

Animist debate

Mark Ridley

The New Anthropomorphism. By J. S. Kennedy. Cambridge University Press: 1992. Pp. 194. £27.95, \$54.95 (hbk); £10.95, \$17.95 (pbk).

ANTHROPOMORPHISM means explaining the behaviour of nonhuman animals by the kind of mental processes that we attribute to humans, and it is generally thought to have been killed a century ago by Lloyd Morgan's canon and the rise of behaviourism. But according to John Kennedy, "anthropomorphism remains much more of a problem than most of today's neobehaviourists believe".

The core of Kennedy's short, provocative, readable and (in my opinion) ultimately unconvincing book "consists of nineteen essays which appear to be erroneous and can be traced to unwitting anthropomorphism". The ideas come from all parts of ethology — they include animal suffering, cognition, hierarchical control, intentionality, migration (particularly R. Baker's work on it) and motivation — and the book reads like an argument with almost everyone in the field. It is mainly British ethologists, and their extended family, who are put in the pillory; but Kennedy has fetched a few outsiders too, such as the students of ape language. It says much for the well-mannered tone of the book that, although Kennedy specifically criticizes many people, it is unlikely that any of them will take personal offence at what he says; I do doubt, however, whether they will agree with him.

The errors that Kennedy detects are of two main kinds: from behavioural ecology and from cognitive ethology. The anthropomorphism of behavioural ecology is mainly what Kennedy calls "mock anthropomorphism" and he has no serious objection to it; it often helps, when applying the theory of natural selection, to imagine that animals, or even genes, make strategic decisions. The errors arise, Kennedy suggests, when behavioural ecologists confuse ultimate causes with proximate ones, and suppose that animals actually do calculate costs and benefits. But there is room for argument about where the confusion lies. When I read the behavioural ecologists quoted by Kennedy, I rarely found the same interest in proximate mechanisms as he did; to me they sounded more like statements about adaptation, perhaps marred by a slip of the (maybe lazy) pen. He objects to the idea of 'warning' signals, for example: "Describing an animal's action as a warning to its fellows effectively takes it for granted that



A male panther chameleon *Chamaeleo pardalis*, one of the most hostile and territorial chameleons, threatens his reflection in a mirror; when unaroused, most of his body would be dark green. The picture is taken from *Chameleons: Nature's Masters of Disguise* by J. Martin and A. Wolfe. Published by Blandford, £16.99.

those actions were intentional on the part of the animal. Intentions are proximate causes of behaviour, so again we have an ultimate, functional cause masquerading as a proximate one in the animal." Oh no we don't! We merely have a signal that is given in an objectively recognizable set of circumstances (danger) and that has predictable consequences in the behaviour of other animals nearby (they take cover). No intention has either been "taken", or mistaken, "for granted".

In cognitive ethology, various anthropomorphic experiences have been suggested to reside in animals, including consciousness, language and suffering. Kennedy argues that there is no good evidence for any of them. So far, so good, but the conclusions he draws are exaggerated. Having shown, for example, that the evidence for consciousness in nonhumans is unconvincing, he concludes, "altogether, then, it seems likely that consciousness, feelings, thoughts, purposes, etc., are unique to our species and unlikely that animals are conscious". This is argumentative agnosticism sliding into atheism.

Moreover, Kennedy's sceptical argument itself does more damage than he allows. It works rather well against humans. He argues that mock anthropomorphism works in behavioural ecology because "natural selection has produced animals that act *as if* they had minds like us", but denies that success is evidence for anthropomorphic mechanisms. So why not for humans too? Humans, it is true, do provide linguistic assurances as well as observable behaviour, but is not

language logically only observed, in the form of 'verbal behaviour', in the same way as physical movement? Surely it is rampant animism to postulate more than a simple neuronal circuit in people who are behaving verbally, as well as physically, 'as if' they are suffering when you stick an electrode in them. Kennedy criticizes researchers on animal suffering because "they have no adequate evidence that animals do actually suffer"; but that is too strong a demand. Nor, for that matter, does he have any evidence that animals do not suffer. Suffering needs only to be a plausible approximate assumption (like optimization, in behavioural ecology) to stimulate research.

For the fate of anthropomorphism, like that of the physiological methods Kennedy prefers, will not be settled by pronouncements from the armchair. It will be settled in the laboratory and in the field. D. Cheney and R. M. Seyfarth (as quoted by Kennedy) claim that "anthropomorphizing works"; Kennedy refers to "the blind alley of neoanthropomorphic cognitivism". We shall see. If anthropomorphism produces results that are, in the normal manner of science, valuable, it will be persisted with; if it does not, it will be abandoned. It was, after all, abandoned once before. The only danger, Kennedy might reply, is that scientists can be enduringly obstinate in their investigations of blind alleys. Just think how long behaviourism lasted in psychology. □

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