

Anthropomorphism in the Primate Mind-Reading Debate: A Critique of Sober's Justification Argument

Authors : Boyun Lee

Abstract : This study aims to discuss whether anthropomorphism some scientists tend to use in cross-species comparison can be justified epistemologically, especially in the primate mind-reading debate. Concretely, this study critically analyzes Elliott Sober's argument about mind-reading hypothesis (MRH), an anthropomorphic hypothesis which states that nonhuman primates (e.g., chimpanzee) are mind-readers like humans. Although many scientists consider anthropomorphism as an error and choosing anthropomorphic hypothesis like MRH without any definite evidence invalid, Sober advocates that anthropomorphism is supported by cladistic parsimony that suggests choosing the simplest hypothesis postulating the minimum number of evolutionary changes, which can be justified epistemologically in the mind-reading debate. However, his argument has several problems. First, Reichenbach's theorem which Sober uses in process of showing that MRH has the higher likelihood than its competing hypothesis, behavior-reading hypothesis (BRH), does not fit in the context of inferring the evolutionary relationship. Second, the phylogenetic tree Sober supports is one of the possible scenarios of MRH, and even without this problem, it is difficult to prove that the possibility nonhuman primate species and human share mind-reading ability is higher than the possibility of the other case, considering how evolution occurs. Consequently, it seems hard to justify anthropomorphism of MRH under Sober's argument. Some scientists and philosophers say that anthropomorphism sometimes helps observe interesting phenomena or make hypotheses in comparative biology. Nonetheless, we cannot determine that it provides answers about why and how the interesting phenomena appear or which of the hypotheses is better, at least the mind-reading debate, under the current state.

Keywords : anthropomorphism, cladistic parsimony, comparative biology, mind-reading debate

Conference Title : ICCPSSO 2018 : International Conference on Comparative Primate Socioecology and Social Organization

Conference Location : Tokyo, Japan

Conference Dates : May 28-29, 2018