

A METAPHOR IS A METAPHOR

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Do animals think? What do ethologists or animal behavior scientists think they think? Because there is no consensus across time, culture and disciplines anthropomorphic “metaphorical” language is flawed. Pamela J. Asquith delves into historical ethology, cultural differences, and language to find how anthropomorphism came to its current state of existence and its state of incorrectness. These ideas take shape and trigger intrigue in her paper titled, “Why Anthropomorphism Is Not Metaphor: Crossing Concepts and Cultures in Animal Behavior Studies”. Asquith makes the reader think twice about language and its overlooked grammatical significance in science.

Keywords: anthropomorphism, ethology, metaphor

Introduction

Culture and science are forever bound, and cannot be ideologically and physically isolated. Pamela J. Asquith, a professor at the University of Alberta and University of Calgary teaching areas of science, technology, and culture in anthropology of modern Japan, introduces perspectives and queries, through investigating historical knowledge about animal behavior. She relates them “literally” to linguistics and to people’s use of metaphors in their speech and writing. Her conclusion is that time is better spent gathering “verifiable descriptions of animal lives, rather than debating about the merits and demerits of anthropomorphism *per se*” (Asquith 1997: 34), due to the necessity of clarity and proof of animal mental cognition. This paper takes that notion a step further to see specifically how those ideas propel such perceptions. Finding the boundaries and patterns that overlap science, language, and culture is the key to understanding the existence of anthropomorphism. Asquith’s strong argument helps define the limits on how animal behavior should be discussed.

A brief history of ethology

In order to realize what anthropomorphism is we must first know where it came from. For historical brevity it is possible to start with the conceptual foundation and intrigue that Charles Darwin (1809-1882) established. His groundbreaking *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, published in 1859, was imperative to the

development of both comparative psychology and ethology, which is the study of animal behavior. This field of study has pushed the theoretical movements of “anecdotal school” or “anthropomorphists”, which drew the connection between humans and animals, mentally and emotionally.

Many other scientists took a stance in the exploration of animal mental cognition. The British evolutionary biologist Julian Huxley (1887-1975) was one of the forerunners of ethology with his area of expertise on birds. Huxley was a supporter of Darwin and his theory of natural selection. Then there was Donald Griffin (1915-2003), an American zoologist, who founded the controversial field of cognitive ethology, the study of thinking and consciences in animals. During the 1920s, Robert Mearns Yerkes' (1876-1956) research merged the separate roots of ethology and comparative psychology. He was an American psychologist, ethologist, and primatologist. These scientists paved the way for skeptical theories to transpire in more believable light by exploring the study of cognitive ethology. What was once deemed silly and non-provable, such as the notion of animals having thought and emotion, is now more scientifically respectable, yet with large gaps of information still to fill.

A brief history of anthropomorphism

It was not science that brought forth the idea of anthropomorphism, but the humanities. Illustrations of animals with characteristically human features date back at least forty thousand years with Paleolithic art. The evidence of it existing from ages ago shows that anthropomorphizing is simply natural. According to Asquith, “the term anthropomorphism presupposes reference to uniquely human qualities” (Asquith 1997: 23). Anthropomorphism is a psychological process, which is said to have developed from animism, legend, and the need for visual representation of the gods. There is no evidence of other animals acting in the same manner towards themselves and towards other non-human animals. In this sense, it is history that has proven the anthropomorphism’s natural tendencies and the outlets for such descriptions have not changed.

Metaphor and its role in language and speech

Athropomorphic language has been used to describe animal behavior. Despite the wide use, is this term associated properly with human qualities in animals? A metaphor has two meanings. Due to the weight words have on perception, it is necessary to distinguish fundamental differences between the literal and metaphorical meaning. The first definition, most commonly thought of, when considering metaphors, is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action. In this context it is not literally applicable. The second meaning is that it is a thing regarded as representative or symbolic of something else, especially something abstract. Metaphors help people realize things within themselves and make sense of the world around them. Thus anthropomorphizing is the most convenient tool for carving clarity and molding lucid transformations from one term to another.

From this viewpoint it is clear why people anthropomorphize, but Asquith, as the title conveys, believes that anthropomorphism is not metaphor because it is not

used properly. Asquith states that “we cannot cite a metaphorical use of this language as a way to avoid the unproven assertions it implies about other animals’ mental lives” (Asquith 1997: 34). Concluding with this incapability of providing evidence of people’s findings are merely “discussions about our perceived place in nature” (*ibid.*: 34). Will this ongoing controversy of anthropomorphic description used in science ever be accepted and is it worth heated debates?

Asquith’s point is to spend energy on finding the facts, work on the proven, and describe the proof in a literal manner despite her contradicting thought that, “The use of metaphor in science is of immense practical relevance” (*ibid.*: 30). To be productive in this quest for more efficient methodology Tommi Vehkavaara gives the audience some critical points to rest on:

This somewhat “necessary” anthropomorphism is one source of the difficulty in distinguishing real biosemiotic signs from imagined ones (i.e. from those ones, which are *effective as signs* only through *our* interpretations). If biosemiotics is supposed to produce more than mere emotional effects in science, or if it is going to be more than mere vague poetic metaphor, the concept of sign has to be abstracted and defined carefully — mere intuitive common sense idea does not suffice. (Vehkavaara 2007: 21)

Is it possible for anthropomorphic descriptions of animal behavior to be correctly interpreted? Perhaps by suggesting that it is not metaphor, Asquith is then inferring that the description is, in fact, the definition the literal truth. Therefore, anthropomorphism, by classification, does not extend to having representational quality, but is the quality in itself.

Revealing evidence

Historically, it has been controversial and at best a criticism when one’s work has been described as being anthropomorphic, due to the lack of evidence provided to show emotional and mental activity in nonhuman animals. Jan A.R.A.M. van Hooff, a retired Dutch ethology and socio-ecology professor, through factor analysis proved that chimpanzees laugh like humans when associated with “play activities and smiling with affiliative activities including talking, giving objects to children, receiving objects and pointing at objects while looking” (Archer 1992: 186). Despite his findings van Hooff still believes that it is motivationally distinct in humans to associate behavior such as laughing and smiling. Does this research provide for Asquith’s idea of “anthropomorphism is not metaphor”, if in fact the allowance relies purely on scientific support?

Darwin and George Romanes (1848-1894), an evolutionary biologist who built the foundation for comparative psychology, shared the belief of ejectiveism, which is basically projection of human mental states onto others. This is essentially a methodological technique to comprehend minds of nonhuman animals. Darwin did not anthropomorphize in his writings, but he did describe his findings in a way so close to the human world that the images drawn in the reader’s mind are as if they were anthropomorphized. For example in this diary-like description, “Happiness is never better exhibited then by young animals such as puppies [...] when playing together, like our own children.” Darwin continues with:

The fact that the lower animals are excited by the same emotions as ourselves is so well established that it will not be necessary to weary the reader by many details. Terror acts in the same manner on them as on us, causing the muscles to tremble, the heart to palpitate, the sphincters to be relaxed, and the hair to stand on end. Suspicion, the offspring of fear, is eminently characteristic of most wild animals. (Darwin 1981: 39)

Darwin's prose is natural and simultaneously analytical. The playfulness in the words is reminiscent of a child finding faces in the clouds and he exudes enthusiasm for animals.

Anthropomorphism, culturally speaking

Anthropomorphism will forever be ambiguous because it is culturally dependant. "Animal denotes a semantic field of which also humans are part, but it also connotes a specific human being endowed with certain negative characteristics (being uncivilized, violent, unrational, *etc.*)" (Martinelli 2007: 158). This is contingent on the perception that animals have on a culture. The intelligence and the existence of the "soul" and "mind" of animals are sought in science and literature. Asquith mentions, "a most distinctive characteristic of the human/animal divide for Japanese is the inability of animals to cry (or laugh)" (Asquith 1997: 28). Is it a matter of semantics or the emotionality of it that culture has placed on to the animal?

British anthropologist Mary Douglas (1921-2007), who wrote extensively on symbolism and human culture, believed that negative cultural significance of bodily dirt is derived from the people's necessity to distinguish themselves from animals. Because humans see animals as not being able to control their bodily dirt, humans consider this dirt to be the worst of all and find it imperative to control it in order to distinguish themselves from animals (Ohnuki-Tierney 1981: 127). This subconscious separation seeps itself through ones relationship with nature.

Breaking away from stereotypes

Pigeonholing, in general, propels falsehood, but also stems from a prominent source. "The fact that human beings perceive and interpret animal behavior in culturally specific ways naturally leads to the creation of animal stereotypes, so that it is difficult to know where the man-made image ends and then real animal begins" (Mullan, Marvin 1987: 6). In the case of the wolves at Skansen Zoo, Stockholm, local workers have tried to change the perception of this animal as seeming to be cruel and violent by bringing pups to interact with the public. The thinking here is that personal experience will disassemble the negative associations derived from portrayals in folktales. Children stories such as Little Red Riding Hood and other fictional accounts, such as werewolves only perpetuate this stereotype. People should remember that wolves are animals, they are predators, but the context of the animal and their action is what forms perception and proper engagement.

Conclusion

Anthropomorphizing is natural to humans, but how it is used and under what circumstances is the point of controversy. The boundaries that constitute the transformative quality of using metaphors need to be better defined. In this sense anthropomorphic metaphors simply mirror, justify, and understand human acts and it is fine, but when attached to rather heavily metaphorical depiction of an animal, the harm is negative and long lasting. As straightforward as they come, Irish writer Louis MacNiece says, “Many people take to animals to escape from human beings — but often it turns out because they find the animals so human” (Mullan, Marvin 1987: 1).

Metaphors are thoughts, at times revelations about the way things are. Scientific metaphors possess uniquely powerful descriptive and predictive potential. These tools should be valued for the worth they carry, which is creating a literally rational and meaningful world. Thinking of metaphors as a sketchpad, as part of the investigative route to truth, is more productive than getting lost in using them in unverifiable descriptive situations. With that said, life is a process and a metaphor is simply part of that.

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Metafoor on metafoor

Kas loomad mõtlevad? Mida etoloogid või loomade käitumist uurivad teadlased mõtlevad, et nad mõtlevad? Kuna eri ajastute, distsipliinide ja kultuuride vahel pole selles küsimuses konsensust saavutatud, on antropomorfne „metafoorne” keel ebatäpne. Pamela J. Asquith süveneb etoloogia ajalukku, kultuurilistesse erinevustesse ja keelde, et uurida antropomorfismi kujunemist ja selle staatust vale kandjana. Tema ideed on esitatud essees „Miks antropomorfism ei ole metafoor: põimides mõisteid ja kultuure loomade käitumisuuringutes”. Asquith kutsub lugejat järele mõtlema keele ja selle tähelepanuta jäänud rolli üle teaduses.

Märksõnad: antropomorfism, etoloogia, metafoor