



Dog's Best Friend

Diana Schaub

Do tame animals have better natures than wild ones? Aristotle says categorically that they do. This assertion (from book 1, chapter 5 of his *Politics*) is likely to strike modern readers as odd, maybe even obnoxious. You don't have to be a PETA radical—opposed in principle to the human project of domestication—to respond sympathetically to the “run wild, run free” ethos. Animals in their natural habitats are marvelous. In what sense could a cow have a better nature than a wildebeest? Or a pet rabbit have a better nature than a wild hare? Is a house cat more admirable than a “Tyger Tyger, burning bright, in the forests of the night”? Isn't it the worst sort of “speciesism” to think that proximity to us, or subordination to us, would make other animals better? And yet, Aristotle is not alone. The anthropocentrism of Athens is seconded by Jerusalem; if anything, the Bible is more insistent on the good of human stewardship. From Genesis on, man is given dominion over all life that moves, from the swimmers to the fliers to the creepers.

It's obvious enough that we have not always acquitted ourselves well. Whether in our relations with the wild kingdom or our practices of animal husbandry or our treatment of working animals and pets, there has been abuse and cruelty. The tyranny of some men, however, is not an excuse for the abdication of rule by *Homo sapiens*. Sapience has its obligations, despite the attempt by modernity and postmodernity to either demote or deny reason. Not surprisingly, once reason's title to rule is overthrown, rule itself becomes increasingly ungrounded. Authority, discipline, and obedience are now highly suspect concepts. The results are visible all around, but nowhere more so than in the household. Adult discomfort with authority

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leaves the littlest and least socialized in charge; spoiled kids and pampered pooches (mis)rule the roost. In response, an entire genre of reality television has emerged to provide guidance to those grown-ups desperate to reestablish order (including an order of rank) in the home. Interestingly, it is always someone foreign-born (from a less democratized land) who demonstrates leadership for the clueless Americans. Thus, in the out-of-control-kids shows, *Nanny 911* and *Supernanny*, a proper British governess fortifies the parental backbone (and supplies the “naughty” chair); in the out-of-control-dog shows, *The Dog Whisperer* and *Leader of the Pack*, the Mexican-born Cesar Millan exudes what he terms “calm-assertive energy.” Viewers astonished by Cesar’s ability to gentle the canine spirit might be tempted to wonder whether *machismo* is as bad as feminism said it was.

If these programs (and the spin-off books and websites) make the case for human authority in practical terms, Gary Borjesson’s *Willing Dogs and Reluctant Masters* deepens the argument, turning the relationship between man and his closest animal companion into a matter for philosophic inquiry. Borjesson, a tutor at St. John’s College in Annapolis, establishes to my satisfaction that dogs have better natures than wolves and, quite possibly, better natures than any other animal—any other, that is, than that most mindful animal whom dogs have chosen to befriend.

It should be said that Borjesson is not out to answer the general question about the nature of the tame versus the wild. He is interested in the unique qualities of dogs, especially their spiritedness, which binds them to us in ways—namely, ethical ways—very different from what is possible for cows or housecats or parrots. He explores the nature and virtues (both original and acquired) of *Canis lupus familiaris*, the process of their betterment (which includes both training/conditioning and education), and the forms of ethical life and justice (yes, you heard that right) of which they are capable. Beginning from the ordinary stuff of proper dog manners and obedience, he

*Willing Dogs and Reluctant Masters:
On Friendship and Dogs*
By Gary Borjesson
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\$14.95 (paper)

*Dogs of War: The Stories of FDR’s Fala,
Patton’s Willie, and Ike’s Telek*
By Kathleen Kinsolving
WND Books ~ 2012 ~ 64 pp.
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pushes much further, uncovering truths about the structure of the soul, the character of rule, the practice of friendship, even the quest for the divine.

Because his reflections on dogs become a parallel reflection on human life, Borjesson deserves comparison to Xenophon, the Greek philosopher who first seriously explored canine nature in his treatise *Kunegetikos* (*On Hunting with Dogs*). Like Xenophon, Borjesson shows how the friendship of predators in the hunt can illumine higher pursuits, from marriage to politics to philosophy.

Friendship without Equality

Borjesson's book is divided into three parts, with the first built on the distinction between friendliness and friendship: friendliness is a disposition, whereas friendship is a discriminating relation that involves demanding practice. Hence—as Aristotle noted in his *Nicomachean Ethics*—friendly people who pursue many-friendedness may not be good at being “best friends forever.” (In the dog world, it's the difference between a happy-go-lucky Golden Retriever and a serious German Shepherd. Often these qualities are specified in the breed standard. For instance, while the American Kennel Club describes the eyes of a Golden as “friendly and intelligent in expression,” Shepherds should display “a certain aloofness that does not lend itself to immediate and indiscriminate friendships.”)

Borjesson begins with evolutionary biology to explain what makes dogs so “astonishingly friendly.” So friendly are they that it seems domestication was begun at their initiative rather than ours: “dogs were our companions before we were organized or civilized enough to imagine creating them. They began to keep us company long before any other domesticated plant or animal.” Certain unique features of their biology render them remarkably adaptable, and thus able to fit themselves to the dizzying variety of human cultures and ways of living. Borjesson mentions their diestrus breeding cycle, which produces new generations at twice the rate of wolves; their tremendous genetic flexibility, visible in the range of dog breeds; their extended socialization or imprinting period (seven times longer than wolves), which makes dogs more receptive to new environments and experiences; and, most important for his analysis, their “sensitivity to matters of dominance and hierarchy,” a trait they share with wolves. He shows how this sensitivity actually tamps down hostility between individual members of the pack and furthers cooperation and a skills-based division of labor. The natural history of dogs presented in the first chapter concludes that dogs are “among the most socially sophisticated,

deeply cooperative animals on the planet.” And since their friendliness extends beyond their own species, it acquires layers of complexity quite foreign to other animals. The friendliness of dogs is aspirational. They are the ultimate social climbers (as the 25 percent of dog owners who admit to allowing their dogs in bed can attest).

The second chapter of Part I ascends from friendliness to friendship, under the aegis not of modern science but of ancient philosophy. Friendship, as an ethical activity, depends on freedom. The question is whether dogs are capable of it. Against the behaviorist view that dogs operate only by stimulus and response (“cookie, cookie”), Borjesson argues that dogs can join, at least as apprentices, our world of responsible action. He highlights the incoherence of typical dog owners who lavish their dogs with affection and praise (often using more morally laden language—“what a good girl!”—with their dogs than with their kids) at the same time that they parrot the skeptic’s dismissive view of canine capacities. The motive of psychic self-protection that Borjesson spies here doesn’t speak too well of us:

What if you knew for a fact that your dog didn’t come when you called because she had decided you were a pushover, wouldn’t you work harder at being a master she respected? What if that required more effort, skill, and spine, including a willingness to correct disobedience? If you knew for a fact that to be friends you first had to earn your dog’s respect, wouldn’t that complicate things?

What the behaviorists and the lazy owners overlook is the spiritedness of dogs. This spiritedness, which the Greeks called *thumos*, is the key to their higher capacities. According to Plato, spiritedness figures in our souls as well, situated between appetite and reason. In the well-ordered human soul, spiritedness allies itself with reason in order to govern desire (as when you muster your willpower to keep to your wise New Year’s resolutions). Aristotle says that spiritedness “is the capacity of soul by which we feel affection,” and also anger, for spiritedness is quick to defend what it loves against attack or injustice. Spiritedness can lift the self out of its narrow confines, expanding the boundaries of “one’s own.” Thumotic individuals will risk their self-preservation for the sake of larger goods: one’s property or territory, one’s family, one’s fellows, even intangibles like dignity and honor that have become integral to one’s self-conception. Spiritedness is precisely the dog-like part of the soul: loving, loyal, and fiercely protective. Because spiritedness is only fully itself when “it stands in a twofold relation, above appetite and below reason,” Borjesson concludes that wolves and higher primates are at best “proto-spirited.” Of the brute creation, only dogs—by

virtue of their alliance with us—can experience the spiritedness that listens to reason and rises above the promptings of pleasure and pain. Dogs become ethical beings through their capacity to pay attention, to care about praise and blame, and to obey. While not themselves rational, they are willing to follow our lead. Man and dog together instantiate the tripartite soul.

Still, there are plenty of lingering questions, as for instance “the question of how a dog’s obedience could ever be freedom, and not, as a cat might archly observe, slavishness.” (There is much at stake in the answer, since a version of the question might be asked of a human life based on obedience as well, say a life lived in religious devotion to the higher will of God, or even the life of a citizen lived in obedience to military or civil authority.) If the best that can come from a dog is obedience, can a dog really be free and a friend? If we are masters, aren’t they slaves, perhaps even the ideal type of the slave? According to Aristotle, “he is a slave by nature who is capable of belonging to another—which is also why he belongs to another—and who participates in reason only to the extent of perceiving it, but does not have it.” Aristotle regarded nonhumans as ineligible for natural slavery since “the other animals, not perceiving reason, obey their passions.” *Contra* Aristotle, Borjesson first elevates dogs to the status of natural slaves and then suggests that there even is a nascent form of spiritual freedom (the “glimmerings” of “thoughtful feelings”) possible for the dog within what is admittedly a relationship based on profound inequality. I’m reminded of Augustine’s suggestion that by serving “heartily and with good-will,” slaves “may themselves make their slavery in some sort free, by serving not in crafty fear, but in faithful love, until all unrighteousness pass away, and all principality and every human power be brought to nothing, and God be all in all.” In the stories he relates of his own two noble dogs, Kestra and Aktis, Borjesson offers an earthier version of such transcendence. He describes how friendship might emerge out of obedience and how mutuality might mitigate inequality:

Once I’ve earned Aktis’s trust [by being a competent, consistent master], the arts we practice become the true authorities. I mentioned Aktis’s joyous expression as he looked back over his shoulder at me after completing our first tracking exercise. The look in his eyes as he gazed at me was heartbreakingly pure and knowing and happy. More definitively than words, his action and gaze told me the art of tracking was something we shared. Neither one of us was master, but the art itself was our authority. Where hierarchically minded, social and cooperative animals are concerned, what surer way beyond the snares of authority and power than to find something we can share—and let it rule.

Freedom in Obedience

In Part II, Borjesson invites the reader to join him on the trail of friendship. He traces the stages of both master and dog's education, starting with the elementary education that family dogs receive: housetraining first and foremost, but also other essentials of self-control like not jumping on houseguests. This is the place for a discussion of conditioning (or habituation) and its contribution to reliable behavior. Despite the often haphazard, fits-and-starts training most dogs receive, they readily become members of the household—a testament to the naturalness of their living with us. Borjesson calls this type of friendship “familial.” Although it has its charms, it's not the best: “there's one sure way to recognize a family dog in the field: he knows perfectly well what ‘Come!’ means, and he'll come when called—if it's convenient.” Like most serious trainers, Borjesson can be withering about the majority of humans who manifest an “absence of much forethought.”

Borjesson moves pretty quickly to the higher levels of conditioning and commitment. Nonetheless, we should pause to consider what a unique achievement housebreaking is. I don't think any other animal can truly be said to be housebroken. Cats and rabbits and such are litter-trained rather than housetrained. They go in a designated spot, but do so at will (and failure to maintain the freshness of their toilet will lead them to find non-designated spots, like the laundry basket—I know this from my son's first stint as a cat-sitter). A good dog, by contrast, will suffer extreme discomfort before violating the sacred precincts of the house. Housetraining is the beginning of dog virtue.

In his treatment of habituation, Borjesson generously acknowledges certain crucial insights of the behaviorists, as for instance “that we become our actions.” So, to become generous, “act generously.” Since “you cultivate mind by cultivating behavior first,” the foresighted owner accustoms a puppy to positions like *sit* and *down*, associating those positions with particular vocalizations or signals. Real mastery, however, requires a shift from conditioning to obedience training. Even here, Borjesson is on the track of something finer; he's interested in “The Soul of Obedience”—as the title of the book's central chapter puts it. The following is a gem of a passage that you won't find in any standard obedience handbook:

An especially powerful and transformative command is the “down-stay.” Like collar and leash, it is powerful because it restrains an animal; however, it's different from these because by the time the training is done the dog will be restraining herself, and thus, in a modest way, she

will be more free. Practically speaking, the down-stay promotes calmness, confidence, and increased steadiness of character.

Obedience training makes possible what Borjesson calls “companion friendship.” The name is well-chosen since the first title a dog can earn in the world of competitive obedience is Companion Dog; like a Ph.D., a CD or CDX—the X means Excellent—is appended to the dog’s registered name.

Only a very small percentage of dogs receive obedience training, and even fewer receive effective obedience training. On Borjesson’s diagnosis, a major obstacle is our ambivalence about authority. We are reluctant to coerce, correct, and cause pain out of a twofold concern for “the harm one may do the dog” and “the harm one may do oneself.” Borjesson does not slight these concerns. His exploration of discipline and anger is sensitive and honest, even honest about his own mistakes. He is ashamed of the one time he permitted a trainer to use a shock collar on his dog, but defends the appropriateness of a bite he once administered to Aktis’s ear (despite the stunned disapproval of a mild-mannered onlooker). In a non-dogmatic way, he indicates why he views with suspicion any “instruments that come between the dog and me, or appeal to the basest part of his soul and mine”—such instruments include both the positive reinforcers like clickers and treats and the negative reinforcers that deliver impersonal corrections like invisible fences and e-collars. He prefers the intimacy and the risks of relying on the human voice, the human gaze, and of course human touch (I think he would consider a traditional leash and prong or choke collar as a direct extension of human touch).

In a journal devoted to technology and society, it might not be amiss to look more closely at Borjesson’s experience with the electronic training collar. The shock was administered during a fit of ferocious barking, after the powerful German Shepherd had ignored the command to desist: “All the arousal drained from Aktis in a heartbeat, his ears folded back, tail dropped, hackles vanished, and the look on his face as he stared at me was one of absolute dejection.” Although acknowledging that the correction was effective (in the sense that the dog became less inclined to lunge for other dogs), Borjesson was nonetheless troubled:

There was something wrong in the way Aktis looked at me in that moment, as though I had betrayed him. I don’t think he was confused about why he felt pain, since in similar circumstances I have corrected such behavior before, but I have a hunch that he was confused about where the pain was coming from. Driving home that day, I felt ashamed for having allowed this distance to open up between us, for

having caused pain in a way that made it unclear that I was personally responsible. It seemed unmanly and unfriendly.

Whether they know it or not, most trainers these days are followers of Montesquieu, the great modern theorist of crime and punishment, who counseled rulers to distance themselves from any association with the unpleasant aspects of rule. Create impersonal institutions and mechanisms that disperse power and disguise or obviate the exercise of judgment. Maybe human beings can accept the indifference of bureaucratic justice administered through technological means (like the flash of the speed camera), but dogs demand more engagement. Their preference for personalism may be a function of their more limited capacities; after all, Aktis had no way of understanding that bolt of lightning in terms either scientific (action at a distance) or religious (*Zeus is angry with me*). Hence, Borjesson's conclusion:

Perhaps we shouldn't seek to avoid the personal risk we take in confronting a dog. Dogs cannot avoid taking that risk with each other, or with us. The willingness to get personal—in punishments as well as in praise and affection—reflects care about the promises and the bond of friendship they represent. It also adds to the incentive to become a master, for it requires skill to get it right.

The education of a dog is always an education for the man as well. Remember, mastery and obedience are desirable not in themselves, but for the shared work they make possible. Obedience points beyond itself to “the practices of friends.” With a little help from Plato and Hegel, Borjesson shows how man and dog may arrive at a spot where the dog knows enough about the common endeavor to hold the man accountable for his failures. He tells the story of a hunter who

could see his brilliant German shorthair pointer Colter's disappointment every time he tracked and flushed a bird only to stand by and watch his master shoot and miss the mark. Ashamed to let down his friend, Bass bought a better rifle and went to a Texas ranch for a weekend primer on shooting. Thus Colter pressured Bass to become a better friend, or at least a better shot. Now that's an example of the power of recognition at work making friends better and more beautiful.

Purpose at Work and Play

Part III, entitled “Destination,” explores the fullest friendship between man and dog. Since friendship is found only in company with virtue, Borjesson

concentrates on canine virtue, which he divides into two categories: “questing virtues” and “hearth virtues,” or more prosaically, the virtues of work and play. As the metaphor of the quest implies, courage is the prerequisite virtue. Borjesson wants to know “how fully a dog can embody the virtue of courage.” His search for an answer takes him back into the thickets of spiritedness. A world with friends means enemies too; the “geometry of friendship” with its poles of gentleness and fierceness occasions some anti-utopian reflections on the “dream of universal peace.” Borjesson explains how dogs being trained for protection work learn “to bite courageously rather than from fear.” These lessons in how to control and civilize spiritedness (rather than extinguishing it through selective breeding or psychopharmaceuticals) have applications in daily life too, and for other spirited creatures like young boys. Borjesson’s discussion is nuanced. He never sacrifices the distinctively human; however, he doesn’t think that defending the distinctively human requires denying dogs a share in certain forms of self-control and self-sacrifice. Appropriately, the chapter ends with a few tales of military dogs. It was the soldiers who served alongside them in World War II who pressed for dogs to be granted medals. Some dogs were in fact awarded Silver Stars and Purple Hearts for their heroic service on the battlefield—awards later retracted over concern that the practice might insult human honorees.

One might have predicted that modern life, so urbanized and technological, would lead to the disappearance of working dogs. Our lives don’t revolve around hunting or herding anymore. But dogs have kept pace with us. In addition to their traditional tasks on farms and fields, they work as service dogs, therapy dogs, search-and-rescue dogs, guard dogs, and of course in law enforcement and the military.

A tidbit from the little book *Dogs of War: The Stories of FDR’s Fala, Patton’s Willie, and Ike’s Telek* by Kathleen Kinsolving: in the afterword, we learn that K-9 SEAL Cairo, a Belgian Malinois outfitted with body armor and night-vision “doggles,” was a member of the commando team that killed Osama bin Laden. Cairo is one of 2,800 active-duty dogs in the U.S. military. Although figures are hard to come by, there are many times that number in police K-9 units. Here, the technology—like the \$86,000 K-9 Storm Intruder, a tactical assault vest with an integrated camera and communication system that allows handlers to see what the dog sees and give commands by radio—further the mission, which might also include such feats as tandem rappelling or parachuting; the highest man-dog jump to date was from 30,100 feet.

Less fit for work are the dogs of war of the book’s title, really the personal dogs of the generals. It’s clear enough that men in authority over

other men sometimes prefer to take a break from authority over their dogs. The Bull Terrier belonging to “Old Blood and Guts” was afraid of loud noises and “downright cowardly,” while the Scottish Terrier that Ike shared with his mistress Kay Summersby was never properly house-broken (perhaps a mirror of their irregular relationship). First Dog Fala, another Scottie, comes off the best of the three, “standing at attention on his hind legs—whenever ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ was played.”

But life is not all serious business. There is also play, and dogs excel at it. Many dogs play part-time at their work, and there are competitive trials of various sorts (field trials, sledding races, lure coursing, water trials, pulling contests, dog agility, and such) that allow dogs to do what they were bred for, even as those ways of life disappear. For instance, I own a sixty-foot fishing net, a dinghy, and plenty of bumpers, buoys, and float lines, just so my Portuguese Water Dogs can have purpose-filled lives, in accord with their heritage and temperament.

In his account of hearth virtues, Borjesson is not interested in the dog snoozing at your feet, but he is interested in purer forms of play than the above-named activities. In performance trials, a cooperating man-dog pair wins the competition either by besting other man-dog pairs or by meeting a defined standard. (Clearly, it is the honor-seeking humans, not their dogs, who covet the ribbons awarded at dog trials.) By contrast, in the “magic circle” of play, both the cooperation and the competition are integrated into the man-dog interaction. If your dog has ever played keep-away with you, when you wanted to play fetch with him, you know what Borjesson means. Of course, friends who can’t even agree on what game they are playing are not the best of friends. Perhaps the main point that emerges from Borjesson’s examination of play is that play requires and rewards attention. His description of a more satisfying, high-level game that he and his dog “made up one day and have been refining ever since” is worth quoting at length:

Here’s the set-up. We’re outdoors, usually in high grass, there’s a ball somewhere, and I know where the ball is but she doesn’t. She knows only that the ball is nearby and, crucially, that I know where it is. The winner is the one who gets to the ball first. The playing field is level because although I know where the ball is, she’s much faster, more agile, lower to the ground, and has a great nose, so if she gets close she’s bound to snatch it up before me. Now Kestra could adopt the strategy of systematically searching the field and brush nearby until she came upon its scent, which in other circumstances is what she’d do. But here she’s found it’s a risky strategy, since I can catch her unawares and grab the ball. Instead she focuses intently on my every

look and move, trying to read the ball's location from my eyes and body language. In the meantime, her strategy is to put herself between me and whichever direction I'm moving, all the while scenting the air between us for clues. It amounts to mind reading. She tries to decipher my intentions, while I try to fool her with false moves and misleading glances. I try to get within range of the ball without her finding it first, but she's familiar with my stock of tricks and often second-guesses me. Some of the happiest times I've spent with Kestra have been moments like these, when the whole pleasure is just having and playing with each other's attention—call it “playing attention.” Sometimes when she gets to the ball first, she actually tosses it in the air and catches it or drops it near me as a tease, only to scoop it up before I can grab it. And when I win? Well, naturally I do the same.

In the final pages of this incredible journey, Borjesson reflects on the limits of such agonistic friendship. The limits arise from our differences; however, those differences can be a source of consolations as well as sorrows. The sorrows include the inescapable burden of human authority (since dogs can never be “the second self” of complete friendship) and our abiding awareness of the brevity of their lives. But from their fleeting friendship we learn about death and dying and the “wisdom of the spirited heart.” Through them, we stay in touch with nature (to borrow a line from the dog's mortal foe, the postman, “neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays” our walks) and with our own animality. Dogs even have a charming ability to offer their silent companionship as we read and think, soaring into realms they can't reach. Borjesson quotes Rilke, who “wrote that good friends ‘guard the gates of each other's solitude.’” My dogs, Tyvek and Maisie, have waited patiently, protecting my greater mindfulness, until the moment arrives for a return to their world of joyous embodiment. Although I've been thinking of them all along, Tyvek and Maisie have had enough of that non-sense and are reminding me that it's time for another sort of ramble.