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Understanding Dog Behavior and Welfare


For many years, John Bradshaw and his colleagues at the Anthrozoology Institute at Bristol University have worked to understand the relationships between people and nonhuman animals, particularly dogs and cats. Although the goals of the institute have not been exclusively concerned with welfare, its members have made significant contributions to the welfare of domestic animals by improving our understanding of them and their needs. Nowhere are these contributions more evident than in John Bradshaw’s recent book, Dog Sense: How the New Science of Dog Behavior Can Make You a Better Friend to Your Pet.

The central thesis of the book is that the welfare of dogs in Western countries is at risk in ways that it has not been before and that the future of dogs is uncertain. At first glance, this seems to be an extraordinary claim. After all, aren’t dogs better cared for now than at any other time in their history? We have been led to believe that the widespread availability of veterinary care and adequate nutrition and the growth of the welfare movement have greatly reduced the suffering of dogs over the last 100 years and that these things hold promise for greater improvements in dog well being in the future. Although this is undoubtedly true, Bradshaw directs us to a more subtle and less obvious threat that has been developing in the last 100 years. Ultimately, this threat is people—both those who care for dogs and those who don’t.

Until the turn of the 20th century, virtually all Western dogs were working dogs—bred; raised; trained; and managed to do specific jobs, whether pulling...
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carts, herding sheep, or killing rats in barns. But with increasing urbanization and industrialization of Western countries, many of those jobs have disappeared or have been greatly diminished, while at the same time dogs have increasingly filled roles as animal companions to people. Furthermore, the roles of companions are in a state of flux with ever-increasing demands being placed on dogs. Western dogs have less control over their lives and their environments than ever before. We expect them to be quiet; behave appropriately at all times; become attached to people but not too attached; and tolerate fewer opportunities for exercise, mental stimulation, and social contact. In short, their basic behavioral needs are increasingly compromised.

Bradshaw states that what dogs really need to adapt to these changing conditions is more understanding. If people who care about dogs knew more about their physical and behavioral abilities and limitations, then better environments, rearing conditions, training, and breeding could be provided. *Dog Sense* is an attempt to integrate the scientific information that has been learned about dogs in the last 60 years and provide it to nonscientists in a way that is both understandable and interesting. The hope is that through this expanded understanding, human attitudes, expectations, and behaviors toward dogs will change.

Bradshaw succeeds admirably in the presentation of the information in the book. However, the title is somewhat misleading as there is less of an emphasis on how to be a better caregiver to your dog (although there are proscriptions for better care) and more of an emphasis on what we need most to understand dogs. The title used in Great Britain, *In Defence of Dogs: Why Dogs Need Our Understanding*, is much more fitting.

Bradshaw spends considerable time discussing two beliefs regarding dog behavior that leads to misunderstandings, which cause great harm to dogs. The first is that all dogs are “pack animals,” that their wolf heritage leads them to try to dominate and control all the people and animals with whom they live. Moreover, people believe that the dogs want to be “alpha,” and the dogs will use any means, including outright aggression, to get their way. This belief has led people to treat their dogs as adversaries and competitors, causing them to do inappropriate and harmful things (e.g., spitting on a dog’s food, alpha rolls, and scruff shakes) to keep dogs in their place. This is a myth that many of us have fought against for years, and finally Bradshaw provides a series of arguments against it that are both overwhelming and compelling. Rational readers will be convinced of the errors of pack theory.

The second belief is that dogs are capable of complex emotions such as guilt, spite, and revenge and that much of their misbehavior is motivated by these emotions. As a result, owners assume that dogs have a sense of right and wrong and that when they are caught misbehaving they reveal it through their guilty behavior. This misunderstanding often leads to after-the-fact punishment
and harsh treatment that is inappropriate, ineffective, and harmful both to the dog and the relationship.

Although better education about these myths should improve the welfare of many dogs, it will take a lot of time before the myths completely disappear. For those who ascribe to these misunderstandings, rational arguments based on science are not convincing. Their beliefs about dogs relate to their unshakable core beliefs about people, animals, and the causes of behaviors. These old ideas will die slowly, only with the passing of those who hold them.

Bradshaw is direct in his criticism of the dog-training community. He notes that there are still many in the profession who are not educated in the science of behavior and that their ignorance continues to contribute to the suffering of dogs. Although training has steadily improved in the last 15 years or so, there are still a lot of improvements that need to be made. Bradshaw calls for better training and more rigorous self-regulation of trainers and behavior consultants as ways to improve the welfare of dogs. However, it should be argued that it’s not just the trainers and behavior consultants who need better training in animal behavior; all pet professionals from veterinarians and veterinary technicians to shelter workers, doggie daycare operators, dog walkers, groomers, and especially breeders need better training. All of these professionals have the potential to do great harm to dogs through their advice to dog owners or interactions with dogs. There are still many in all of these professions who remain ignorant of the science of animal behavior or choose to ignore it.

Bradshaw’s book gives those who care about the welfare of dogs compelling arguments about why they must advocate for the application of science-based knowledge to the breeding, care, and training of dogs. He goes further by describing specific issues that are problematic for dogs and their people. Finally, he suggests ways that changing human attitudes, expectations, and interactions with dogs can improve their welfare, even as the roles of dogs change in human societies. This book is clear, well reasoned, and interesting, and it makes an important contribution to our understanding of dog behavior and welfare.

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