

Abstract:

The British biologist, philosopher, and psychologist, Conwy Lloyd Morgan, is widely regarded as one of the founders of comparative psychology. He is especially well known for his eponymous canon, which aimed to provide a rule for the interpretation of mind from behavior. Emphasizing the importance of the context in which Morgan was working – one in which casual observations of animal behavior could be found in *Nature* magazine every week and psychology itself was fighting for scientific legitimacy – I provide an interwoven account of Morgan's efforts at discipline building, his philosophy of science, and his biological thought. To this end, I explore the surprising connections between evolutionary theory and early work on learning. I allege that with the decline of Lamarckism, and the commensurate inability to easily explain the acquisition of complex behaviors, Morgan was motivated to turn towards development. Further emphasizing the importance of evolutionary theory to Morgan's work, I seek to show that the canon only works as Morgan intended when paired with his broader understanding of mental evolution, and in particular the Herbert Spencer inflected notion that mental evolution forms a linear sequence. In this way, Morgan's canon also provides a significant example of how even wide-ranging methodological dictums can be importantly tethered to local context.