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## Be More Dog

The human-canine relationship in contemporary dog-training methodologies

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# Be More Dog

## The human–canine relationship in contemporary dog-training methodologies

J U S T Y N A W L O D A R C Z Y K

While contemporary dog training is by no means homogenous – and ranges from extremes like Cesar Millan’s popular application of old-style dominance theory mixed together with some machismo (Jackson Schebetta 2009; Pregowski 2014), via the by now mainstream application of behaviourist principles of operant conditioning with emphasis on positive reinforcement (see instructional books by Pryor 1984 and Donaldson 1996) to recent departures from behaviourism’s almost Foucauldian formation of a docile body through disciplinary and post-disciplinary techniques (as exhibited in the instructional materials of, for example, Sdao 2012) – it is hard not to notice certain trends. The past decade or so can be characterized by increased attention paid to the dog’s emotions, recognition of the dog’s significant otherness, respect for the dog as a sentient being (Pregowski 2015) and – as the title of this article infers – even a certain desire to become more like the canine partner in result of the process of training. This is a radical departure from the traditional understanding of what pet dog training is. Historically, training has been about curbing dogs’ instinctive behaviours in order to replace them with more ‘civilized’ behaviours that make canine presence acceptable in an anthropocentric world; it has been – as Katherine Grier writes in *Pets in America* – an endeavour of “‘raising” an undeveloped mind into a state of concord with other, cultivated members of the community’ (Grier 2006: 74).

This article analyses this role reversal on the basis of contemporary instructional manuals and videos directed at the pet dog owner and hobby dog sports enthusiast, specifically through a comparison of the training materials

by two world-class dog agility competitors and instructors: Canadian Susan Garrett and Silvia Trkman from Slovenia. While both trainers are part of the ‘positive training’ camp, Trkman’s methods, which are hard to separate from her overall demeanour and interactions with her own dogs, stand out against Garrett’s strict behaviourism. In a way, this could be summed up in terms comprehensible outside the closed circle of dog-training aficionados not simply as being more dog friendly but as ‘more dog’. The agility run is a ‘subject-transforming dance’, as Donna Haraway wrote (2007: 176), but it is also a performance of ‘dogness’ on the part of the human, forcing the human to engage in an activity that oozes ‘dogness’ and that stretches the limits of humanity, blurring the human–animal divide. The title of this paper is inspired by the highly successful British O2 advertising campaign from 2013, titled ‘Be More Dog’, which played on species fluidity by presenting the story of a cat who longed to forego his usual feline aloofness and reserve, in order to ‘be more dog’ by engaging in typical canine activities, such as running in the park, playing Frisbee™, while exhibiting boundless enthusiasm, energy and a positive attitude to life (‘Running? Amazing! Sticks? Amazing!’). The tagline summed up the message: ‘Maybe we should all be more dog.’ The success of the campaign – which received a number of awards – is due to a large extent to its skilful portrayal of the positive qualities popularly associated with dogs. I would like to argue that this philosophy of valuing canine enthusiasm for the simple pleasures of life also structures many contemporary interactions with dogs, including training practices. This total

redefinition of training is succinctly summed up in the title of Michał Pregowski's article that discusses the shift away from behaviourism in contemporary dog training: 'Your dog is your teacher' (Pregowski 2015).

#### THEORIZING CANINE PERFORMANCES

The conceptual framework of this chapter is indebted to the notion of performativity of species, explored by Lynda Birke, Mette Bryld and Nina Lykke in the article 'Animal performances' (2004). Birke, Bryld and Lykke draw parallels between discourses of gender/sexuality and animality and suggest that the notion of performativity, as developed by Judith Butler (1990, 1993) and later Karen Barad (2003) in relation to gender, can also be applied to an analysis of species. In short, Birke, Bryld and Lykke point to species as performative, emphasizing the significance of the material context of the performance. As an example, they discuss the 'laboratory rat' as always constituted performatively through interactions with the material context (the laboratory, the scientist) but also through biopolitical breeding practices: the rat's body is shaped in result of breeding selection to fit the laboratory equipment; more docile and easier to handle rats are selectively reproduced and so forth. While their analysis may not seem groundbreaking, in that the entanglement of animality with race, gender and sexuality as well as notions of the cultural construction of species were explored already in the 1980s by Donna Haraway – a fact that Birke, Bryld and Lykke duly acknowledge – what makes their article a potent source of inspiration for this work is their emphasis on 'the concept of "performativity" [being] useful for analysing co- or intra-actions of human and non-human actors' and their insistence on the material circumstances of the performance (Birke, Bryld and Lykke 2004: 168).

Haraway's notion of 'becoming with', developed in her 2003 *Companion Species Manifesto* and elaborated in *When Species Meet* (2007), is also useful in that it redefines training from a unidirectional activity in which the

human imposes something upon the dog to an activity that changes both sides of the training relationship, creating a new entity and a new quality. Species is constituted performatively and relationally, which is never more evident than in the case of companion animals, whom we cannot even imagine as existing without interactions with humans. The trained-animal act – even if not formally staged – is a performance of animality always in relation to humanity: it is a performance of a certain kind of bond, or power relationship (or both) and at the same time it defines this bond. As I have argued elsewhere, in recent years this performance has changed from a performance of wilful submission to one of joyful cooperation (Włodarczyk 2016). It is expected that dogs interacting with humans should look like they are enjoying themselves; joy can be a skilfully crafted effect of training.

The change I am trying to pinpoint, the turn towards 'dogness', stems from an ethical impulse: the desire to incorporate an appreciation of animal alterity into training practices. Yet, performances rooted in different understandings of the human-canine bond may look deceptively similar. The question remains: how do we evaluate these performances? Is it possible to distinguish a performance rooted in a more traditional view of the human-canine relationship from one that is – for lack of a better term – more progressive? Thinking through a similar idea, Michael Peterson (2007) coins the notion of the 'animal apparatus', to provide a framework for taking into account the thematic analysis of aspects of animal performances, related to the production of such performances. In a theatrical performance involving animals, the animal apparatus pertains to both props used to teach and later elicit the performance but also to elements of the stage sets that inevitably aid in the production of meaning. Peterson writes: 'collars, reins, bits, whips, food, treadmills are part of this apparatus, but so are lights, wings, and even the very concept of on- and offstage space' (34). Peterson's notion can be extended to performances that do not take

place on stage: the animal apparatus is present in everyday interactions with dogs, but also in training protocols. Such application of theory developed to discuss theatre performances for analysing performances of a different nature is not ungrounded; the multiple meanings of performance – for example, in art (with theatre as both a sub-genre and a location) and in sport – cannot fully be separated from one another. A recent volume on animals in performance practices, *Performing Animality* (Orozco and Parker-Starbuck 2015), which comes mostly from theatre-centred performance studies, opens with a summary of Donna Haraway's analysis of canine agility performance. There actually exists a growing body of scholarship on agility coming from performance studies. In *Animal Acts*, Haraway herself comments on Holly Hughes's article on agility by positing that agility is performance art (2014: 31–5). As Lourdes Orozco and Jennifer Parker-Starbuck write in the Introduction to *Performing Animality*: 'The context through which Haraway formulates her ideas around human-animal relations is not dissimilar to that of the theatre – it variously includes embodied collaboration, presence, "actors", "directors", training, theatricalized settings, companionship, amateurs and professionals; it includes joy' (2015: 1). Conversely, it seems justified to use Peterson's ideas to discuss human–canine interactions off the stage.

Even to the trained eye, a good agility run is a good agility run: it is fast, smooth, flowing, rhythmical, precise, accurate and joyful. Yet an examination of the animal apparatus – or the material context of the performance and its coming into being – makes it possible to evaluate not just the effectiveness of the performance itself but also the ethical aspects related to its production. Training materials in the form of manuals, videos and blogs, as well as the props associated with them (including prong collars, e-collars, clickers, crates, toys, leashes) but also the setting of a video, even the aesthetic aspects of its composition are, in this sense, not only part of the animal apparatus, but also a record of its other constitutive elements.

Thus, a close reading and a comparison of the instructional output of the two trainers makes it possible to recognize this new quality that I see as part of the recent move away from behaviourist control and toward an approach that advocates 'more dogness' in training.

#### GARRETT, FOUCAULT AND RADICAL BEHAVIOURISM

Susan Garrett's methods have been discussed by Donna Haraway in *Companion Species Manifesto* (2003) and in *When Species Meet*, where Haraway grudgingly recounts her almost total conversion to behaviourism, a philosophy she used to despise as it applied to the human world. The figure of Susan Garrett, and her book *Ruff Love*, are instrumental in Haraway's acceptance of behaviourism. Haraway comes into the world of dog training full of ideas that she later deems romantic and describes how her reluctance wanes as she experiences the positive results of behaviourist methods. It is their effectiveness, their scientific grounding (in Skinner's theory of operant conditioning) and the resulting joy with which the dog engages in the interaction that make Haraway a convert. 'The compensations for the dog are legion' – adds Haraway (2003: 44), admitting that the approach she is philosophically somewhat uncomfortable with, at least in the beginning, has positive long-term effects.

The roots of Haraway's initial reluctance to Garrett's methods may need to be explained. By the late twentieth century a strict behaviourist approach to human behaviour was being replaced with more nuanced approaches that took into account factors other than just reinforcement and punishment. Furthermore, the behaviourist approach in dog training, although it certainly can lead to enthusiastic and fast performance, is based on inducing in the dog the type of self-control that Foucault would see as characteristic of the regime of biopower: it is control through desire rather than through the classic disciplinary technologies. Foucault writes: 'power is strong ... because, as we are beginning to realize, it

produces effects at the level of desire – and also at the level of knowledge’ (1980: 59). The human member of the training dyad remains the inducer or shaper of the dog’s desires. While the learning process is based on the dog making choices, and being rewarded for making the correct choice, it is the human who offers the binary choice to the dog. In order for the choice to be a simple binary, the human needs to methodically control the dog’s environment through leashes, crates and so forth, to take out the other variables and make it impossible for the dog to engage in environmental temptations. In the presence of a squirrel, the dog can either make eye contact and get a cookie for this choice or not make eye contact and whine at the end of its leash. What cannot happen – if it did, it would ruin the training process – is the dog actually chasing the squirrel. In result of the repeated practice of the methodically prepared training protocol, the dog ceases to desire the squirrel and begins to desire contact with the handler.

In *When Species Meet* (2007), Haraway recounts how the training protocol advocated by Garrett helped her dog Cayenne overcome the challenge of learning to stop in the contact zone. The contact zone, an actual element of agility equipment, an area at the bottom of certain obstacles that needs to be touched (not jumped over) by the dog with at least one paw, has a metaphoric quality for Haraway through its association with the concept developed by Mary Louise Pratt to define space for the interactions of various cultures. Yet it is also very literal. Cayenne is re-trained to stop in the contact zone through a simple behaviourist procedure: if she does not stop in the zone, she is taken off course and put in her crate. She is not allowed to finish the course. This procedure works only if the dog actually desires to continue running, which Cayenne clearly does.

Haraway’s reluctance to embrace behaviourism resulted from her wariness of the type of total control of another being that this philosophy entails. Behaviourism, while claiming to open the road to ‘all positive’ training, does not really erase the

human’s dominant position: it never erases power. While dominance, particularly as the term has been used in relation to dogs (so-called dominance theory) is not part of the behaviourist vocabulary, the process of training is still dominated by the human’s godlike position in relation to the dog’s learning process. Still somewhat uncomfortable, Haraway chooses to adopt behaviourism as the primary method of communicating with her dog because of its effectiveness but also because of its omnipresence: the other alternative at the time being the classic punishment-heavy military-derived training, which was never successful in agility training. However, in the narrative of agility training with Cayenne Pepper, Haraway is the student, the apprentice – not the innovator. She learns, she comes to accept that that is offered to her, but she does not – so to speak – look outside the box.

Garrett’s animal apparatus reflects her commitment to changing the dog’s behaviour through the control of his environment and access to resources. The training aids are numerous and include: crates, head collars and detailed training diaries. The protocols she proposes are very detailed and the consequences presented for non-compliance are shown as terrifying: if the trainer breaks the reinforcement criteria just once, the entire effort could be ruined. The training techniques that Garrett proposes make it possible to manipulate the dog’s desires in a way that can make the dog crave that that he would ‘normally’ (that is, without training) abhor. This is nowhere more evident than in Garrett’s procedure for crate training, presented in a 2007 DVD, titled *Crate Games for Motivation and Control*. The video, filmed inside Garrett’s indoor training facility, opens with almost unbelievable shots of multiple dogs running full speed into their crates. For Garrett, as for many trainers, teaching a dog to be in a crate is of paramount importance as the crate works wonders for controlling the dog’s environment. Yet, for Garrett, it is not enough to teach the dog to just comply with being in a crate; her goal is to make the dog actively desire the crate. She teaches

this through a very detailed protocol of classical conditioning that associates the crate with food. Indeed, the results are amazing and it is hard to deny that the dogs want to be crated but the video is also the pinnacle of what some see as wrong with purely behaviourist training: while such training can certainly create a very intense emotional relationship between guardian and dog, it is also based on highly formalized and structured interactions in which there is no space for spontaneity, unstructured displays of affect and little preoccupation with what the dog 'naturally' wants. In fact, that that is natural (such as chasing, jumping, barking and interactions with other dogs) first needs to be eliminated, in order to be re-introduced, only under controlled conditions. The dog needs to learn an almost human type of self-control in order to be allowed to regain the privilege of access to canine behaviours.

#### BEYOND BEHAVIOURISM

As posed in the opening of this article, radical behaviourism's hold on agility training is waning as increasingly more trainers restructure their training practices in ways that acknowledge their dog's canine specificity rather than impose human standards of behaviour on the dog. They adapt to the dog, changing their training and handling styles in a way that makes them 'more dog'. Interestingly, in the world of agility, these are not trainers who have given up on competitive aspects of the sport. On the contrary, one of the pivotal figures in this trend, Slovenian-born Silvia Trkman, also happens to be one of the top competitors in the world, winning multiple World Championship titles with a number of dogs. At the same time, Trkman constantly repeats that such success was never her goal and that people ruin their relationships with their dogs by being too focused on winning. Trkman's methods could best be summed up as: speed, spontaneity, play, and throwing human ambition out the door. For Trkman, the appeal of agility lies in its fast pace and the excitement that this generates in the dog. Putting emphasis on control over speed –

as classic behaviourist techniques do – would go against those very qualities that dogs like about the sport: it allows them to run fast, as Cayenne's behaviour in Haraway's contact-zone narrative proved. According to Trkman, in order not just to do well but to experience the full joy of agility, the handler should embrace those aspects of the sport that make the dog tick: running full speed, turning the run into a chase, becoming more like a dog him or herself.

Trkman has not published any printed books but she does have a number of training videos and multiple online articles and interviews, in which she explains, in a very low-key manner, how and why she breaks all the rules of behaviourist training. Her videos are filmed mostly outdoors, against the backdrop of the spectacular Slovenian Alps. She is often filmed training in very casual situations. Out on walks in the woods, her dogs are seen racing around her, off-leash, usually as a group. When she is working with one dog, it is typical to see the others walking around and engaging in doggy activities: sniffing, playing or just casually resting. In her 2011 DVD *Ready, Steady, Go!*, Trkman presents her philosophy as 'work less, play more' and run more. In the opening segment, she says: 'Agility is just about playing and running and having fun and chasing and ... running, again.' She encourages handlers to embrace the spirit of agility and work with their dog's natural instincts rather than against them. By this, she means foregoing detailed training protocols and being open to sudden changes. In *Agility Diary* Trkman describes a particular training situation like this: 'Here I wanted to teach a reverse figure eight but she [the dog] had some other ideas, so I couldn't help but reward it because I really like her creativity' (2015). Trkman also advocates trusting the dog, respecting the dog's individuality and responding to it in the process of training. While it may sound esoteric, there are very specific cases that Trkman uses to explain what she means. If a dog cannot handle staying at the start line – a stay is recommended by most agility trainers to allow the handler to get into position on the course but it is also a difficult exercise to teach, because the

dog really wants to run once they see an agility course – then Trkman does not argue for re-training the stay. On the contrary, she suggests that a possible solution is to forego the exercise and just run with the dog because, after all, a stay is not a required part of agility, it simply makes positioning easier for the human (*Ready, Steady, Go!* 2011).

Finally, Trkman's signature is her running contacts, an exercise that best exemplifies her philosophy. The contact zones, as mentioned previously, need to be touched by a dog with at least one of its paws before the dog descends the obstacle. Haraway described teaching her dog to stop in the contact zone with two paws on the ground and two back legs on the obstacle, a procedure popularized by Susan Garrett and used by the majority of US trainers until very recently. Trkman's DVD *Running Contacts that Make You Smile* opens with a dedication to her dog La: 'an amazing crazy little dog of many virtues, but self-control is certainly not one of them' (2012). Trkman continues by explaining that she decided to turn La's weakness (lack of self-control) into an advantage by teaching her to run full speed and touch the yellow zone while running, in full extension. Trkman explains that her major gratification as La's partner is being able to smile as she watches her dog run at full speed alongside her: 'We both love to run and hate to stop' (*Running Contacts that Make You Smile* 2012). Trkman's running contacts have met with much criticism from inside the agility community: other trainers question whether it is possible to methodically teach the behaviour; whether her dogs' performances are not just a fluke, a stroke of good luck; and whether the handling of such fast performances is even possible for the average human. It is interesting that this minute element of agility training, the contact-zone performance, has raised so much controversy. This discussion reveals that the behaviour of stopping can be interpreted as an intrusion of the radical behaviourist discourse of self-control into the sport of agility. I use the word 'discourse' consciously, in its Foucauldian definition, because, for almost two decades, it seemed 'obvious' to the majority of trainers that

stopping the dog in the contact zone is the only sensible way to train, even though the rules absolutely do not require a complete stop; on the contrary, they reward the fastest performance.

#### BEYOND AGILITY

Trkman is by no means the only trainer whose ideas exhibit this new philosophy. Neither is agility the only activity where this trend can be noticed: it is an example rather than the exception. In fact, the desire to not just understand but even inhabit the canine's mind and body can be traced in numerous training materials or journals related to various training endeavours. Cat Warren, in her memoir of training a cadaver (human-remains detection) searching dog, writes of moments of desire to get inside the mind and body of her dog in order to know what the dog knows, to smell that that is unavailable to the human being or to possess canine communication skills: 'We watched her, trying to learn from her engagement and disengagement, her covert and canny manipulation of this emotionally stunted puppy. We wanted to know what Megan knew' (Warren 2015: 10) while the pet owner's version of the activity Warren engages in, called K9 Nosework, stresses in the rulebook that the sport is 'all about dogs and celebrating their amazing abilities' (K9 Nosework 2014). In fact, many of the contemporary human-canine activities declare their goal as strengthening the human-canine bond and making the guardian more aware of the dog's innate needs, drives and instincts. It seems as if much of cutting-edge contemporary training is not so much about making animals behave in ways in which they otherwise would not, as Paul Patton defined training in his Foucauldian reading of the training of dressage horses (2003: 83–99), but quite the opposite. It increasingly is about making humans engage in activities in which they otherwise would not, challenging them in unexpected ways, both physically and mentally. This is evident in many training memoirs that present the arrival of the dog as a moment of disruption of the human's life and describe its gradual reconfiguration

in ways that adapt to the canine's presence. English professor Cat Warren never envisioned herself searching for dead bodies, yet her dog's exceptional talent and high energy made her search for an activity that would both constitute an outlet for his drives and an avenue to make his scenting talent shine. In popular parlance, this is what people mean when they say that having a dog makes a person more active. Such common knowledge is also confirmed by empirical studies on the activity levels of canine guardians. Not all become agility competitors or cadaver dog experts but the general dog guardian population is by far more active than non-dog guardians (Schofield *et al.* 2005; Cutt *et al.* 2008).

#### CONCLUSION

Dog training, particularly the training of pet dogs, has historically been about curbing their instinctive behaviours in order to replace them with behaviours that make canine presence acceptable in an anthropocentric world. This is clearly changing, as more people are engaging in dog-related activities not with the aim of 'civilizing' their dog but because they want to satisfy their dog's physical and emotional needs and because they are fascinated with dogs' otherness. There is strong empirical grounding for such claims in studies of handlers' motivation for engaging in training (Farrell *et al.* 2015; Teodorowicz and Wozniewicz-Dobrzynska 2014) but this is also visible in the performances themselves and in the training apparatus: the methods, props, equipment and so on. If one conceptualizes agility as a performance of 'dogness', then the agility run performs dogness as speed, engagement and passion. All good runs – successful performances – make the spectator experience dogness as such. Thus, when one looks at the performances of competitors who train their dogs using different training philosophies, the difference may not be striking. True, Trkman is clearly running faster than most other competitors, even at the World Championships, but the full extent of the differences can only be discerned through a comparison of the entire 'animal apparatus'.

Once it is taken into account, it becomes obvious that there is qualitative difference in how she interacts with her dogs. Because her approach – an appreciation of dogness – reflects the motivation of increasingly more people who engage in dog training, I see this approach as innovative and believe that the turn away from radical behaviourism and towards 'more dogness' is imminent in the dog-training world. It is not a doing away with power altogether – that would be impossible – but it is the recognition of behaviourism's status as discourse, an expression to forego full control of the dog's behaviour, a readiness to learn not just with the dog but from the dog. Whether this is also slipping into another discourse, which I certainly believe it is, is up for further discussion.

Of course, what I – after the O2 advertisement – define as 'dogness', that is exuberance, impulsiveness, enthusiasm, sociability and full engagement in everyday matters, is itself context-dependent. This is not a timeless and universal set of features associated with dogs. Historically, humans have seen in the dog that that reflected their beliefs about what it means to be a dog. This has included loyalty and courage, but always underpinned with the darker side of animal otherness that had to be suppressed in order for the positive features to emerge. The Aristotelian definition of the human as 'the rational animal' has persistently haunted our interactions with non-human animals and training offered a way of partially repudiating the dog's animality, primarily through the inculcation in the dog of that that he was seen as lacking: self-control. What we can observe in contemporary training practices is not a total repudiation of the understanding of animality as lack of self-control but the revaluation of animality: impulsiveness is no longer something to be suppressed; rather, it becomes a quality that humans envy and wish to emulate. This shift in perception can be seen as part of the growing ethically motivated interest in animal otherness that is characteristic of the 'animal turn' we are currently experiencing.



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