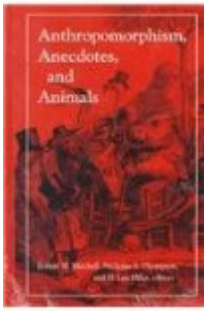
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert W. Mitchell, Nicholas S. Thompson, H. Lyn Miles, eds.. *Anthropomorphism, Anecdotes, and Animals.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997. xx + 518 pp. $35.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7914-3125-2.



Reviewed by Monique Bourque

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In *Anthropomorphism, Anecdotes, and Animals*, twenty-nine essays take up the question of whether, and to what extent, anthropomorphism and anecdotes are useful tools for describing and explaining animal behavior. In doing so, they examine the definition of anthropomorphism, the nature of scientific documentation, and the emotional content of human evaluation of animal cognition. Taken as a whole, the book is a thoughtful work which can provide valuable insights for the non-scientist interested in a broad introduction to the literature on animal behavior.

The book's nine sections examine the history of anthropomorphism and its definition as distinct from metaphor; subjectivity and objectivity in the description of animal behavior, and folk psychology as a way of understanding animal motivation; the role of anthropomorphism in explaining animal mental states; the use of anecdotes in anthropomorphism; the notion of intentionality in describing animal behavior; evaluating, describing, and explaining animal consciousness and self-consciousness; animal cognition; animal language; and differences between anthropomorphism and anecdote as tools for understanding animals. The book thus examines anthropomorphism as both a concept and as an analytical tool.

Although anthropomorphism and anecdotes are very old components of the scientific endeavor, the book takes as its starting point the "methodically anthropomorphic analysis of anecdotes of animals" put forth by Charles Darwin and his protege G.J. Romanes in the 1870s. Darwin and Romanes shared a belief that "all human emotions and intellectual abilities have simpler animal counterparts" (p. 17). They assumed that animals' mental processes could be explained as analogous to those of humans, and that these processes exist on a continuum of mental evolution in the animal world; in this view, the development of an individual human mind mirrors the process of evolution. The debates over animals' mental evolution settled almost immediately into arguments over the definition of types of thought processes, and analyzing language as a reflection of mental ability and activities. As outlined by the essays in this collection, the basic issues of the dis-

cussion of animals' intellectual activity and the interpretation of their behavior have changed little since the late nineteenth century, though the conceptual apparatus for discussing these issues has become increasingly complex.

A basic problem for several of the contributors, then, is defining the term anthropomorphism. For the contributors to this volume, anthropomorphism may defined most broadly as the description of animal behavior with reference to humans. Editor Robert Mitchell's essay "Anthropomorphism: A Guide for the Perplexed," which is inexplicably located at the end of the book, should be read at the beginning; it provides an excellent and much-needed map of the rest of the book. Mitchell divides anthropomorphism into three types: "global," which is anthropomorphism in its broadest sense, and includes both of the other two types; "inaccurate," which involves seeing human motives and characteristics reflected too literally in animal behavior, a common error in popular books (and, I would add, in nature documentaries); and "subjective" anthropomorphism, or mental state attribution, which describes the application of psychological principles to the study of animal behavior.

The essays cluster around these types of anthropomorphism in various ways; several authors argue that anthropomorphism is an inevitable part of human interaction with the world, and our attempt to make the world more comprehensible, and less fearsome. For several of the contributors, anthropomorphism includes by definition the inappropriate use of metaphor to understand animals; for others, it is a valuable tool if methodically and thoughtfully used. The most important questions, which are examined throughout this collection, are basic issues of both method and philosophy: what assumptions about the world do humans bring to the process of understanding animals? to what extent do humans "read" their own assumptions and motivations into animal behavior? is it possible to outline a method for describing animal behavior that does not direct the reader to a particular interpretation? is it possible to achieve an objective viewpoint in assessing animal behavior? The answers to these questions are not easily summarized in the context of a review, particularly since the writers often disagree. To the extent that they do, however, the book provides a useful introduction to some of the major issues in the field of animal behavior.

As is generally the case with essay collections, some chapters are more accessible and convincing than others. Among the most compelling are those which deal most directly with questions of the attribution of motivation to animals. Gordon Gallup, Jr., Lori Marino, and Timothy Eddy explore the distinction between the attribution of mental states to animals, and the self-awareness implied by such attribution. They argue that most species lack the self-awareness necessary to "make inferences about knowledge states in others" (p. 91)--a necessary prerequisite to understanding and sympathizing with other animals; people, on the other hand, readily make such attributions to other species and even to inanimate objects and imaginary entities such as ghosts. Their explanation for why humans do this (in order to make the world more understandable and less frightening) is less compelling than that of Stewart Guthrie, who asserts that humans anthropomorphize because as a method it is the safest way to understand the world: "it is a good bet because if we are right, we gain much by the correct identification, while if we are wrong, we usually lose little" (p. 56). In other words, we order the world in terms of what matters most to us as humans: "we scan an ambiguous world, first, with models determined by our most pressing interests" (p. 56). Other particularly thought-provoking contributions include Paul Silverman's essay examining existing criteria for attributing mental states to animals, and calling for greater rigor in establishing criteria for evidence of mind; these criteria, he argues, must take into account the

probable/intended uses of the conclusions which will be reached in any experiment in identifying and establishing evidence of mind in animals. Easily the most entertaining essay in the volume is Elizabeth Knoll's examination of Darwin's anthropomorphism, which included man in his continuum of mental evolution. Knoll suggests that Victorian readers found Darwin's ideas palatable in part because in ***The Descent of Man*** and ***The Expression of Emotion in Men and Animals***, he used for primary examples either the most humanlike (apes, for example) or the most comfortingly domestic (dogs). In other words, Darwin clearly reflected in this writing on animals his readers' assumptions about themselves.

The book originated in a session at the 1989 annual meeting of the Animal Behavior Society, intended to examine psychological interpretations of animal behavior. While the cover copy claims it was authored by an array of scholars including historians, psychologists, philosophers, biologists, anthropologists, and behaviorists, suggesting a broad range of perspectives, the majority of the contributors are psychologists and biologists. The book will therefore be of greatest interest to readers with background in these fields. There is some overlap in the background literature examined in several of the essays, but the reader who lacks background in the subject of animal behavior may find this helpful in connecting the essays.

Although the essays in this book certainly encourage the reader to take seriously the connections between humans and animals, this is not a book to provide ammunition for animal-rights advocates seeking scientific support for the equality of humans and animals. If anything, these essays show us that, Alex the parrot and Koko the gorilla notwithstanding, humans are no closer to understanding animals than we have ever been.

[Part 2: ""]

Date: Tue, 24 Mar 1998 12:14:06 EST From: VogelGreif <VogelGreif@AOL.COM> Reply-To: H-Net Discussion List on Nature in Legend and Story <H-NILAS@H-NET.MSU.EDU> To: H-NILAS@H-NET.MSU.EDU Subject: Book Review: Anthropomorphism, Anecdotes and Animals

Robert W. Mitchell, Nicholas S. Thompson, and H. Lyn Miles, eds. ***Anthropomorphism, Anecdotes, and Animals***. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997. xx + 518 pp. $21.95 (paper), ISBN 0-7914-3126-6

Reviewed for H-NILAS by Monique Bourque <mbourque@sas.upenn.edu>, University of Pennsylvania

In ***Anthropomorphism, Anecdotes, and Animals***, 29 essays take up the question of whether, and to what extent, anthropomorphism and anecdotes are useful tools for describing and explaining animal behavior. In doing so, they examine the definition of anthropomorphism, the nature of scientific documentation, and the emotional content of human evaluation of animal cognition. Taken as a whole, the book is a thoughtful work which can provide valuable insights for the non-scientist interested in a broad introduction to the literature on animal behavior.

The book's nine sections examine the history of anthropomorphism and its definition as distinct from metaphor; subjectivity and objectivity in the description of animal behavior, and folk psychology as a way of understanding animal motivation; the role of anthropomorphism in explaining animal mental states; the use of anecdotes in anthropormorphism; the notion of intentionality in describing animal behavior; evaluating, describing, and explaining animal consciousness and self-consciousness; animal cognition; animal language; and differences between anthropomorphism and anecdote as tools for under-

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