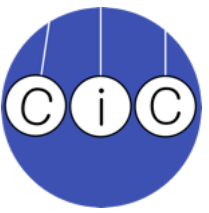# Teleology and generics

David Rose, Siying Zhang, Qi Han & Tobias Gerstenberg
Department of Psychology, Stanford University

Introduction

Generic statements, such as "Bees have stripes", are supposed to transmit essentialist beliefs about categories.

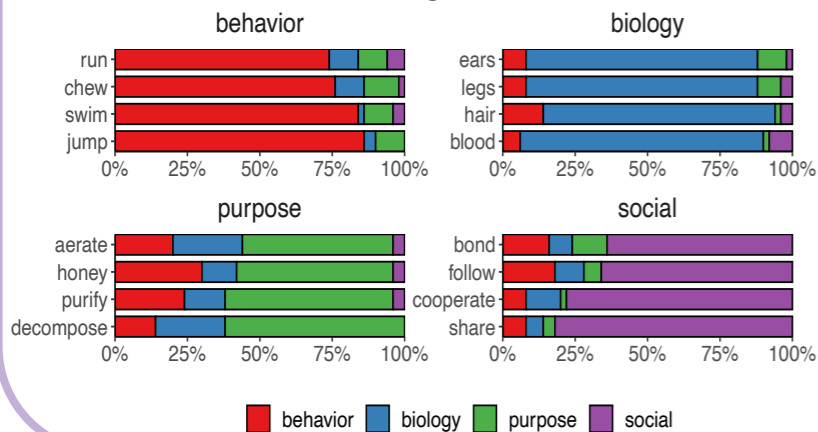But is it generics or features that matter?

Hypotheses:
1. Teleological properties, what something is for, matter more than other feature types.
2. Generic vs. specific form of statement doesn't matter.

Approach:
1. Get features that people view as falling into types.
2. Use these in generic and specific statements.
3. Change features in transformation cases to determine if that affects categorization.

Experiment 1

Properties that people place into different categories

Experiment 2

Generic/specific statement → Categorize features

Vulpans jump, are warm-blooded, enable decomposition, and share food with group members.

Please categorize the following properties in the table below for **Vulpans**.

For each property, indicate whether you think it is best categorized as:
a biological property, a behavioral property, a social property, or a property that is related to its purpose.

Please select a unique category for each property.

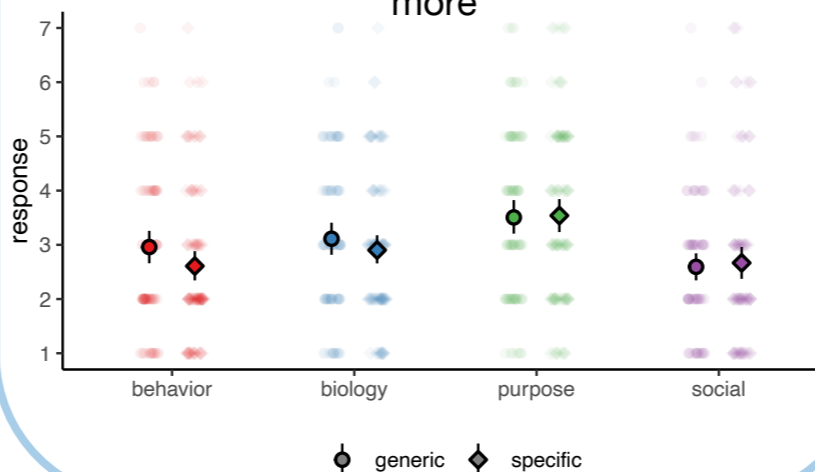| Property	Category			
enable decomposition	○ biological	○ behavioral	○ social	○ purpose
are warm blooded	○ biological	○ behavioral	○ social	○ purpose
share food with group members	○ biological	○ behavioral	○ social	○ purpose
jump	○ biological	○ behavioral	○ social	○ purpose

Feature transformation → Categorize creature

One day, toxic waste is dumped into a nearby river and a **Vulpan** is exposed to it. As a result, it underwent some changes.
Its **biological** properties changed so that now it **NO LONGER** *is warm blooded*.
Instead, it *has hair* like a **Zerp**.

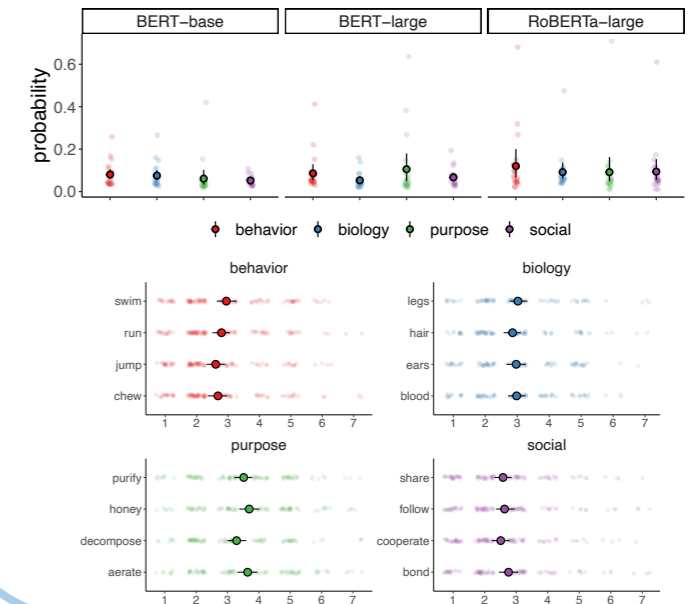| Category	Vulpans	Thing after the changes	Zerps
biological	are warm blooded	has hair	have hair
behavioral	jump	jumps	swim
social	share food with group members	shares food with group members	cooperate with group members
purpose	enable decomposition	enables decomposition	purify water

To what extent do you think the **thing after the changes** is a **Vulpan** or a **Zerp**?

definitely a Vulpan — unsure — definitely a Zerp

Generic/specific doesn't matter; Teleology matters more
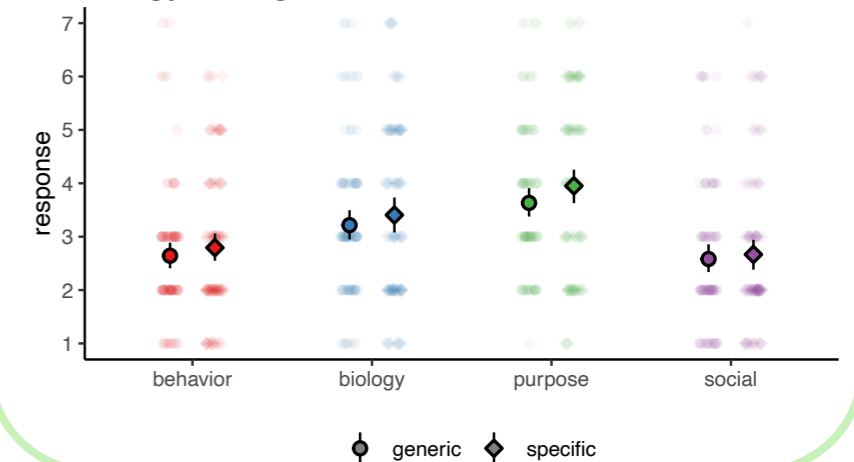

Experiment 2 (cont'd)

Teleology isn't merely more diagnostic

Experiment 3

Teleology, not generics, matter more in induction

Conclusion

Teleological properties matter more than generics and other feature types. This may be because purposes are treated as essences. Teleological essentialism captures this.