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Title: The Risk of Conservatism in Comparative Psychology

Abstract:

Comparative psychologists investigate human and nonhuman animal cognition. Research in this field is largely isolated from concerns about the ethical and practical treatment of animals. Social and ethical values, however, are crucial for assessing the sufficiency of evidence for hypotheses with practical import. Hypotheses in comparative psychology have such import, as knowledge of an organism's cognitive capacities affects how we think that organism ought to be treated. I argue for the consideration of social and ethical values in relation to comparative psychology, drawing on contemporary animal mindreading research to illustrate my case. Research in animal mindreading (or "theory of mind") exhibits a high tolerance for false negatives. This carries a risk, as false negatives can lead one to treat individuals in ways deemed unacceptable had the true cognitive and affective abilities of these animals been known. The current general tolerance for false negatives should be replaced with a case-by-case assessment of acceptable levels of risk, given a hypothesis and its practical and ethical consequences.

Biography:

Marta Halina is a University Lecturer in the Philosophy of Psychology and Cognitive Science at Cambridge University, UK. She received her PhD in Philosophy and Science Studies at the University of California, San Diego, in 2013 and was a McDonnell Postdoctoral Fellow in the Philosophy-Neuroscience-Psychology Program at Washington University in St. Louis before coming to Cambridge in 2014. Her current research focuses on issues related to nonhuman animal mindreading, ape gestural communication, and mechanistic explanation in biology.

Marta is a fellow of Selwyn College where she directs studies in History and Philosophy of Science (HPS) and the Psychological and Behavioural Sciences (PBS). She also leads the subproject "Kinds of Intelligence" at the new Leverhulme Centre for the Future of Intelligence: <http://lcfi.ac.uk/projects/kinds-intelligence/>

Research interests:

General philosophy of science (experimentation, explanation, modeling, the new mechanistic philosophy), philosophy of psychology and cognitive science (comparative psychology, nonhuman animal cognition and communication, cognitive ethology, embodied and distributed cognition, neuroscience), philosophy of biology (mechanistic explanation and discovery, model organisms).

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