

Walk the Dog

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In association with Dog Listener

The realities of dog behaviour and some of the misconceptions – when owners humanize dog behaviour!

When it comes to the relationship between man and dog, there are two main views; the popular view and the view of the behaviourist. To some people the dog is nothing but an unthinking, fur-covered, biological machine; others consider dogs to be much like little people in fur coats. While most dog owners may be aware of the attributes of their dog's breed, understanding their dog's ancient ancestry and its natural behaviours is something that can be misunderstood and misinterpreted, which may lead to problems for the dog owner.

The relationship between man and dog goes back thousands of years. Genetic studies based on DNA have helped to establish the origins of dogs, with analysis of mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) suggesting that the wolf is the most likely ancestor of our dog¹ (the mtDNA of a wolf compared to a dog differs by only 1 to 2 per cent – the same range difference found between races of humans). Such findings also indicate that the domestication was probably initiated approximately 135,000 years ago. However, Raymond Coppinger would argue that the mitochondrial clock is not a valid estimator of time. The cooperation between man and dog in hunting is depicted in ancient artwork dating between 12,000 to 17,000 years ago. The earliest historical records of dogs come mainly from Egyptian art, interestingly archeological findings suggest there were over a dozen different breeds ranging from Greyhounds to dogs resembling the Basset Hound found on tomb walls and monuments such as that of Thutmose III, who reigned more than 4,000 years ago.

Early man and dog were naturally drawn to one another, sharing parallels in social structures; the two species formed cooperative hunting groups and extended families.² By cooperating, man and dog are likely to have gained an advantage over other species competing for the same resources. The relationship between man and dog was mutually beneficial; man could take advantage of the dog's exceptional hunting skills of scenting, tracking, chasing, flushing out and if necessary killing the prey, and at night man provided dog with warmth of the fire and discarded scraps of food. The dog was also the first line of defence, with his natural barking and guarding ability, warning off attackers and signaling the humans to any approaches to the camp. "Human altruism, coupled with empathy for others, may have provided the foundation for the dog's domestication and behavioural incorporation."³ While man and dog originally had a primarily utilitarian relationship, this steadily shifted to that more of a companion role; and herein lays the blurring of what

¹ Note: Studies led by Robert Wayne from the University of California, showed that all dog breeds had only one forbear, the wolf. Wayne and his team of scientific researchers analyzed the mtDNA of 162 wolves from around the world and 140 domestic dogs (representing 67 breeds). Source from paper by Robert K Wayne, *Molecular evolution of the dog family* (1993), *Wolfdog resource*. Website address: <http://www.idir.net/~wolf2dog/wayne2.htm>

² Book: Lindsay, Steven R (2001) *Applied dog behaviour and training*, Blackwell Publishing, Volume 2, chapter 1, page 1.

³ Book: Lindsay, Steven R (2001) *Applied dog behaviour and training*, Blackwell Publishing, Volume 2, chapter 1, page 5.

people believe and what science and behaviourism tells us about dog's behaviour and thinking.

The **popular view** is the view that many people, notably dog owners, have of their dog. These views are formulated through pet ownership and common understanding that is built over time. As I have already discussed, man has developed a close relationship with dog for thousands of years and this has allowed both sides to develop an understanding of each other, as well as many misunderstandings to be made. Much of the popular view is based on humans projecting their interpretation of the world and their behaviours onto the dog (anthropomorphism). The popular view has also been influenced by literature and entertainment; before the birth of behaviourism most accounts of animal learning were told through anecdotes, "we crave anecdotes about genius dogs...[where] dogs' value is based on myth and exaggeration."⁴ Dogs are surrounded by myths, fictions and factoids. As early as the mid-sixth century, Aesop's Fables, passed down by oral tradition, included examples of dogs acting in an anthropomorphic way to illustrate moral lessons. Examples of how entertainment has effected our beliefs about dogs, their intelligence and ability are that of the Rin Tin Tin and Lassie. Rin Tin Tin (nicknamed Rinty) was a German Shepherd dog, found as a pup in a German trench in World War I by Captain Lee Duncan. Duncan trained Rinty to perform a variety of tricks which included being able to leap over 11 feet.⁵ Rinty was spotted by a film producer and his film career came in 1922, when he appeared in 'The Man From Hell's River'. Rin Tin Tin would leap over raging river rapids and hold reins in his mouth to drive a horse and carriage. Rinty was so popular he was credited with saving Warner Brothers from bankruptcy in the 1920's, and received over 2,000 fan letters every week.⁶ Meanwhile, Lassie was the story of a courageous collie "with the heart of a lion and the navigational instincts of a homing pigeon".⁷ Originally a short story by Eric Knight in 1938, the tale of Lassie was made into a film of the same title 'Lassie Come Home' in 1943 by MGM. The film not only kick-started the career of Hollywood legend Elizabeth Taylor, but the story of the highly intelligent collie's courage prompted a long running television series running from 1954 to 1999, with a remake of the film released in 2006.⁸ Lassie and her exploits made the public believe that this dog could think, plan, sympathize, recognise good people from bad, feel pain, remember complicated facts, have unbelievable senses of hearing, sight and smell and seek revenge. In reality, when Lassie seemed to be looking around carefully to study a situation, the dog was actually watching his trainer wave a rag. Walt Disney is another great contributor to the anthropomorphism of dogs with cartoon characters such as Pluto and Goofy, and through animated films including 101 Dalmatians, The Lady and the Tramp, and The Fox and the Hound. The humanizing of dogs continues today with cinema blockbusters such as Beethoven (1992), Cats & Dogs (2001), The Shaggy Dog Story (2006), Underdog (2007) and Beverley Hills Chihuahua which recently completed filming and is due for release in September 2008. It seems that we humans find it easier to relate to a situation when we project our own emotions and thought patterns onto the actions of our dogs.

Unlike the popular view which interprets dog behaviour, the **behaviourist view** is based on a scientific approach. Behaviourists' views are scientifically determined through

⁴ Book: Donaldson, Jean (1996) *The Culture Clash*, James & Kenneth Publishers, chapter 1, page 13.

⁵ Internet: Wikipedia, online encyclopedia, search 'Lassie'. Website address http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rin_tin_tin

⁶ Book: Lindsay, Steven R (2001) *Applied dog behaviour and training*, Volume 2, chapter 1, page 12.

⁷ Internet: Smith, Neil, Lassie, BBC movie review, 14th December 2005. Website address:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2005/12/13/lassie_2005_review.shtml

⁸ Internet: Wikipedia, online encyclopedia, search 'Lassie'. Website address <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lassie>

observation and testing of a dog's reaction to particular events or stimulus, to try and understand why the dog reacts in a certain way. In essence, this is trying to understand how the dog 'sees' the world rather than how humans think a dog should see the world.

The behaviourist view encompasses psychological understanding of the dog and, like any science, has developed over a period of time and has made mistakes as well as progress in trying to effectively understand the motivation behind a dog's behaviour. For example, at one time scientists and philosophers alike believed that dogs were dumb animals incapable of thought. French philosopher René Descartes suggested in the 17th Century that dogs had no intelligence, reasoning or consciousness, instead they were controlled by physical reflexes and unthinking responses to things that stimulate them.⁹ However, this thinking was challenged in 1859, with the publication of 'On the Origin of Species' by Charles Darwin. The book included a chapter on 'Instinct' (a term used in his time to refer to the natural behaviour of animals)¹⁰; this chapter detailed the theory of evolution by natural selection.¹¹ Darwin concluded that humans were not special in their mental abilities; he described animals and people as having differing levels of awareness, reasoning ability, intelligence and memory. This meant that a dog might be conscious and self aware but not to the same degree as a human. Modern theories of behaviour began with the work of Ivan Pavlov, a Russian physiologist who in the course of his study into the digestion in dogs, observed that the dogs he was studying would salivate before food was placed in their mouths. He thought the dogs were associating his laboratory assistants or the sound of the laboratory door opening with food. Pavlov tested this theory by ringing a bell just before feeding the dogs. Over time the sound of the bell ringing was enough to cause the dogs to salivate. This work explained reflexive behaviour and is referred to as 'classical conditioning', and led to the modifying training technique of 'click and treat'.

The work of others such as Edward Lee Thorndike and Burrhus Frederic Skinner paved the way for our more modern understanding of animal behaviour, and this work lay the foundation for treat based dog training methods today. Thorndike, an American psychologist at Teachers College, Columbia University¹², studied animal behaviour and their learning processes; this led to his theory the 'Law of Effect', if a consequence is pleasant, the preceding behaviour becomes more likely. If a consequence is unpleasant, the preceding behaviour becomes less likely. This is referred to as 'operant conditioning'. Thorndike is credited with being the first to outline operant conditioning concepts, whereas B.F. Skinner was the first to fully define operant conditioning in his book 'The Behaviour of Organisms'. This work expanded to become both a science and a technology for changing behaviour, although some would suggest that Skinner's understanding of the laws of behaviour and how events affects an animal's behaviour, does not necessitate an understanding of the canine mind.

As discussed, the popular view and the behaviourist view have differing ideas on what drives the dog to behave in a certain way in certain situations. An example of how these two views would interpret a situation follows; the dog chews up the owner's pair of shoes while he is absent from the house. When the owner comes home and discovers the damage, he is angry and upset; the dog lowers his body and slinks away.

⁹ Book: Coren, Stanley (2006) *The intelligence of dogs*, Pocket Books, chapter 4, page 63.

¹⁰ Book: Slater, P.J.B (1999) *Essentials of animal behaviour*, Cambridge Press, chapter 1, page 1.

¹¹ Internet: Wikipedia online encyclopedia, search under 'theory of evolution'. Website address http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theory_of_evolution

¹² Internet: Wikipedia online encyclopedia, search under 'Edward Thorndike'. Website address http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_Thorndike

The popular view is that the dog learns from its telling off that chewing the owner's belongings is wrong. The dog has chewed the shoes out of resentment for being left alone, but when the owner finds the shoes and is upset the dog feels guilty about what it has done. The behaviourist view would suggest that the dog has learnt that chewing has negative consequences when the owner is present, but safe when it is left alone. The dog is anxious when left alone and the chewing action gives him comfort. When the owner comes home, the dog behaves in a submissive manner in an attempt to avoid punishment.

Some of the **misconceptions** which arise when owners humanize dog behaviour are that dogs are capable of pre-mediated thought and retribution as seen in entertainment with the likes of Lassie. Humans tend to prefer the Walt Disney view of dogs because it is easier to relate to and essentially we want our dogs to be clever, loyal and moral. In reality, however, dogs are pre-wired for survival, they are predators; therefore food is of prime importance, the dog needs to drink, sleep, stay safe and reproduce. "Dogs are completely and innocently selfish...they do not think abstractly. They are amoral."¹³ Dogs are capable of problem solving, but they are incapable of linking actions that are separated by time. The work of Thorndike and Skinner has helped us to understand how animals learn which has led to the summation that dogs do not think logically. Instead "they learn through a series of pleasant and unpleasant experiences which occur within two seconds of a particular action."¹⁴ Only humans have the ability to understand that a punishment being inflicted is the result of some earlier unwanted action. Therefore, when the disgruntled dog owner finds his chewed shoes when he arrives home and shouts at the dog, the dog would not understand why it is being punished, even though the owner may think the dog looks and is acting in a guilty way. Pavlov's work has helped to explain how classical conditioning works in our every day lives too. For example, when I open a tin of cat food my three cats come running out of no-where. When I open other tins of food the sound of the opener still causes my three cats to appear. The cats have associated the sound of my tin opener with their food.

I agree with the behaviourist view of the relationship between man and dog. For me, Brenda Aloff's observation of man and dog's relationship is summed up neatly when she states "constantly we are trying to communicate with our dogs as though they are human...and constantly our dogs are trying to communicate with us as though we are dogs."¹⁵ As humans, we attempt to teach our dog our values but dogs are only capable of learning on a 'canine level' and can therefore only understand canine values. The humanizing of dogs and their behaviour is why I believe some dog owners have difficulty in understanding their own dog's behaviour and in communicating successfully with their pet.

I understand how we, as humans, can easily fall into the trap of humanising our dog's behaviour as the loyalty and devotion our pet demonstrates as part of its natural instincts as pack animal, closely mimics the human idea of love and friendship. As a result many dog owners view their pets as full-fledged family members and this may include a degree of pampering or treating the dog in a way that is not appropriate to its species, such as dressing the dog up in outfits. But it is important that the owner does not make unrealistic demands on the dog as dogs' mental processes are not the same as ours.

¹³ Book: Donaldson, Jean (1996) *The Culture Clash*, James & Kenneth Publishers, chapter 1, page 12.

¹⁴ Book: Fisher, John (1991) *Why does my dog?* Souvenir Press, chapter 2, page 23.

¹⁵ Book: Aloff, Brenda (2005) *Canine body language*, Dogwise, chapter Dogs & Language, page 10.

Problems may develop between dog and owner when the owner fails to recognise that their dog is behaving in a way which is natural or normal to a dog. Typical dog behaviours include digging, hunting and stalking, chasing, barking, scenting and tracking, shaking, retrieving, guarding food, chewing and territorial marking. Many behaviour patterns which are part of the normal behavioural repertoire of the dog may, within the framework of man and animal living together, become problematic. For example, in a social quarrel, an aggressive behaviour like snapping or biting is a typical behaviour amongst dogs. However, such behaviour cannot be tolerated if it is directed at a human being. If the owner was to then punish the dog for snapping by using physical force, then this could make the situation worse, as the dog may become fearful or distrust the owner.

Earlier in this essay I looked at the example of a dog **chewing** his owner's shoes and how the popular view and in turn the behaviourist view would interpret this behaviour. Most dogs are fed on a diet that requires very little chewing, however they have not lost the ancient desires that would have enabled them to chew through the skin of the prey and chew up the carcass. Most dogs, therefore, like to chew their toys and exercise their jaws on bones or chews. For young dogs, chewing is also important as it helps to ease the pain from the milk teeth loosening (typically around four to six months of age) and then again when the adult teeth have come through and are now settling into the jaw (at approximately eight to nine months of age). Dogs are pack animals and sociable, however, many dog owners have to go out to work every day and they may have children who are at school, which means there are periods of time throughout the day when the family dog is left alone. Some dogs will chew or gnaw at furniture or the owner's belongings, in the absence of anything acceptable to chew on, due to the stress or anxiety at being left on its own. The chewing action acts as a comforter, therefore this behaviour becomes self-rewarding for the dog and repeated. This behaviour can be frustrating for the dog owner.

A dog's olfactory system is highly sophisticated and dogs use their **scenting and tracking** instincts typically when out on a walk. Therefore, practicing recall and walking to heel is important otherwise when the dog picks up on a scent and begins to track it, the owner may end up being pulled down the street or the dog ignores the owner's recall command, leading to the complaint that 'my dog doesn't listen to me' or the dog runs off on the scent trail. Another behaviour which forms part of the hunt sequence is the **chase**. While this is taken advantage of and encouraged with, for example, racing Greyhounds, for an owner whose dog chases moving objects such as joggers, cyclists, cars or motorcyclists, this can be extremely dangerous as it may lead to a serious accident. Fast moving vehicles present the perfect chance for a good fast chase, and some dogs can become so obsessed with car chasing that they will continue even after they have experienced an accident that leaves them seriously injured.

Many dogs will shake their toys when playing. This action mimics the act of dealing with a captured prey (this forms part of the hunt sequence – the 'inhibit'). **Shaking** vigorously can stun prey or cause them fatal injuries making the prey less likely to fight back. Although many dogs focus this behaviour on their toys, there have been unfortunate incidences over the years where dogs have seriously injured or killed other family pets when the predatory instincts have kicked in. One such case was reported in July 2008, in

the Yorkshire Evening Post, where a family dog killed the neighbour's cat after escaping from its garden in Leeds.¹⁶

When an owner falls in love with a particular breed and does not take into account the purpose for which it was originally bred, this can lead to other possible problems. For example, wolves and domesticated dogs **dig** naturally. Some breeds of dogs are more prone to digging behaviour than others, those in the Terrier group for instance. Breeds like Huskies, Malamutes are more inclined to dig cooling or sleeping hollows but almost any breed of dog is likely to dig for one reason or the other.¹⁷ This digging behaviour can be very frustrating for the keen gardener and therefore the owner would be best to either avoid taking on a breed prone to digging, or limit this behaviour by providing other stimulation or a 'digging zone'.

Brenda Aloff's observation on communication between human and dog discussed earlier in this essay outlines the language barrier between our two species. Dogs are blamed for all sorts of things they have not done or were not thinking because owners have misread their body language or misunderstand their natural behaviours, such as my earlier example of the owner thinking the dog 'looks' and 'acts' in a guilty way upon finding the chewed shoes. However, dogs cannot understand human language instead they understand sound patterns, intonation, facial and body language. A typical problem where the owner gets frustrated with the dog for 'not listening' or responding to their commands arises with the dog **barking**. The postman is the traditional target of barking or aggression from dogs. This is because he typically comes around the same time each day, often when the owner is at work or no-one is at home, and he does something strange like pushing letters through the door. However, when the dog barks at the door the postman leaves. Since the dog is rewarded by the postman 'retreating', the dog learns that barking works and repeats this behaviour when individuals come to the front door. Some dog owners will shout at their barking dog, such as "be quiet" and "enough". However, the dog does not understand what these words mean, to the dog the owner is now sounding distressed, caused by this perceived danger (the post man), so the dog continues to bark and get into a heightened state, and may become even louder with his barking as a result of the owner 'joining in'. If this behaviour is not dealt with in an appropriate way, the dog may become ever more alert to sounds or approaches to the house, and this could possibly result in complaints about the noise from neighbours or may lead to possible aggressive behaviour directed towards visitors at the door. Barking designed to get attention is a typical problem in dogs that are pampered or doted on by their owners. When the dog feels he is being ignored he will give a series of barks until the owner responds, this becomes a learnt behaviour which can again be annoying for the owner, even though they have unwittingly promoted this barking through their actions. If the owner ignores the dog barking then the dog continues on barking for a long time and will eventually stop. This is known as the 'extinction burst'. However, an important characteristic of extinction is that before behaviours stop completely they often increase in intensity, duration or frequency; in essence the dog 'ups the ante' and the extinction burst is the reason some dog owners eventually give up and give into the unwanted behaviour.

Guarding food is a natural behaviour of the dog as instinct for survival prompts some dogs to bury food. In the wild an animal has to compete to get enough to eat and once

¹⁶ Internet: Gardener, Tony, Yorkshire Evening Post, 'Leeds owner fined after dog kills pet cat', 3rd July 2008. Website address: <http://www.yorkshireeveningpost.co.uk/news/Leeds-owner-fined-after-dog.4249093.jp>

¹⁷ Book: Fisher, John (1991) *Why does my dog...?* Souvenir Press, part 3, page 109.

they have a piece food it is important to hang onto it. The motivation to keep hold of the possession can be very strong in some dogs and this natural instinct then becomes a problem, especially when the dog starts to guard things from the family with whom it lives. When a dog is guarding a chew for example, it will often stare, turn its head away from the owner, stiffen up or go very still, and may bare its teeth and grumble to signal its intentions, if the owner comes near the dog while eating. The dog is warning the human to back off, essentially the dog is saying 'this is mine'.

This behaviour can be very upsetting for dog owners and may lead to the dog being labeled as aggressive. Guarding food can also cause confrontations within a multi-dog household. "In almost every case of this kind [guarding], the dog has achieved pack leader status"¹⁸ therefore, it is important for the owner to modify this behaviour and teach the dog that the hands that feed it, does not take away. This can be achieved through the appropriate training.

While there is no doubt that man and dog's relationship has changed over the thousands of years from one of a functional purpose to that of companionship, it would be wrong to assume that time has given humans an understanding of dog's behaviour without ever humanizing it. It is our basic human nature to put our own values and behaviours onto animals, which has been buoyed by anecdotes, literature and entertainment over the centuries. However, the work of behaviourists has brought us an understanding of how events affect an animal's behaviour and how dogs learn, which has helped to develop our modern reward based training methods today. Being a good dog owner is not only about providing a comfortable and stimulating environment for the pet, but it is also about having a basic appreciation of dog's natural behaviours. By doing so, we do not set dogs up to fail with our high expectations; instead we can embrace the behaviours and adapt so we can have the relationship both man and dog deserve.

¹⁸ Book: Fisher, John (1991) *Why does my dog?* Souvenir Press, chapter 3, page 132.