

LETTERS

Anthropomorphism and animal welfare revisited: Slater's challenge

Professor Peter Slater's recent review of the late John S Kennedy's *The New Anthropomorphism (Animal Welfare 1993, 2: 187-188)* only weakly conveys the nature of Professor Kennedy's strong and sometimes one-sided message concerning the presumed ills of anthropomorphism. Nonetheless, Slater presents a challenge that is more important than his review of Kennedy's book. While Slater is right in believing that Kennedy's ideas will be irritating to some, it should be noted that Kennedy's book will offend not only those who are fans of the careful use of anthropomorphic descriptions and explanations, but also will irritate those who want to see the issues discussed in a more fair, well-argued manner. See also M Ridley's review of this book, *Nature 1992, 359: 280*. In my view, readers of *Animal Welfare* should be exposed to some direct quotations from *The New Anthropomorphism* so that they can make up their own minds concerning some of Kennedy's claims.

First, with respect to anthropomorphic tendencies and their supposed negative effect on the field of ethology in general, it is claimed that

'Anthropomorphism must take its slice of the blame for a sort of malaise that has lately afflicted the subject of ethology as a whole' (p55)

Kennedy goes on to write

'In conclusion, I think we can be confident that anthropomorphism will be brought under control, even if it cannot be cured completely. Although it is probably programmed into us genetically as well as being

innoculated culturally that does not mean the disease is untreatable.' (p167)

That there is a sort of malaise in the subject of ethology as a whole simply does not jibe with current interest in the field among people with diverse backgrounds. A glance at any of the newer textbooks and old and new journals in the field shows that there is a lot of interest in ethology and the stimulating and difficult problems that ethological studies consider. Kennedy also claims, in the total absence of any data whatsoever, that there is some sort of genetic predisposition to engage in anthropomorphism. [Slater (p 187) also notes Kennedy's view that 'we are biased towards anthropomorphism' but Slater does not tell readers anything about Kennedy's claim that anthropomorphism is probably genetically programmed.] The claim suggesting that there is an underlying genetic cause for anthropomorphism is totally out of character with the rest of Kennedy's arguments that demand appeal to hard data. Kennedy cannot have it both ways, but he seems to want to have it both ways - he criticizes those who are either open-minded about anthropomorphism or those who favour anthropomorphism because in his view there are no hard data showing that anthropomorphism is useful, but then he makes unsubstantiated claims about possible genetic mechanisms responsible for anthropomorphism.

Perhaps Kennedy's closing sentences capture the essence of his views concerning anthropomorphism and animal cognition, some of which are closely linked to his stance on animal

welfare. He writes

'If scientists, at least finally cease to make the conscious or unconscious assumption that animals have minds, then the consequences can be expected to go beyond the boundaries of the study of animal behaviour. If the age-old mind-body problem comes to be considered as an exclusively human one, instead of indefinitely extended through the animal kingdom, then that problem too will have been brought nearer to a solution' (pp 167-168).

Kennedy's idea that the mind-body problem might be closer to solution if restricted to humans actually flies in the face of much recent work on the philosophy of mind, where a significant trend is towards naturalizing and even 'biologizing' mental properties. No doubt, Kennedy would regard such moves by philosophers as misguided, but they cannot simply be dismissed by a wave of the hand; at best his argument depends on a contentious philosophical position. This sort of argument is typical of many of those who want to stir up their foes but not engage them in open debate.

Two issues are of concern here. First, Kennedy's prose is typical of critics who write as if the only alternatives are an unconstrained, fuzzy-minded use of anthropomorphism on the one hand, and the total elimination of anthropomorphism on the other. Slater claims that Kennedy is sceptical of anthropomorphism, but Kennedy is not really at all sceptical. Rather, Kennedy attempts to close the door on useful debate by making uninformed and

outlandish claims such as those mentioned above. Kennedy is not objective at all, and he is as guilty as those whom he criticizes for bringing all sorts of baggage to their scientific work; Kennedy's baggage merely differs in kind. Further, while Slater notes Kennedy's concern that '*anthropomorphic attitudes have hampered research and led to false conclusions*' (p188), a point with which Slater agrees, both fail to point out that those who eschew anthropomorphic attitudes also can be wrong. There is a middle position which Kennedy (and others) ignore. Anthropomorphism can be useful if it serves heuristically to focus attention on questions about animal behaviour that might otherwise be ignored. Anthropomorphism might be used in a rigorous way to assist theory construction and to motivate empirical research projects (for discussion and numerous references see Bekoff M and Allen C 1994 *Cognitive ethology: Slayers, skeptics and proponents*. In Mitchell R W, Thompson N and Miles L (eds) *Anthropomorphism, Anecdotes and Animals: The Emperor's New Clothes*. University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln).

Second, while Kennedy fears that science is damaged by false assumptions, he does not hesitate to use a double standard that favours his views, some of which may be plagued by false assumptions. Kennedy's views on animal welfare are also informed and motivated by his fear of the ill effects of false assumptions. In his brief discussion of Kennedy's views on animal welfare, Slater makes a claim

that is perhaps even more important than his review of Kennedy's book, a claim that needs further fleshing out by and for those interested in animal welfare. Slater writes (contra Kennedy) on page 188 that '*the assumptions one brings to bear in designing experiments are not necessarily the same as those one should adopt in deciding how to treat animals*'. We really do need to know more about the assumptions that one does or should use in deciding how to treat non-human animals (hereafter animals), and how they connect, or even if they can connect, with the assumptions that influence experimental research that is supposedly more objective. My own fear is that those who demand hard data that bear on animal welfare will not be convinced by Slater's view, and that they will shut the door on further discourse because Slater's position is merely stated but unargued. Of course, a book review is not the place in which to develop this (or any other claim) in detail, but Slater's challenging statement is one that should motivate a lot of discussion among those interested in animal welfare. One, obvious and important connection between assumptions underlying scientific research and views on animal welfare is that it is false to believe that either is an objective enterprise. Each person comes to science with biases, just as each individual comes with biases to their views of the non-human animals whose very lives depend on their opinions of them. Slater (as have many others) notes that there are very difficult problems associated with studying animal welfare from an objective scientific viewpoint, and that Kennedy's

book highlights some of them. Perhaps the problems associated with studying animal welfare from an objective scientific viewpoint are insoluble, for among the reasons that an objective view cannot be attained is that it is impossible to be objective about the use of non-human animals by humans. If this is the case, what are we to do about it? **Certainly we cannot let the animals suffer because of our inability to accept that an objective study of animal welfare is impossible.**

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