
Morgan's Munificent Canon

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Abstract

I offer a novel interpretation of Morgan's Canon that emphasizes the central role played by the problem of other minds in comparative psychology. I then defend the Canon (or at least its spirit) against recent criticisms.

Behaviorists and their critics have long misinterpreted Morgan's Canon as a principle of parsimony that condemns mentalistic explanations of nonhuman animal behavior. But Morgan meant his Canon to be neither pro-simplicity nor anti-anthropomorphism. Instead, Morgan realized that animal psychology could only overcome the problem of other minds by embracing inference from the human case. From an anthropomorphic starting point, mentalistic explanations are often parsimonious. Morgan designed his Canon to ensure that comparative psychologists explore the disanalogies between human and animal minds as well as the analogies.

Nevertheless, several philosophers have argued that the Canon is not a useful methodological precaution (Andrews & Huss forthcoming, Fitzpatrick 2008, Sober 2005). These philosophers claim that mistakenly attributing psychological properties to animals (anthropomorphism) is no greater a sin than mistakenly denying psychological properties to animals (anthropectomy). They suggest that comparative psychologists ought to ignore Morgan's Canon and simply prefer whichever explanation is best supported by the evidence. Against this suggestion, I argue that the problem of other minds is as great a problem for comparative psychology as ever (cf. the 'logical problem' in the theory of mind literature.) While mistaken anthropectomy is no better than mistaken anthropomorphism, comparative psychology is inclined towards anthropomorphic explanations. The Canon rightly stresses the need to thoroughly investigate anthropectic alternatives.

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