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Dogs as Environments: How Dogs Mediate Nature, Social Interaction, and Self-Relation

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Introduction

The arrangement of chairs within a room has the power to shape how people interact within it. This is just one example of how the location and occasion can set boundaries for appropriate behavior. For instance, what is deemed acceptable during a sporting event may not be appropriate during a funeral, and beach attire may not be suitable for the workplace. In other words, environments serve as media that influence our actions and interactions. The reverse is also true: media such as the alphabet, books, calendars, clocks, cell phones, and the internet are environments that enable us to live and act as we do. These technologies provide the spaces and times that make human action possible, which is never completely unmediated or isolated from its surroundings. Both the immediate environment and the environments made possible through various media forms impact our behavior.

How then, do dogs fit into the above scheme of things? Dogs are frequent “features” in human environments. Are they environmental factors that mediate our behavior? Are they technological extensions of the human? Perhaps they are a little bit of both. At the very least, we can suggest that *dogs mediate*. Like a particular room arrangement or like an automobile, dogs mediate between the larger world and ourselves; they slide between ourselves and others, and they also help to shape action and self-understanding. They thus may be seen as environmental factors that mediate our behavior, or as technological extensions of humans. In either case, the presence of dogs has played a role in shaping the human world. Many people can’t imagine their lives without dogs, and humanity would be very different without them.

I elsewhere argued for the notion of “other people as environments,” i.e. as forms of media (Anton, 2014). Here, I make somewhat similar claims: Dogs, as humans’ “best friends,” can

also be seen as dynamic factors of mediation that shape our environment. However, what does it mean to say that dogs mediate or partly constitute the environment in which we find ourselves?

One way in which dogs can be seen as part of the environment is through their role as a dominant medium or staple in society (McLuhan, 2003). Dogs are a major part of the economy, including industries such as pet supplies, grooming and care facilities, dog shows, dog parks, licensing and regulations, and cremation services. They are commodities and staples that contribute to the livelihood of many people. Dogs are also raised and sold as valuable items, but in a throwaway culture like ours, many may end up in kennels and eventually be euthanized due to changing trends. These examples illustrate how dogs have been incorporated into human affairs and make up a significant part of the economy, with the dog industry being worth billions of dollars.

Dogs are environmental in other more subtle ways. Dogs co-evolved with humans and were domesticated by them. As primary “transitional objects,” they mediate between humanity and nature (also see Berman, 2015). They occupy a unique space that is neither completely “wild nature” nor fully “human culture.” Dogs can help break down barriers between strangers and facilitate social interaction in public places. As personal companions, dogs can help people grow in self-reflection and contemplation about their own personality, including qualities such as temperament, playfulness, judgment, forgiveness, empathy, and acceptance. Dogs allow people to encounter and understand themselves in new ways through their mediation.

Dogs, Nature, and Humanity

Dogs are not just objects within our environments; they have co-evolved with us and have played a role in shaping our culture. The domestication of dogs is part of a larger set of symbiotic and cultural processes, in which humans have shaped dogs and dogs have influenced us. From one perspective, to riff on McLuhan and Nevitt (1972), dogs could be seen as extensions of nature that have helped shape the nature that makes us. From another angle, dogs could be viewed as one of the most sophisticated “technological extensions” ever developed, and humans are the extension of nature that has shaped the nature of the dog.

The bond between humans and dogs stretches back to ancient times, long before the concept of domestication emerged. It is believed that humans learned some hunting tactics and hierarchical behavior from wolves, while wolves also gained some understanding of human interaction (Johnson, 2011). The relationship was mutually beneficial, with dogs receiving access to a surplus of human food and humans gaining loyal allies and effective guards. Throughout history, dogs have played a crucial role in a variety of tasks, such as herding livestock, assisting in expeditions, safeguarding human offspring and territory, and sharing food. From an evolutionary perspective, it can be argued that both humans and dogs have mutually influenced and shaped each other's environments. However, at some point in time, humans began to domesticate and selectively breed dogs as household pets.

Domestication draws a line between "the wild" and "the tame," one where dogs serve as "transitional objects" located between "the natural" and "the human." The domestication of dogs allows us to understand ourselves as animals while also recognizing certain animals as "persons." Some of these "persons" even have super abilities, such as the ability to smell certain diseases and cancers.

Dogs also offer insight into the concept of humanity in the modern Western world, adding to the ongoing 'nature vs. nurture' debate which often centers on the extent to which individuals are biologically 'determined' or shaped by environmental conditioning and development. However, modern dogs offer a different perspective on this debate. Genetically, humans are more similar to apes than to dogs, and we also have significant anatomical and morphological similarities to apes. Granting these genetic and biological similarities, dogs have been selectively bred for characteristics that we consider "human." We have also had a much longer history of intimate contact with dogs than with apes, and dogs have shorter life spans than apes, meaning that selective breeding can have dramatic effects within a century or two. Hence, despite the morphological and anatomical differences between dogs and humans, dogs may seem somewhat more like "people" or family members to us than primates do. At first glance, this could be seen as evidence of the influence of nature over nurture, as dogs' "human" characteristics have been developed through selective breeding over many generations. However, upon closer examination, it becomes clear that intelligence in dogs cannot be reduced to genetic similarity, brain size, or the use of hands. The very act of

nurturing and selecting for “human” characteristics in dogs helps us to define and refine our understanding of what it means to be human.

Dogs offer a unique perspective on the human-nature dynamic, serving as a bridge between the two. Through their domestication and integration into human society, dogs highlight the complex relationship we have with the natural world. On one hand, the close bond we share with our canine companions brings us closer to nature. At the same time, the fact that dogs are now primarily found living in human homes and relying on us for their needs serves to distance us and them from the wild. In this way, dogs serve as a reminder of our place within the larger ecosystem, while also reminding us that we are more than just another animal. And, moreover, they also allow us to recognize ourselves as more than solely human.

Domesticated dogs play a central role in mediating social relationships. Like any medium of communication, dogs have the ability to change the way we interact with others. Having a dog changes the way we live, not just in terms of practical demands such as feeding, walking, and grooming, but also in terms of the patterns and pace of interactions within and outside the family. Inside the home, dogs are often considered members of the family. They need to be greeted and said goodbye to. They can provide comfort and serve as playful friends and companions, but they can also demand attention and physical affection. Dogs may also become involved in family dynamics, mediating between family members in conflict and sometimes protesting their owners’ sexual activities.

Dogs have been selectively bred to be attentive and seek attention, so they require distributions of attention and also offer attention to family members. For some people, the presence of a dog transforms their house into a home and creates a sense of family. A couple without children but with a dog somehow becomes its own kind of tribal family, often bringing out maternal and paternal characteristics of its owners. Where before there was merely a couple, there is now a small interspecies family. Statistics show that people living with dogs tend to have longer life expectancies and engage in more outdoor activities.

Dogs play a mediating role outside of the home. In relationships with others, dogs create a public sphere of shared value. To travel with a dog (or to take a walk with a dog) is to change

the trip (or the walk). Walking down the street with a dog is a profoundly different experience than simply walking down the street on one's own. Others see the dog and fear it or are attracted to it. Dogs are a particular kind of person, and, as such, they mediate our encounters with others. A dog can increase or decrease a person's status or attractiveness: walking a dog can be somewhat like being with a celebrity or an unruly child. On one hand, certain people who have dogs can be seen as friendly or safe – willing to undertake care-giving such as picking up after their dog and ministering to it when it is sick. On the other hand, certain people with dogs can appear powerful and dangerous. Someone walking with an aggressive German Sheppard and snarling a Pit bull may inspire anxiety. Dogs provide public occasions for the display of interaction etiquette and social hierarchy: being willing to stop for it to sniff the grass and/or being the “master” and having the dog dutifully trained to respond to verbal and non-verbal commands.

Dogs can also facilitate social interactions and introductions between strangers. People may be more likely to approach and interact with someone accompanied by a dog, and dog owners may socialize with each other while walking their dogs. Strangers can come up and ask, “Can I pet your dog?” “What is his/her name?” Dogs can also help to ease social interactions and break the ice, as they provide a common topic of conversation and can help to reveal shared interests and values. In some cases, having a dog may even improve social connections and relationships, as it may make the owner more approachable and relatable to others on a non-intellectual level. Some of this sensibility is best conveyed with a personal story. When my wife and I first moved into our neighborhood, the neighbor boy, about 8 years old at the time, greeted us and asked if we had any children. We said, “no.” He then asked if we had any pets. We again said, “no.” But we told him that we had some plants. He said, “Oh... Ok,” and he walked away. In the following weeks and months, we would walk together through our neighborhood and occasionally meet people. Our neighbors were friendly enough, but we seldom got beyond pleasantries. Then, when we adopted “Kiki,” an adorable Victorian Pomeranian, our social interactions were differently mediated and eased up as it were, because of the dog. It was as if some of our neighbors suddenly realized that we were more than stodgy eggheads – that we could relate to others in a grounded way and at the level of affect.

Dogs have the unique ability to help humans display care, leadership, and power, particularly through their roles as service dogs. These specialized canines are trained to perform tasks that humans are incapable of, such as detecting bombs, epilepsy, or drugs. These capabilities are the result of human intervention and training, and make service dogs formidable “forces of nature.” They serve as a powerful reminder of the potential for humans to harness the natural abilities of other species and work together towards a common goal.

Dogs and Self-Relations

Dogs can also act as mediators in our self-relationships, helping us to gain a new perspective on ourselves. Because they don't try to schmooze us or ingratiate themselves to us, and because they are not concerned with abstract concepts such as religion, politics, or wealth, they allow us to consider how they see us without judgment or hidden agendas. Dogs can also help us to become aware of our own neuroses and anxieties. In addition to providing insight into ourselves, dogs can also help us to relax and calm down, offering a sense of comfort and companionship.

In our relationship to the cosmos and nature, dogs provide a divine presence, an ethical sounding board even without speech. One can look into the eyes of a dog and the inability to understand what, if anything, the dog is thinking mimics our inability to fathom the universe. Surely there is some kind of intelligence there. What is it? What would it say to us? Dogs are cosmic in this way, judging us by means of our own judgment.

Have you ever looked into a dog's eyes and wondered, “What does the dog see?” It is natural to consider how a dog might perceive us, and part of that comes from thinking about how dogs see the world in general. In Eastern philosophy, the phrase “dog-mind” is often praised as a symbol of enlightenment, wisdom, and a superior form of non-attachment. Dogs are constantly living in the present moment, and they often invite us to do the same. They serve as a playful reminder to be present and fully engaged in the present moment.

Dogs can serve as a reminder of a different kind of community beyond the human, and can provide a sense of connection and belonging in today's world of self-selected information silos. Dogs offer a horizon of interaction that can temporarily move people beyond beliefs,

ideologies, and abstract affiliations. Dogs can also provide an alternative to forming community bonds based on political party or religious beliefs, and can offer a sense of connection and commonality that transcends these divides. In forming community bonds with dogs, we are reminded that we are more than merely human.

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