

A built-in objection against if-I-were-a-horse argument

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Abstract. Max Gluckman introduces us to if-I-were-a-horse arguments, but what is wrong with them? In this paper, I draw attention to an objection built-in to the terminology.

Draft version: Version 3 (16th September 2022)

“If I were a horse, I could go this way

And I could go that

And so I think I shall stay where I’m at.”

In one of his books, the anthropologist Max Gluckman tells us about earlier anthropologists, before the revolution in the 1920s:

...in many cases, they used a mode of reasoning which a great social anthropologist, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955), called the ‘if-I-were-a-horse’ argument. This refers to a story of a Middle West farmer whose horse strayed out of its paddock. The farmer went into the middle of the paddock, chewed some grass, and asked himself: ‘Now if I were a horse, where would I go?’ It is undoubtedly caricature to apply this joke to the very learned and intelligent books of many anthropologists; but there is also an element of truth in this—as in many—caricatures. (1965: 2)

I am not convinced that the arguments Radcliffe-Brown and Gluckman have in mind are best referred to as “if-I-were-a-horse arguments,” because presumably the farmer is interested in

working out where the horse will go next, so as to anticipate that move and be there. The farmer is interested in the future, in predicting. Even if the horse will not go anywhere, by everyday standards, he is interested in predicting that. The earlier social anthropologist, in contrast, was often interested in explaining what has been done, and done by fellow humans (e.g. Frazer 1894).

But someone might say, “You would not use this term, but the tribe of anthropologists do, and so using this method of argument is not a good way of understanding people.” There is an objection to if-I-were-a-horse arguments more or less built-in to the terminology!

References

Frazer, J.G. 1894. *The Golden Bough, Volume 1*. New York: Macmillan.

Gluckman, M. 1965. *Politics, Law and Ritual in Tribal Society*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.