times get into trouble because, like, you know, you'll be like, "Oh, you're so cute and I love you dog bla bla bla, bla, bla." But dogs don't understand the English and so to them it sounds like [MAKES NOISE]

EVA MEIJER [00:16:13] Let's begin with the dog, because dogs do understand English it turns out. So, there's a dog family lab in Hungary and they're studying dog-human relations. They're doing scans of the dog brains and then saying stuff. And it turns out if you're using words that don't match with the tone of your voice, they think "Huh?" So they listen to both the tone of your voice and the words. And there are, of course, also dogs that are told a lot of words, but then that's a kind of different way of, of dealing with words, you know. But also just in the kind of regular communication they pick up a lot more than we think. And people are studying that now.

But of course, if you are treating your dog like a mini human or like a furry baby, and it's also weird because Americans always say "baby" and "child" to, to dogs, we don't do that in the lab. We don't kind of have this hierarchy, family hierarchy in the dog-human relations. But of course if you pretend that they're humans, then you're going to go wrong. But that's because dogs have their dog way of perceiving the world; we mostly use our eyes and

dogs mostly use their nose. So that's a different, a different entry point into understanding the world. And it turns out that, that the sense that dogs smell have a kind of grammar.

So they, they, and they can also when they smell soup, they can, can smell the different ingredients in the soup or we just smell soup. And when they smell the pee of another dog, they, they can smell all kinds of information about their identity: is this a tall dog? That also has to do, of course, with where it is and um is, are they old? Is it a male or female or something else, I don't know. So it's a kind of it's, it's, dogs have a different way of meeting the world, but that doesn't mean that we cannot meet each other because there's also dogs and humans domesticated each other. Some people say that humans domesticated dogs, other people say that dogs domesticated humans. Some people say, even say that humans began to use language in relation to dogs, but that's very contested. So I'm not saying that I believe that, but it's an interesting idea. [DOG BARKS] There's a dog [LAUGHS]

JVN [00:18:44] He agrees!

EVA MEIJER [00:18:45] [COOS AT DOG] So, so the thing is that there are many ways in which we understand each other. So even humans who don't live with dogs can understand when they listen to the tape recordings of their growls, they can understand whether [DOG BARKS] it's kind of a play growl or an angry growl or, or something. And it's even the case that when dogs and humans who like each other, when they look into, into one another's eyes, they both create oxytocin, which is known as the cuddle hormone.

JVN [00:19:25] Eva, my dog trainer told me that that my dog, or that dogs don't fucking like it when you look in their eyes. She said that it gives them anxiety and to ignore him. So you say that's not true?

EVA MEIJER [00:19:38] Well, it depends on the relationship. I mean, you're not going to look at them like this all the time, you know, then they'll feel threatened and also only [DOG BARKS] [TALKS TO DOG]

JVN [00:19:48] Come cuddle Ollie.

EVA MEIJER [00:19:49] [LAUGHS] Now he just wants to be part of our conversation. [DOG BARKS] But my, my other dog doesn't like it when strangers look into her eyes, for example. But there are different ways, I mean when you have a relationship with someone, you do communicate with the eyes, right, and it's also with human beings. It's a bit weird if you go into the supermarket and you're like this.

JVN [00:20:10] Yes.

EVA MEIJER [00:20:11] But with someone that you're romantically involved with, it can be a very nice thing, you know. So it's, it's, it's not the same, but it's similar. But we were speaking about parent-child relationships. And the thing is, and that's something that's very important, we always think that there's kind of um, um, an opposition. So on the one hand, there's the humans and on the other hand, there's the animals. But humans are also animals, and this broad category of animals is comprised of very tiny creatures that we cannot even see and beings who spent their whole lives in the sea, and, you know, there are so many different kinds of animals. So, there are some non-human animals who are very good parents, better than humans. And of course in humans there's also a wide variation of cultural practices and individual differences. But there are also these non-human animals that you don't care, or cannot afford to care, or, you know, because it all, it all depends on their circumstance. So there's not really one answer I can give to that.

But there is, there's this research lab in Vienna, the Messerli lab and they are um record, they are doing research about animal morality. There's also this philosopher, Kristin Andrews, who, who writes about animal morality and normative practices. And I think that humans often sort of feel like, similar to how they think that they have the best language, they also feel like they have the best morals. But, in fact, we're not doing that great, you know, because we're very immoral as well. And many other animals have types of normative practices. They, they care for each other, but also in a negative sense. So they get jealous or they, they bully others. And so, and it's not the same, it's never completely the same. Dog social lives are different from human social lives are different from pigeons' social lives. But there are similarities.

And through studying these we get a better grasp on what they are doing and how to better share the world with them, but also on all of these concepts. And basically, that's where my interest lies because I'm not an animal scientist, I just read all of these studies because I am a philosopher. I read all of these studies about animal languages and I thought, "Why is nobody writing about this?" Because if you read one, you read them in the, on the websites and in the science section of the newspaper and you think, "Oh, that's amazing, these animal can do this." And then you turn the page and you sort of forget. But if you collect all of these different stories about animals speaking about their own lives, about the world, about human beings, about their emotions--apparently cows speak a lot about their emotions when they're standing on the field together--when you see all of that, then it changes your vision of the world and also our position as humans in the world.

And I think we really need to do that because of the state of the world that we're in. You know, it's the climate crisis, the Corona pandemic, all of these things are related to our re-

lation to nature, to the bigger hole, to the other animals. But it's also simply very um enriching. It's, it's just, people are often scared of difference and they feel like that's what is different from you is somehow worth less or it's, it's less interesting. But I think it actually, learning about all of these animals' minds, languages, social communities, it's, it's definitely, it's wonderful because you walk out and you think, oh, the pigeons are doing that and that and that, and it makes the world a much more living and inviting place. But it also makes things harder, of course, because you are, become more attuned to the harm that we do to other animals, because that was one of the things that I was thinking about as well when you spoke about parental relations.

I visited a cow sanctuary yesterday with someone who is studying greetings between cows and humans. And she was doing that at dairy farms, but there the cows, they don't grow very old, actually. They don't grow past puberty because then they are already sent to slaughter. They're not with their children, they're basically in a sort of monotonous environment, and they can't really, they don't have a lot to talk about. So they do greet each other, but that's basically it. And then we went to the cow sanctuary where they live in a group, stay together, they sometimes have friendships that last for 20 years, sometimes mothers and children stay together for a very long time. So it's a completely different situation. And maybe if people think about cows and, and how they, and what kind of parents they are, then they think about these industrial situations, but that actually distorts what they are capable of. So it's a, that's also something that animal scientists are becoming more aware of: how the conditions that animals live under influence the studies.

JVN [00:26:21] Yeah, I definitely think that that's part of, like, I mean also just to clarify, I'm definitely someone who, like, I absolutely eat meat, like, I had a fucking, like, chicken taco last night. I was also a militant vegan for, like, four years from 22 to 26 and then I, like, walked past the sign for, like, steamed garlic butter clams and that was all she wrote. And then I've been spiritually bypassing ever since. Because it doesn't feel good, it doesn't feel good to think about murder, it doesn't feel good to think about, like, taking someone else's life away. And I think the way that people oftentimes spiritually bypass that conversation, myself included, is this sort of feeling of superiority or, like, a non-human life isn't the same as a human life, you know, those sorts of things. And, so that is definitely something that's really important to think about. And I think the other thing that people kind of spiritual bypass or at least the way I think about, it's like, like, what's going on in there. So if you don't conceive of language, if you don't have the language that you know we understand and communicate in and you were saying how, like, cows greet differently so, or dogs with humans, like, what does it sound like in their head? Like, when they're talking, communicating, like what do you think it sounds like between their ears?

EVA MEIJER [00:27:49] So a lot of times people are not skeptical about the minds of other human beings, so they kind of, I, I kind of enter this conversation with you without a doubt, that you are a thinking human being. You're in a computer right now but I still sort of feel like you are real. But then many humans kind of become, suddenly become very skeptical when it's, when the subject turns to animal minds, and that's partly related to the fact that they do not speak in human language. But as we know, language can also deceive. You can lie to me about yourself. Language can also lead to misunderstandings, human language. And as we spoke about before, language is more than words. You know, there's a lot of what we often call body language enforced in our communications with each other as well.

But the basic thing seems to be, and that is called speciesism, a form of discrimination that sort of excludes all the other animals beforehand simply because they are animals. And I think that, there are many, many, many differences in, when you look at a group of humans, there are very many cultural differences also when it comes to language and there are sign languages and there are drum languages and there are oral cultures and many other things. There's also, I mean, there used to be this book, women come from Mars and men from Venus, or the other way around, you know, so humans also think in these terms about gender differences sometimes and, and all of these other differences, right. And often-times when humans understand that, ok, humans are sort of they should all have rights and there are, because we are humans, you know, but then you sort of repeat the violence or the problem on another level, because then you, you create this hierarchy between humans and other animals. And we know that there are non-human primates that are very, very like us and there are other animals who are very, very different from us.

So, the, I guess my point is that there are things going on in their minds and sometimes we're pretty sure. For example, imagine you are living with a dog and a human being and you sort of know when the dog looks like that, that they're not so happy with that and you know, how they express themselves when they want to eat. And with your human partner, it's kind of similar you know, you feel they might smile, but you know that, you know, it's not completely right; there's something wrong, you need to do something about this. They might say they feel fine, but you know that they're not really. And then at other times you're like, no, this is fine, it's, we're completely in tune or something. And that's because you've learnt to read them and live with them.

And, I suppose that you can also that, that, that might function as a metaphor for communities as well, so like cultural communities, you sort of know the animals that you live with. If you live outside of the city and you're close to the earth or something, they might walk around your house, you get to know them. So we have all of this folk knowledge about the animals and we sort of know what they do and what, what they want. And then we have this animal science that helps us with some things. Sometimes animal science is also prob-

lematic because it can be colonial in nature. It can be a form of gaining more power about animal communities. But it can also be a form of taking responsibility because our lives are intertwined with all of these animals and we need to, many of these relations are violent and getting more knowledge about them and creating a different body of knowledge about animals can also help make these relations less violent. So, and then, yeah, what's going on in their mind? Sometimes we know, sometimes we don't. Some things we might really know and sometimes we might never know.

But then, so I, I write as an, I'm an academic philosopher, I write for a broader audience and I also write novels. And that's also different ways of speaking about things. Music is another way of speaking about things. You can make someone feel something when you sing for them or play music for them. And, and we, and you can know something about the world when you listen to some, a certain kind of music, you know what I mean. So there's different ways of what Merleau-Ponty called "singing the world," and different perspectives, different kinds of knowledges, and they don't end with the species line. There's people who, who hunt together with dolphins. There's people who, you know, there are, there are so many ways of, or birds, there are really are many, many ways of getting to know each other.

But I do think that this all begins with an attitude of, but, expecting them to be able to say something, you know, because if you are, if you are not listening or thinking well, you know, I'm a human, I don't care, or whatever your position is, then you are not going to be able to hear it or see it. But that's, of course, goes for a lot of things. If you don't look around you, then you miss a lot of what's going on in the world.

JVN [00:34:00] So I wrote down, you know, like, emotions and language. And it seems like language is how we convey what is going on on our inside or, you know, or it's how we're communicating. So my dog, Pablo is his name, I go pet his ear, he wants me to pet his ear more because he likes nuzzles, you know, he, like, bats my hand with his, or my hand with his head. So he's like, you know, keep petting me. Is there a way or has anyone ever tried to, like, see what that sounds like or hear what that sounds like in there? And I understand there's, like, sign language. And I understand, I also understand that there's people who don't, like, their, you know, their eardrum, it doesn't perceive noise, like, they don't, you know, they have, they're having issues with hearing so they can't. So I understand that there's like an ableist conversation here as well. But I think really I'm just literally curious. My cat, my dog, any, like what would it sound like in there? Like, could we ever, like, put a little electrode on there and like see what it sounds like, like has anyone ever done that?

EVA MEIJER [00:35:07] But when you think, do you think like you speak with your own voice in your mind?

JVN [00:35:13] Kinda. I think so. Or it's like I get a feeling and then I react to my feeling.

EVA MEIJER [00:35:19] Yeah. Yeah, so I think it's kind of, I think it's probably quite similar. So sometimes there's the feeling and reacting to the feeling: "I want that," and then you do it you know. There's also being habituated to different types of situations: so I always do this, so I just do it. You know, the interesting thing, we spoke about morality before, is that people often think morality, "Oh, you need to make all of these puzzles, this is right, this is wrong, this is maybe right and then make, like, a calculation." But a lot of morality is actually learned behavior; it's, it's an impulse. So, you know, you see a child drowning, you jump in before you think about it or a dog or, and I think that sometimes and that's also the thing about dogs and language, there's this dog called Stella, and her human is a linguist and she's teaching her to use these, these buttons that make or, it's so, for example, play, or Stella can press the button and then you hear play and they have very elaborate conversation. She has an Instagram page. And I think that's kind of more like what you are saying, right? You say "pet me" or something, that that would be the sound in, in their heads. But, um, but I think that, you know, because you, you already know what is going on in the mind of your dog because you are responding to what your dog is, is asking. You know, you have a dialogue in that sense and it's a very small and compact dialogue about touch and touch is also a word.

JVN [00:36:55] And so yeah 'cause like maybe, maybe in his head it's just more of like a feeling. He's like, hmm, like hmm. like I want more. Yeah, and then, like, when he's over he's like he just fucking runs away because he doesn't want me to pet him anymore or he'll, like, lift up one paw and, like, kind of sometimes he does this thing with his mouth or "I'm, like, oh, I'm not touching you anymore," because I can just, he like, he gets kind of pissed.

EVA MEIJER [00:37:15] Yeah but it also because maybe it begins like a feeling but when you don't respond he'll probably be like, "Hey, but I want this," you know, and then he'll say something to you, like, do the nose thing and then and then you'll be like yes or no. So it really is this answer-responds thing.

JVN [00:37:34] You know what it kind of reminds me of, this time when I was in rehab when this really fierce old man who is an alcoholic said not knowing why I'm an alcoholic is not what made me crazy. Needing to know why I was an alcoholic is what made me, because he was like, why me? Why can't I quit? Why can't I? It was, like, that need to know. And I think that's part of the human condition is like wanting to put a human understanding on something that's different, where it just, why do I need to know that? I don't need to know

what's going on in his little baby head. It's a cute little head. I know he's got needs and we already are communicating, which is kind of what you're saying, which is really interesting.

EVA MEIJER [00:38:12] Yeah, but it's, that's part I, I think that's part of what you say is true. We don't need to know everything. But you also mentioned before the dangers of anthropomorphizing so, so humanizing the dog and that can be a danger. So you can't completely let it slip. That's like saying, "Oh, about a group of humans, oh these, these types of humans always want that," you know. So you do need to still pay attention to that specific being. But it sounds like you have a good understanding with the two of you. And also, one thing about the humans' need to understand themselves. I, for example, wrote a book about depression, also a philosophical book, but also dealing with my own experiences. It's called 'The Limits of My Language.'

And one of the things that I found is that, of course it's, it's important to understand yourself and to deal with things that happen to you if they come back to you and haunt you, and talking to others can be a way of describing your identity to yourself in a new way so that you see it in a new light or words and conversation and therapy can really help. But it's ultimately also a matter of creating the habits that keep you going. It's that the embodied physical stuff and, or at least that's how it works for me, maybe it works different for other people. So, I do think that's for us indeed the nonlinguistic practices also make up a large part of our lives and we being attentive to that is, is, is, is, is important. I think that's also why people do yoga, for example, you know, it makes them connect to their body and the world in a different way.

JVN [00:40:10] So another that just came to my mind is there was this story a year or two ago about, like, this goat that was delivered to like a tiger enclosure, the zoo, for the tiger theoretically to, like, eat. But then they became friends and, like, they were just, like, playing together and, like, you know, like the tigers, like, didn't want to eat the goat. And I don't know if it eventually turned on the goat and then, like, did eat it. But what do we know about, like, inter-animal communication? And, and I guess what I was thinking about morality, it's like, do we ever see, like, a, like, and that's kind of why that came to my mind, it's like, is there ever a tiger or like a snake would be, like, their impulse's like, "I'm gonna go eat that mouse" or "I'm going to go eat that goat," but then like the little goat does something cute or the mouse does something cute or the tiger is like, "Oh my God, are we friends?" And then, like, they become friends.

EVA MEIJER [00:40:58] I think there's a lot of friendships that have been documented quite well. I mean that's also, humans like to look at videos of animals who have become friends with other animals, especially when they're from very different species. And yes, there are these friendships and they can have, I mean animals who are lonely will want

friends as well. So especially in zoos, you know, you can imagine that you are really needing a friend when you are in that enclosure all day, and then suddenly there is another being and you're like, "Wow, you know, this is someone else so we can do it together now." And, and there's also, of course, friendships between humans and other animals.

And but they, they communicate with one another and in many other ways, there are animals who imitate the alarm calls of other animals to scare them away and eat their food, you know some are very good and can imitate many alarm calls [LAUGHS], very lucky with food. And in terms of morality, what might also be important to mention is that we often understand these things as something that you're born with or not, and also, again, belonging to a species. But I heard a very interesting, somebody told me about a study about crocodiles and crocodile-human relations in different villages that were close to one another in a part of Indonesia. And, in many places there were conflicts between the humans and the crocodiles. But in one of these towns, the crocodiles were holy so they couldn't be killed. In the other towns, they were also protected but then when they posed the danger, they would sometimes be killed.

And in the town where the crocodiles were holy there was, like, a new understanding between the humans and the crocodiles. So they would share the fish, the children, the children swam with the crocodiles. It even went as far as the crocodiles they, they, they make a nest on the beach and lay their eggs there and then at a certain point, the eggs need to go back to the water and the parents in the, and the human parents in the town would tell their children to help the crocodiles bringing the eggs to the water when the time was there. So through living together in a nonviolent way, these two species, humans and crocodiles gained a new understanding of one another. And they probably figure out, "Well, this is the best way to do it," you know, you, you, yeah, you live together and then you're sort of safe. And then the other towns, there were accidents, you know, people were killed and they would kill the crocodiles and so on and so on. So there's also a different future possible in terms of relationships between humans and other animals that is perhaps less violent when humans change their behavior.

JVN [00:44:17] So, another thing that comes to mind, and I don't know if, you know, this is something I've, like, read a lot about in America, I follow this woman on Instagram called the Kitten Lady. And her name is Hannah and she's been a guest on Getting Curious before and she's amazing. And she was really important in bringing light to an awareness to and ultimately ended the practice of, like, these really horrific testing of like stuff on cats. And it's stuff that, like, you wouldn't even have heard of. And it was, like, these very secret, like, government, like, testing things. And so for, for things like that, where there's just like such, what's it called like, just devaluation, like, of life and just, like, such cruelty, for people that are moved by that, don't, or want to be a part of ending those practices, have you had

any experience with, like, organizations doing really good work or ways that people can educate themselves more to get more in tune with animal language and try to be more of a force for good?

EVA MEIJER [00:45:26] Well in terms of language I'm actually not sure because I think that's something that's mostly taking place in academia at the moment, and that is interesting. I think that within universities' philosophy department, all kinds of humanities departments, the position of animals and thinking about animals is changing a lot. But I think that what you are hinting at, the sort of basic cruelty towards animals, you don't need language to understand that things are wrong, you don't need animals to not need to be able to speak in order for us to want to abolish current farming practices or indeed the testing on animals that you are talking about. And the interesting thing is also right now that people are beginning to do research on what is sometimes called production animals like cows and chickens and pigs. And it turns out that they do have these very, very rich inner lives; they have empathy, they make friends. Chickens already speak to their chicks when they are in the egg and they have very complex language. I said that they are, they speak about humans as well.

JVN [00:46:50] They do?

EVA MEIJER [00:46:51] So they, they do.

JVN [00:46:52] I mean, not that I don't believe you because I do totally fucking believe you, but, like, how, I'm just so fascinated by how we figured that out. How did they, 'cause they just listened and there was, like, different noises for different things?

EVA MEIJER [00:47:04] Yeah, yeah. It's different noises, but also with different movement and different social um events that recur and then they respond in a, in a certain way. It's basically just, the, getting to know someone. But the thing is that because humans don't want to, a lot of human culture is just built on animal exploitation. That sounds a bit ugly, but it's true you know, so it's, we don't want to know that stuff. We don't want to know how much they suffer, you know, because it's easier if we don't. And it's, so I mean, for example, pig language, we know the basics, you know, and we, everybody knows that that they are smart and social and they like to build nests and they, they whack their tail when they're happy like dogs, and they have these snouts that are really sensitive.

But, but it's still something that's just, it's like it's in separate rooms in people's minds, you know. And so I think that's what you are asking is more about translating the things that we already know to society and, and speaking about it the way that we are doing now and taking seriously these things. And that just demands cultural change and a lot of work from

many different organizations. And, I mean, I don't know which organizations in the, in the U.S. are the best for this, but a lot of people are doing good work.

JVN [00:48:34] And then, what animal species has the most similar or, like, similar or most familiar way of communicating to what a human would seem is familiar?

EVA MEIJER [00:48:48] The answer to that question, well, first of all, we don't know where because there's so much stuff we don't know, but it's, it's interesting. So it turns out that bats, we can't really hear what bats say because their noises are too high for our ears to perceive; the frequency is too high. But scientists have been using audio recordings and some say that bats are probably the mammals that have the most complex language after humans, whatever that means right, you know, maybe other languages are way more complex, but that's the way they phrase it from their human point of view. But then there's also, there are also all of these animals that can speak in human language and use these words to tell us stuff about their inner lives, for example, the gorilla Michael who was speaking in sign language and was telling humans about his childhood when he was, when his parents were killed and he was taken from his community and brought into the laboratory. So there's different kind of similarities with different species.

And, for example, the, the interaction that you describe with your adult companion is another instance of a human and another animal understanding each other quite well, but in a, in a different way. So, so it's interesting, and it sort of also asks the question, yeah, how special our human language is, but also what we value most in language. Do we value communication with others or do we value making ourselves clear or do we value the more, the abstract things like novels and poetry? There are whales who sing love songs that last for 20 hours, but we don't really know what they are singing about, but it's complex, but we don't understand. So it's basically also a question about what you value about language. And it's, there are many, many, many things we don't know yet, so we could be very surprised.

JVN [00:51:05] So what are your hopes for the future of interspecies communication and of non-human animal rights?

EVA MEIJER [00:51:17] Well, I think that, as humans, we are now trying to figure out a new kind of relation with the natural world. We are dealing with huge crises like the climate crisis, global warming, the Corona pandemic, all of these things that, that relate back to our relationship with nature. So we feel a need to reconceptualize ourselves. And I think that comes with developing a different kind of attitude towards the natural world, but also the other animals. And we can learn a lot from them. Some philosophers, for example, say that we should give nature reserves to the other animals as property because they would be

better able to take care of it. And there's a, there's a lot to learn also about their social relations, questions of morals and normativity and all of that. But that means that we as humans need to begin to listen better to others, which is always very difficult for us. But it's, it's something we need to learn as a species. I think we need to perhaps also take a step back because we're always used to going forward, forward, forward, and then we walk into something and **[[ruin?]]** it and we're like, "Oh, what happened now," you know. So we sort of need to begin to pay attention to all of what is going on around us. And that's really, really includes building new relations with these other animals. But the thing is, I can't tell you as a human how these relationships should look.

I mean, of course I can say we should take a step back and be less violent and, and all of that. But in the end, if I am again formulating what kind of life they want and what kinds of things they want from us, I'm actually repeating the idea that we know best as humans. So we need to do this in a dialog and not simply the dialogs on an individual level as the one that you describe with your dog, which is a matter of paying attention from both of you, but also on a cultural level. So I'm, I mean apart from abolishing all of these, these really violent practices like the farming practices and vivisection and all of these things, we also need to, yeah, begin to, to see them differently and listen to them. And I think that, of course, um, and I think that, that, that, these, these new ideas about language or thinking about their communication as language is, it can be part of that because that can help us see and understand what they want, how they perceive the world and then we should take it from there.

JVN [00:54:22] Mmh. So what, ok, so what about, like, is there ever any, 'cause I mean, you're a literal philosopher, you're a literal, a writer, you're a PhD, honey, you have studied a lot. What's one thing that you just, like, really don't want to hear, like, anyone say anymore? Like, what's something that just grinds your philosopher gears around animal languages?

EVA MEIJER [00:54:49] I think it's, it's what we began this conversation with: people who say that there is nothing going on in their minds because they don't speak, both of these things are wrong. They do speak and there's a lot going on in their minds. And our minds are connected to our bodies as well, so it's the mind-body thing.

JVN [00:55:09] Ohh, that's so true! I feel like what I learned is, or what I'm learning is, is that, like, this idea of like interconnectedness and that we are all interly connected, like, with each other and that that it's really hard, if not impossible, to in reality draw such a boundary around "humans do this and non-humans do that." We are so much more connected and intertwined, and to compartmentalize it is something else. While that can seem like your reality, it isn't actually the truth. And I think that, you know, when you talk about

climate crisis and the coronavirus pandemic and all, I think really what this is, is, like, symptoms of us refusing to see the reality of how much more connected we all really are. So it's really, it's really fascinating. And I think that there's so much for us to glean from our treatment and historical understanding of human non-human relations.

EVA MEIJER [00:56:17] Yeah, I agree.

JVN [00:56:19] Well Eva uh, also just got to say, such congratulations on MIT publishing. I mean, that is like, I went to high school with this girl who got a 30-, she got a 34 on her ACT, and they accused her of cheating 'cause it was, like, such a perfect score. And then she took it again and did it twice 'cause she's genius. And then she went to MIT and then she studied, like, chemical engineering. And I was always, like, "Blink once if you're a spy," because then after that she started a greeting card company. And I was like, I was like, "Blink twice if you're a spy." And she was like, "I actually am not, I just work," but she's, like, the smartest person I've ever met in real life. And MIT, you got published by MIT, so just major congratulations.

EVA MEIJER [00:57:06] Thank you!

JVN [00:57:09] Yes! You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guest this week was philosopher and writer Eva Meijer. You'll find links to her work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on. Our theme music is "Freak" by Quiñ - thanks to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, introduce a friend, honey, and show them how to subscribe. It's hard out here in these podcast world streets, honey! Follow us on Instagram & Twitter @CuriousWithJVN. Our socials are run and curated by Emily Bossak. Our editor is Andrew Carson, who is a total saint, because I mess up a lot, and our transcriptionist, who is also a major saint, is Alida Wuenscher. Getting Curious is produced by me, Erica Getto, and Emily Bossak.