The
Culture Clash

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For Lassie

Chapter One
Getting the Dog's Perspective

Walt Disney vs. B.F. Skinner

A book published in the early 1990s refers to the "moral code" of dogs. It became a bestseller. It seems that most people still buy into the Walt Disney dog: he is very intelligent, has morals, is capable of planning and executing revenge, solves complex problems, and understands the value of the artifacts in Walt's home. Nobody wants B.F. Skinner's dog: the input-output black box who is so obviously not the furry member of our family. It's been marketed all wrong, I think. Skinner was right but has gotten bad press. The truth must be presented in a way that people will start to buy into. They have to, because not getting it has led to the death of countless dogs. Here is an example to illustrate the difference.

A dog has been reprimanded every time he was caught chewing furniture. Now the dog refrains from chewing furniture when the owner is home but becomes destructive when left alone. When the owner comes home and discovers the damage, the dog slinks around, ears back and head down.

Walt's view: The dog learns from the reprimand that chewing furniture is wrong, and that the owner hates it. The dog resents being left alone and, to get back at the owner, chews the furniture when the owner leaves. He deliberately, in other words, engages in an act he knows to be wrong. When the owner comes home the dog feels guilty about what he has done.

BF's view: The dog learns that chewing furniture is dangerous when the owner is present but safe when the owner is gone. The dog is slightly anxious when left alone and feels better when he chews. It also helps pass the time. Later, when the owner comes home, the dog behaves appeasingly in an attempt to avoid or turn off the harsh treatment he has learned often happens at this time. The owner's arrival home and/or pre-punishment demeanor have become a predictor: the dog knows he's about to be punished. He doesn't know why.

There is no question whatsoever that the second view is the accurate one. The question is not which interpretation is the truth but rather why anyone still argues the point. The medical equivalent would be a significant percentage of the American public thinking disease was caused by imbalance in humors, rather than microorganisms.

The accurate information has been around for decades, yet most people who own dogs haven't learned it yet. One reason for our astonishingly poor understanding of dogs is extremely slow trickle down from experts: those in applied behavior educating one owner or one class at a time rather than something on the scale of public service announcements or spots on Oprah. Not only is this missing, fantastically inaccurate information about dog behavior is actively disseminated on reality TV.

But I think there's a second reason for the slow acceptance of realistic interpretations of dog behavior: simple reluctance to let go of anthropomorphism. Behaviorism, made famous by Skinner, has suffered some serious backlash since its assault on the world of psychology in the mid-twentieth century, largely because it could be successfully argued that hardcore behaviorism comes up short for understanding humans in all their mega-brain complexity. When it comes to animal training and behavior modification, however, the fit is incredibly good. But so far no amount of evidence makes the behaviorist model palatable to the average dog owner. The implications of this are really important.

The impressive staying power of Walt's warmhearted but distorted view of dogs is a perverse measure of how much we like them. We want them to be smart, morally "good." Many cynics see dogs as superior to people in their loyalty and trustworthiness. By contrast, the behaviorist model hasn't caught on in the mainstream because it seems to reduce dogs to input-output machines. Our fear is that if we accept this viewpoint, we strip dogs of their status as honorary humans, with the logical extension of negative ramifications for their welfare.

In other words, humans are tribal. Our compassion and consideration for other beings is strongly aligned with our perception of how similar they are to us, and a strong measure of that similarity is intelligence. IQ is still an acceptable prejudice. Heated ethical discussions ensued when the question of language acquisition in great apes was raised. Without a possible capacity for language, it had somehow seemed more okay to accept a utilitarian attitude towards them. No one much questioned the premise of intelligence as criterion for being considered for compassionate treatment.

Our species has a long history of incredible violence and horror perpetrated, essentially, because the victims were too far outside our perceived tribe. Our current tribal boundaries have a lot to do with species, IQ and moral integrity. Our bond with dogs is obviously strong. But they are the wrong species. To explain the bond, we compensate by exaggerating how much they resemble us in the areas of intelligence and morality. This is a typical example of a bias or attitude coming first and then edifices of explanatory facts or fictions being built in support of it.

But things do change. I think we're more ready than we ever have been to accept the real species. We are now living in a culture that is much more aware of the concepts of tolerance and validation. Dogs are not like us, not nearly as much as we thought, but that's okay. We can still bond with them, share our lives with them and use them as surrogate children without apology. We don't have to

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build myths surrounding their nature to legitimize how we feel about them. They are valuable and fascinating as they really are. They don't need to be promoted in intelligence or morality to merit fair treatment or places in our families. Empathy and compassion for beings that are clearly unlike ourselves is a phase of ethical progress.

Facing up to reality is important not just because anthropomorphism has outlived its usefulness. It has always had a very real down-side for dogs. Plenty of perfectly good dogs are insufficiently Lassielike to their owners and subjected to still-legal sadistic training practices. The greatest gains for the welfare of dogs are now to be found in abandoning the Disney dog notion and replacing it with information from two sources: dog behavior and the science of animal learning. Indeed, it is our *responsibility* to be informed about the basic needs of the species we are trying to live with as well as the vast and well-developed behavior modification technology available to us. If we achieve this, we can help them fit into our society without totally subjugating their nature.

Lemon-Brains but We Can Still Like Them

The two areas in which there is the greatest amount of myth and knowledge void are:

1) dog behavior, i.e. the genetic endowment and constraints or "hard-wiring" the dog comes with, and
2) animal learning, i.e. the nuts & bolts about how experience affects the behavior of dogs and other animals, including us.

Humans also learn through operant and classical conditioning[1]. In this respect, we are like dogs. However we, unlike dogs, are also masterful at learning through observation and insight. We have language to mediate our thoughts, we can move mentally from past

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[1] "Classical" and "Pavlovian" conditioning are the same thing

to present to future and think abstractly. We internalize values taught to us, most of us developing qualities like compassion and a conscience, a sense of right and wrong. Behaving congruently with our values gives us self-esteem, a feeling of integrity. All of which swishes dogs completely.

Dogs are completely and innocently selfish. They learn almost exclusively through operant and classical conditioning. Although some of their behaviors are socially facilitated, there is no good evidence that they have the all-purpose Swiss Army Knife imitation tool that humans have. Here is the important point: this doesn't make them stupid or any less valuable than they would be if they could think more like us.

In fact, dogs are great learners. They can discriminate extremely fine differences in their environment. They have incredible olfactory powers. They can deal with complex social environments. They may have a rich emotional life. But they do not think abstractly. They are amoral. They cannot move mentally forward and backward through time. And although they can learn to discriminate the relevance of certain words, they do not understand language.

Let's examine our penchant for inflating the importance of intelligence and language in determining the worth of living beings. Psychologist Steven Pinker has noted that little money has been thrown at and no films made on the search for extraterrestrial marsupialism, or, for that matter any other adaptation organisms have evolved or might evolve to make a living. We're looking for *intelligence*. Nobody stops to think that this is evidence of a bias.

So while intelligence is but one strategy to gain evolutionary foothold, it is the only one we feel is worth searching outer space for. The jury is even out on whether our strategy will help us go the distance, long-term survival-wise.

Pinker says:

"Though language is a magnificent ability unique to Homo sapiens among living species, it does not call for sequestering the study of humans from the domain of biology, for a magnificent ability unique to a particular living species is far from unique in the animal kingdom. Some kinds of bats home in on flying insects using Doppler sonar. Some kinds of migratory birds navigate thousands of miles by calibrating the position of the constellations against the time of day and year. In nature's talent show we are simply a species of primate with our own act, a knack for communicating information about who did what to whom by modulating the sounds we make when we exhale." (*The Language Instinct,* 1994)

We all, publicly at least, denounce discrimination based on race, sex, age or body-size but the tyranny of brain-power remains and is ever so subtle. There are few more egregious insults than to call someone stupid. Ponder for a minute how you would feel about using rats in experiments to test drugs if it were discovered that rats are sophisticated, pacifist, psychic beings with IQs greater than the average human. If we still somehow had the might to perpetrate anything we wanted on them, it would raise insurmountable moral questions because our internal justification for using them has less to do with our might than the fact that, well, they're not very smart, are they.

Dogs (like rats) are multitalented but they are also not very smart the way humans are. A recent book, devoted to the intelligence of dogs, is 250+ pages long (Stanley Coren, *The Intelligence of Dogs: A Guide to the Thoughts, Emotions, and Inner Lives of Our Canine Companions,* 1994). Interestingly, despite careful qualifications by Coren regarding definitions, the ranking of breeds by intelligence literally made newspaper headlines. We are obviously fascinated by the notion that dogs - or at least certain breeds of dog - might, just might, be really, really smart. It all makes as much sense as evaluating humans on our ability to sniff for bombs or echo-locate.

We crave anecdotes about genius dogs and these abound. Everyone knows a story that illustrates how smart dogs are. But a fundamental question has never been answered by proponents of reasoning in dogs: if dogs are capable of these feats of brain power at all, why are they not performing them *all the time*? Why never in controlled conditions? What is most tedious about these claims is the lack of rigor in evaluating them. It reminds me of people who leap to unlikely conclusions about things like circles in English wheat fields. Before theorizing that the circles were made by extra-terrestrials, more likely explanations have to be ruled out, such as sophisticated pranksters. The latter turned out to be the case, but not before a huge amount of interest (not to mention a film) was generated by extra-terrestrial theories. It would seem parsimony when evaluating possible interpretations is not mankind's natural inclination. Likewise, before jumping to the conclusion that the dog thinks abstractly and moralizes, first rule out an explanation based on operant and classical conditioning. I actually find it disturbing that my dogs' value is based on myth and exaggeration, as though their reality wasn't good enough. Their value comes from their real beings, their dogginess. They don't need mental upgrading. They are worthy and wonderful as they are.

So what is the fallout for dogs of the Lassie myth? As soon as you bestow intelligence and morality, you bestow the responsibility that goes along with them. In other words, if the dog knows it's wrong to destroy furniture yet deliberately and maliciously does it, remembers the wrong he did and feels guilt, it feels like he merits a punishment[2], doesn't it? That's just what dogs have been getting - a lot of punishment. We set them up for all kinds of punishment by overestimating their ability to think. Interestingly, it's the "cold" behaviorist model that ends up giving dogs a much better crack at meeting the demands we make of them. The myth gives problems

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[2] The word "punishment" here is used in its everyday sense – those already familiar with operant conditioning jargon will recognize from the context that what I'm referring to is positive punishment

to dogs they cannot solve and then punishes them for failing. And the saddest thing is that the main association most dogs have with that punishment is the presence of their owner. This puts a pretty twisted spin on loooving dogs 'cause they're so smart, doesn't it?

Learning theory, i.e. behaviorism, is the best means we have to understand and modify the behavior of our dogs. It is best both in terms of effectiveness and therefore, by extension, in terms of minimizing wear and tear on the dog and on the dog-human relationship. The large-scale unwillingness to accept and develop our expertise in applying the principles of animal learning is defended on grounds that don't hold up when scrutinized. The basis in science leaves people cold yet the warm model, as we've seen, lays the foundation for endless punishments of these brilliant, moral, yet law-breaking beings. My argument is that dogs aren't demeaned or reduced to the status of laboratory rats by applying what has been learned by behavioral science. I'm incensed, in fact, by the incredible irony that zillions of rats AND dogs lived pretty awful lives in laboratories and were subjected to zillions of rotten experiments in order to come up with basic principles of how animals learn. One of the most obvious applications of the knowledge so gained would be dog training, no? Kind of a double whammy for your species to be used in the experiments and then have the mass public ignore the results and continue to punish you because you're so smart. Of all the windows in existence to communicate with dogs, operant conditioning is the window that is open the widest. We should start using it.

The Eager to Please Fallacy

The anthropomorphic spin on dog behavior is not limited to exaggerations of their intelligence. We also misinterpret their regard for us. When are we going to put to bed once and for all the concept that dogs have a "desire to please?" What a vacuous, dangerous idea. I'm still waiting to meet this dog who wants to please his owner. Indeed, where is this dog who is interested at all in the internal state of his owner except with regard to how

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manifestations of this state impact events of relevance to the dog? Actually, let's start by tracking down a dog who can form representations of another being's internal states at all. Although praise works as a reinforcer for some individuals in the total absence of any competing motivation, this effect is limited, and casts some pretty extreme doubt on a "desire to please" module.

Closer scrutiny makes the case even weaker. Rule out, for starters, that the praise functions as a safety cue - a predictor of extremely low likelihood of aversives. This is evident in traditional obedience classes. The primary motivation is said to be praise. The primary motivation is actually avoidance of aversives, called "leash corrections." If the trainer is any good, the dog learns that if a response is praised, a correction has been avoided, and so the praise acquires meaning and relevance. But does this mean the dog is employing this sound as evidence of some internal state of the maker of the sound? This is unlikely.

Praise can also acquire some "charge" as a secondary reinforcer in the day-to-day life of a dog. People tend to praise dogs more before doling out cookies, attention, walkies and games. This all is more evidence of what we already knew and should be exploiting with a tad more sophistication: *dogs learn by the immediate results of their actions, and by tip-offs to important events in their lives.*

And yet the use of food in training meets moralistic resistance among a staggering number of owners. I once spoke to a traditional trainer who poured scorn on the use of food as a motivator. The line he trotted out, and which still makes me retch even to this day, was: "If you use food to train, the dog is doing it for the food and not for you." This man's dog, trained by avoidance with a strangle collar, was supposedly doing it for him because the only *positive* reinforcer was praise. Trainers who make claims about dogs working "to please" or strictly for praise seem oblivious to the main motivator they employ: pain.

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The first task in training any animal is finding out what motivates it. No motivation, no training. All animals are motivated by food, water, sex, and avoiding aversives. If they are not motivated by these at all, they die. A lot of animals can be motivated by play, attention, and the opportunity to socialize with or investigate other dogs and interesting smells. All animals can be motivated by signals that represent one of these primary reinforcers, provided the relationship between the signal and the primary is kept adequately strong. This is mostly where praise comes in, as a sort of imprecise marker that tells the animal the probability of a primary has improved. If you opt not to use positive reinforcement, you end up, like they all do, using aversives and announcing that your dog is doing it for you. How pathetic.

None of this is to say praise isn't good or important. I personally praise my dogs an embarrassing amount because I like them and I like doing it. They like it when I'm in a good mood because Good Things Happen for Dogs when She's in a Good Mood. I personally love it when someone like my Kung Fu instructor, who has power over me, is in a good mood, but not because I'm genetically wired with a desire to please him. My interest in my teacher's mood is pretty selfish, and *I'm* supposed to be a morally advanced human. Any interest your dog has in your mood is based on what he has learned it means for him. And that's okay.

Praise does work as a primary reinforcer for some dogs. They like it enough to work for it, especially when it's the only game in town. But this is weak grounds on which to marginalize those dogs for whom praise does not work as a primary. It is also weak grounds to support the hypothesis of an underlying mechanism of desire to please. A lot of dogs seem to kind of like praise but won't reliably work for it. This is fine. There's a difference between expressing affection to the dog, for what it's definitely worth to the human and for whatever it may be worth to the dog, and relying on praise as a principal means of motivating an animal in training or behavior modification. In other words, don't confuse bonding

activities with training and behavior mod. For the latter, heavier artillery is usually needed.

Some people feel disappointed to discover the necessity of using heavier artillery like food and access to fun and games and other primaries in order to condition their animal. They feel like their particular dog is a lemon because he "listens when he wants to," "only does it when I have a cookie," and has in short little or no desire to please. ***Generations of dogs have been labeled lemons for requiring actual motivation when all along they were normal.*** In fact, many people are actually put off by the intensity with which dogs will work for strong primary reinforcers such as food. It assaults any belief they might have in the desire to please myth, and makes them feel less important to the dog ("wow, is *this* what motivation looks like?"). I'm still waiting to meet a real dog with desire to please. If he shows up, I'll send him for therapy.

The desire to please thing has been fed, largely, by the misreading of certain dog behaviors. Dogs get excited when we come home, solicit attention and patting from us, and lick us. They are very compulsive about their greeting rituals. They often shadow us around when we're available and become gloomier or even anxious when we leave. They are highly social and genetically unprepared for the degree of absence from family members they experience in a human environment. They also bounce back amazingly well, to a point, from the immense amount of punishment we mete out at them. They monitor our every movement. I can see how this could be interpreted as worship, but it's important not to get a big ego about it: they are monitoring our every movement for signs that something might happen *for dogs*.

My dogs' brains are continuously and expertly checking out the behavior of humans, working out to eight decimal places the probability at any given second of cookies, walks, attention, Frisbee and endless hours of deliriously orgasmic games with the latex hedgehog. They appear devoted to me because I throw a mean Frisbee and have opposable thumbs that open cans. Not to

say we don't have a bond. We are both bonding species. But they don't worship me. I'm not sure they have a concept of worship. Their love is also not grounds for doing whatever I say. It is, in fact, irrelevant to training. To control their behavior, I must constantly manipulate the consequences of their actions and the order and intensity of important stimuli. Interestingly, some of the most sophisticated training jobs are done where no love and little bond is present. This is not to say that training is not one of the best ways around to *foster* a bond. It is. But it's not a prerequisite of training.

The Dominance Panacea

The other model that has been put forth as a quasi-justification for the use of aversives in training is pack theory. Ever since the linear hierarchy was postulated in wolves, dog people have gone cuckoo in their efforts to explain every conceivable dog behavior and human-dog interaction in terms of "dominance." We really latched onto that one. It is a great example of a successful meme. Dogs misbehave or are disobedient because they haven't been shown who's boss. You must be the "alpha" in your "pack." Aside from amounting to yet another justification for aversives-oriented training methods - the dog is supposedly staying up nights thinking up ways to stage a coup so you'd better keep him in his place with plenty of coercion - dominance has provided a panacea-like explanation for dog behaviors.

For the owner, this simple explanation makes unnecessary the work of boning up on a myriad of other topics, like how animals learn. Notions like dogs rushing through doors ahead of their owners or pulling on leash to exert dominance over their owners are too stupid for words. Some poor people have it so backwards that they view appeasement behaviors such as jumping up to lick or pawing as dominance displays and thus fair game for aversive training. The dominance panacea is, once again, a case of leaping to a conclusion before ruling out more obvious explanations. Dogs chew furniture because what else could furniture possibly be for?

They are disobedient because they have no idea what is being asked of them, are undermotivated to comply, or something else has won the behavioral gambit at that moment in time, like a fleeing squirrel. Rank is not likely on their minds.

So, a separation has to be made between a dog behaving appeasingly and a dog being under aversive control. If you apply continuous shock to an animal after giving the recall cue, turn it off when the dog makes contact with you, and the dog learns he can escape and later avoid the shock by coming as soon as you give the cue, you have aversive control. You can do the same thing more clumsily, and many do, by using strangle collars or rolled up newspapers. This is not necessarily a dominance maneuver, however. How it impacts rank, if that exists, is up for grabs.

Likewise, if a dog knows that he has a one in five chance for a reward if he comes and that the great likelihood is he will be able to return to what he is doing if he comes immediately, and will in fact *lose* a few minutes' freedom if he fails to comply, he's also going to exhibit a strong recall. This is control without aversives. What's important here is not what brand of motivation you use, avoidance or positive reinforcement, but the near total absence of bearing this has on the whole question of dominance. When most people say they have a dominance problem, usually they mean one of two things: they have a *compliance* problem, or else the dog is biting or threatening them. It may very well be in both cases that the dog's self-perception is that he is dominant over the owner. It could also be the case that the dog's self-perception is he is second-to-last in rank of all organic matter on the planet yet is still undermotivated to comply and/or bites people. You could have a dog whose self-perception is that he is very dominant yet is a world-class obedience dog and never bites or wants to bite anyone.

If the problem is compliance, the dog can be successfully trained to comply using operant conditioning. This is the direct-access means to modifying behavior. Using concepts like dominance to explain that a dog doesn't want to come when he has not been conditioned

to do so and had the behavior proofed against competing motivation is needlessly muddying the water. You can flip him on his back all you want and he will still fail to come if he's untrained and unproofed. And, you can flip him on his back and hold him down all night (and precede him through doorways) and he's still going to bite you if you set up conditions that push him past his bite threshold. There is a staggering lack of rigor and parsimony in the dog world, and the popularity of dominance as explanation is a prime example.

Top Ten Behaviors People Attribute to "Dominance"

1) **Biting/aggression, especially towards family members**

2) **Pulling on leash**

3) **House-soiling, especially when accidents occur on beds, shoes etc.**

4) **Chewing valuable owner possessions**

5) **Jumping up to greet and pawing**

6) **Failing to come when called**

7) **Begging at table/pestering for handouts**

8) **Going through doorways first**

9) **Sleeping on forbidden furniture**

10) **Food/laundry stealing**

My favorite myth is going through doorways first. What silly person came up with the notion that a dog would understand, let alone exert dominance, by preceding his owner out the front door? When dogs are rushing through doors, mustn't we first rule out that

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they are trying to close distance between themselves and whatever is out there, as quickly as possible, because they are excited, because they are dogs, and because they have never been presented with a reason not to?

Whenever there's this desperate grasp for "whywhywhy" a dog does something, rather than being taken by a red herring like "pack theory," first rule out:

1) because it's being reinforced somewhere in the environment

2) because no one ever made a case to do otherwise (i.e., why not?)

The dominance panacea is so out of proportion that entire schools of training are based on the premise that if you can just exert adequate dominance over the dog, everything else will fall into place. Not only does it mean that incredible amounts of abuse are going to be perpetrated against any given dog, probably exacerbating problems like unreliable recalls and biting, but the real issues, like well-executed conditioning and the provision of an adequate environment, are going to go unaddressed, resulting in a still-untrained dog, perpetuating the pointless dominance program.

None of this is to say that dogs aren't one of those species whose social life appears to lend itself to beloved hierarchy constructs. But, they also see well at night, and no one is proposing retinal surgery to address their non-compliance or biting behavior. Pack theory is simply not the most elegant model for explaining or, especially, for treating problems like disobedience, misbehavior or aggression. People who use aversives to train with a dominance model in mind would get a better result with less wear and tear on the dog by using aversives with a more thorough understanding of learning theory, or, better yet, forgoing aversives altogether and going with the other tools in the learning theory tool box. The

dominance concept is simply unnecessary. So, what do we know about real dogs?

Top Ten Things We Know About Real Dogs

1) **It's all chew toys to them (no concept of artifacts)**

2) **Amoral (no right vs. wrong, only safe vs. dangerous)**

3) **Self-interested (like all living organisms)**

4) **Lemon-brains (i.e., small and less convoluted brains)**

5) **Predator ancestry (search, chase, bite, dissect and/or chew software in most individuals)**

6) **Highly social (bond strongly and don't cope well with isolation)**

7) **Finite socialization period (fight or flight when not socialized to some social stimulus category)**

8) **Opportunistic scavengers (if it's edible and within reach, eat it, NOW)**

9) **Resolve conflicts through ritualized aggression (never write letters to editor, never sue)**

10) **Well-developed olfactory system**