Devising a Paradigm for the Assessment of Guilt across Species

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Abstract : While there exist frameworks to study the induction, manifestation, duration and general nature of emotions like shame, guilt, embarrassment and pride in humans, the same cannot be said for other species. This is because such 'complex' emotions have situational inductions and manifestations that supposedly vary due to differences between and within different species' ethology. This paper looks at the socio-adaptive functions of guilt to posit why this emotion might be observed across varying species. Primarily, the experimental paradigm of guilt-assessment in domesticated dogs is critiqued for lack of ethological consideration in its measurement and analysis. It is argued that a paradigm for guilt-assessment should measure the species-specific prosocial approach behavior instead of the immediate feedback of the 'guilty'. Finally, it is asserted that the origin of guilt is subjective and if it must be studied across a plethora of species, its definition must be tailored to fit accordingly.

Keywords : guilt, assessment, dogs, prosocial approach behavior, empathy, species, ethology

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