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Our Embodied Friendships With Dogs

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It's frustrating to many of us that we can't convince others of the reality of our friendship with dogs.

Some of us have a strong sense that our dogs are truly our friends. We might even be tempted to say that dogs are more reliable in the feelings they have for us than are fickle humans, who are often willing to betray or manipulate us for their selfish interests. We might agree that the familiar epithet, "Man's Best Friend," may be apt, because our dog truly is our fondest friend in all the world.

Upon hearing this kind of claim, many people shake their heads sadly, not merely doubtful that it could possibly be true, but also suspecting that anyone capable of such a belief must be a pitiful human being, unable to engage with other humans in fellow feeling. According to this cynical way of thinking, we emotionally disabled dog lovers desperately create an illusion of shared love with an animal to compensate for our inadequacies.

Among such skeptics are a couple who are also dear friends of mine. They are generally knowledgeable and perceptive people. Yet faced with my assertions of friendship with my dog, Bhakti, they are inclined to smirk. They confidently object that animals can only react to food or to some other stimulus which directly indicates the presence of something the animal needs. They feel impelled to break the news, firmly but gently: dogs, like other animals, have no feelings for any particular human individual—nor can they even register the sense of any person around them as a distinctive individual. Dogs, they say, have no emotional capacity to enter into a relationship with a person based upon affection. To

the dog, so my these friends of mine tell me, I'm just the guy with the dog food. They admit that the dog might superficially seem emotionally attached to me, but really, they say, the dog's just conditioned to do what it has to do to get some more chow.

My friends are not atypical in their opinions, especially for non-pet people. Non-pet people are quickly identifiable by their rigid postures when approached by a dog, as they lean away from intimate contact and look about for a human worthy of directing their gaze upon, instead of this annoying beast. If they're forced by the dog to pay it some attention or by the group pressure of other people greeting the dog, they will slightly bend over and wave their arms in a skimming motion near the dog, but never bend their knees to get down to a level on the same plane as the dog's face—a respectful way to engage canine companions. To get down on the dog's level, especially that much lower level of a dog like mine, an apple-headed Chihuahua, would be an absurdity to them, whereas to me it's a gesture of accommodation and recognition, a perceptible invitation to enter into a relationship.

Apple-headed Chihuahuas, by the way, are fuller dogs than regular Chihuahuas, more mellow, with faces that somewhat resemble a seal's, unlike their more emaciated, highly-strung cousins. I grew up with a very large boxer, so I have experienced both ends of the dog stature spectrum.

Do Dogs Have Feelings?

I had been living with my dog Bhakti for seven years, when I became ill. Being a marathon runner, I was more concerned about my damaged cartilage and knee surgery than the painful intestinal difficulties I was experiencing. Once my knee was surgically repaired, I suddenly realized my gut needed attention and was astounded to be told that I had a softball-sized cancerous tumor blocking my bowel. Bhakti was well cared for by a person whom she had known closely for her whole life and certainly fed each day of the ten days I was in the hospital having a bowel resection (and thankfully that's all, despite the more dire predictions about the spread of my cancer).

When I was released from the hospital and we drove home and walked in the door to my house, Bhakti came running out and literally cried and howled, and howled and moaned in a wrenchingly pitched way I have never heard from her before or in the six years

since. Not only had she missed me, not only had she sensed that something had been threatening to my well-being, but she obviously had been incredibly anxious and distressed in such a way that all this pent up feeling was being released. She carried on for quite some time and reduced all of us to tears and hugs, trying to console her, all the while that she was also continuously snuggling her little head up to me and stopping her hysterics to lick me gratefully. It seems obvious to me that her actions expressed these emotional experiences, but philosophers often have the task of arguing in favor of what seems to be too obvious to need argument.

Non-pet people are not the only ones who would deny Bhakti's fears for my well-being and fears of losing the object of her love, her anguish, pain, relief, and warmth. The smugness of those who deny animal feelings and their capacity for friendship with humans comes from this belittling view of animals being backed by the experts. Most philosophers or ethologists (scientists who study animal behavior) would tell me that my claim to be friends with dogs are instances of 'anthropomorphizing'. Anthropomorphizing means attributing human feelings and thoughts to entities which don't really have them. Another term is 'projection': dog-lovers are sometimes accused of projecting their own thoughts and emotions onto dogs.

As I wrote that last sentence, Bhakti was peering up at me intently. I know that she had no idea what I was doing or what I was asserting as I wrote. She was probably hoping that some of the muffin I was absentmindedly munching as I typed at the keyboard would end up as a handout to her—the last thing an elderly diabetic dog needs, but again this fact is not something Bhakti is aware of or factors into her lust for blueberry muffins. There's a lot that I could project onto Bhakti, but don't, and there's a lot of projection going on collectively by people in our culture—toys, clothes, and other treats for dogs have become big business at the same time that our busier, more socially fragmented, and isolated lives have made the need for nonhuman companionship stronger.

Misunderstanding Animals

The charge of "anthropomorphizing" has become as destructive to open dialogue about the nature of animals as the phrase "political correctness" has become to a truly open and meditative exploration of political questions. To anthropomorphize is to be blind to the

actual experience of animals by attributing human thinking and feeling to them. In regard to friendship with animals, this would mean that people project feelings of loyalty, affection, respect, and shared commitment onto animals in order to meet our human need to overcome loneliness through bogus friendships with animals. Any report that we have identified feelings in animals can be discounted by the charge of anthropomorphism, no matter how real such a feeling may seem to be, given the way the animal behaves. Certainly, when we look at "reacup" Yorkies in pink dresses and matching hats, St. Bernards lugging around flasks of Johnnie Walker Red Label, or poodles being laced up in jogging shoes, we can see that humans in the contemporary American culture are doing a lot of projecting their own thoughts and feelings onto dogs. Anthropomorphism can sometimes be a real danger. But this doesn't show that *all* perceptions of canine feelings are a result of projection.

Ethologists all know the story of the counting horse, "Clever Hans." Hans achieved fame a hundred years ago for being able to solve arithmetic problems, whether adding or multiplying the number flashed on cards before him, giving the answers by the number of times he tapped his foot.

This was supposed to prove that animals could have human-like intelligence. What's wrong with this approach is that it assumes that animals need to demonstrate *the same kind of intelligence* as humans in order to be intelligent. Assuming animals should make sense of the world in exactly the same ways that humans do, whether by reasoning out situations, doing some abstract mental operation like arithmetic, using tools, or communicating by language, is to be "anthropocentric," to assume that human ways of understanding, communicating, or creating are the only standard against which any other ways are to be measured. It would mean that for animals to be considered capable of friendship, they must behave just as a human friend might, whether by having shared values, being supportive, or being considerate to their friends.

At first Clever Hans passed impartial tests administered by the famous psychologist Carl Stumpf and a panel of judges at the Berlin Psychological Institute in 1904. They failed to find any trickery in Hans's performance. It began to appear that Hans really could add and multiply numbers. That all changed when Stumpf's student, Oskar Pfungst, discovered what was really going on. Hans was responding to subtle cues given completely unconsciously by

Hans's handlers and by others who tried to test the horse's abilities. The horse was sensitive enough to pick up on their emotional excitement and expectation. Without knowing it, the handlers widened their eyes, flared their nostrils, flushed, or altered their breathing, when the right answer was arrived at. Hans could sense this, and would stop tapping at the right number of taps.

Hans didn't fail to demonstrate intelligence by not being able to do abstract mathematics with flash cards. Instead he showed how sensitive and understanding he was in grasping the barely perceptible signs of the feelings of the humans around him. I retell this famous story because it can be used to promote a shift in how we approach our understanding of animals' abilities. In order to consider our dogs' ability to be friends with humans, we should look at other levels of understanding than the usual abstract, rational cognition that we humans often employ to assess ourselves, others, and our relationships. Rather than looking at the traditional standards for entering into friendship based on the assumed essential human abilities, we should look at differing ways that animals might demonstrate having friendships.

The power of this approach is not only that we will no longer fail to see animal's unique abilities, but also that we will reconsider our own feelings and behavior. If philosophy is to tell us something about dogs, it can approach dogs with an eye to their unique and non-human abilities. Since we too are animals, we may learn more about ourselves by seeing hidden aspects of dogs and finding that there are key elements of human friendships that we have ignored. Animals may have lessons to teach us about the nature of friendship in general.

Some might be tempted to *define* "friendship" as a specifically "human activity" that relies upon specific human capacities and interests, and thus close the question without further inquiry. After all, this definitional approach had been taken for thousands of years in regard to the capacities to use language, to reason, to draw analogies, to count, or to recognize the meaning of death, or in regard to the activities of making art, holding funerals, playing games, giving directions to others, or describing which of many possible enemies are approaching. These are all capacities and activities that ethologists have demonstrated to exist in various animals, despite previously defining them as purely human capacities and activities.

Cormorants won't dive again after diving seven times for Japanese fisherman unless they are given the fish treat they receive

every seventh dive; bees describe how far and in what direction and how much honey is to be found through their "waggle dance" to other bees; Irene Pepperberg's parrot performs impressively on analogy tests; prairie dogs communicate to other prairie dogs what sort of predator is approaching by making differing sounds; elephants will not leave a member of their group who has died without covering the body with soil and remaining in an extended vigil over the site; Koko the gorilla learned to communicate through American Sign language and then using a computer keyboard responded to an online question of what is "death" by answering "sleep forever" (in reference to his cat who was killed by a car); and these are just a few of the capacities and activities that have been discovered to be true of animals in recent decades—or at least, so many scientists assert.¹

Phenomenology to the Rescue

The approach that I follow as a philosopher is phenomenological, which means that what counts for me is not to work within a logical system of defined terms, and construct arguments on that basis, as many philosophers do, generating lovely conceptual systems which miss much of the richness of our experience and of reality. Phenomenologists attempt to discover by observing the world whether they can find new ways to look outside traditional categories, to experience new kinds and levels of meaning that may have been hidden by previous assumptions.

If animals seem to experience fondness for each other, or seem to form bonds of attachment, or seem to prefer companionship while engaging in certain activities, or demonstrate a loyalty to particular other individuals that motivates them even to risk their lives—and some or all of these characteristics define what humans have meant by 'friendship'—then a phenomenologist will look to see if he or she can make sense of an animal's experience as also being shaped by friendship. If the phenomenologist can generate

descriptions which put into language aspects of experiences that had not yet been articulated, this will enhance the human capacity for new observations and in turn these observations will add more to the descriptions.

If we're seeking to give a "deeper" or "thicker" description of our experience of the world and of other beings' experience of the world, then emotions, intuitions, imaginings, bodily feelings, perceptual associations, aesthetic recognitions, temporal senses, and other ways to "take in" what is around or within us *may* reveal aspects that either supplement or replace what rational understanding indicates.

Many traditional philosophers assert that we can only understand other people or other creatures by finding rational principles that would underlie and connect the differences among them by seeing how they are instances of these same rational principles. For example, in a famous case in animal science, the fact that wasps repeat the same motion many, many times was judged as "dumb" and proof of the wasps' lack of grasping the situation confronting them because it was so inefficient. But the "utterly mechanical" label given to the wasps' activities reflects more of our own feelings about humans having to perform numerous repetitions. Scientists saw that modifications to the wasp behavior could be made that would be more in line with a rational principle of efficiency and used this principle to compare the activities of humans and wasps in the same situation. However, in the wasp's context, there may be other reasons that make sense for it to repeat actions in a way that would be numbing to a human consciousness. It may be the way the wasp achieves a coherent approach to the totality of tasks in its world.

This "rational yardstick" approach of assessing animal behavior and experience goes hand in hand with the perspective that assumes all sense experience, all emotional experience, all bodily feelings, and all memories, can only be understood by being interpreted according to rational principles. Phenomenologists take experience as their guide and listen to how emotion and imagining, for example, shape our experience as much as rational ideas. The evidence from emotions and from imagination may be an equally valuable input about the nature of existence.

Clever Hans could not do addition or multiplication. He could not reveal the aspect of the world illuminated by arithmetic. But given the horse's emotional sensitivity and perceptual sensitivity to

¹ Many books which detail these findings but a few of my favorites as most readable and comprehensive are Gary Kowalski, *The Soul of Animals* (Stillpoint, 1991), Donald R. Griffin, *Animal Minds: Beyond Cognition to Consciousness* (University of Chicago Press, 2001), George Page, *Inside the Animal Mind*, (Broadway, 1999) and Daise and Michael Radner, *Animal Consciousness* (Prometheus, 1996).

very small details, he could "understand" the emotions of his questioners and attempt to please them. It is an insight of phenomenology that we "take in" and have an immediately felt understanding of certain aspects of the world through emotion, through imagination, and through bodily feelings. This insight has been shared by psychologists who speak of "emotional intelligence," and even by brain scientists who have discovered that the more rational cognitive functions of the brain work inseparably from those processing centers in the brain handling the emotional, the imaginative, and the bodily.

If it were true that humans and dogs had to communicate through rational assertions or could understand each other only through abstract reasoning, then there could be little mutual understanding. If friendship relied on rational insights being communicated and reflected upon by each friend, and not on an emotional immediate communication through embodied perception giving each friend a better sense of shared experience, emotions and feelings, then friendship between humans and dogs would be impossible. However, it might also be impossible between humans.

By "embodied perception" I mean that we take in not just bare sensations, like "red," but apprehend the red as part of a larger web of relationships that are its interwoven context, so that a florid red complexion is immediately seen as a possibly revealing illness, or overheating, or chronic drinking of alcoholic beverages, or as expression of embarrassment. The "red" doesn't stand alone, for the sensations perceived by the body are immediately part of a larger cluster of meanings.

With other humans, I "get" their joy in walking with me, or playing with me, or being together in activities, from their smiles, their laughter, their hugs, their skipping about, their matching their rhythms with mine, and a host of other expressions and apprehensions which occur on an immediate embodied level of "lived understanding," as fitting together to convey this sense. I do not have to think about these things reflectively and rationally to understand the warmth of the shared happiness and fondness. Equally, in the sneer of the lips, in the menacing, rigid posture of the body, in the glare of the eyes, in the attacking tone of the voice, in the wariness of the steps, and so forth, I immediately have a lived, felt embodied understanding of another person's hostility.

Both animals and humans understand the world to a great extent through their bodies kinesthetically, emotionally, perceptu-

ally, memorially, viscerally, and imaginatively. Dogs are especially sensitive to tone of voice, to posture, to rhythm, to touch, to entering into shared activity co-operatively and rhythmically, to spontaneously giving themselves over to play and inviting others to join them through gesture (the famous hunched over "v" formed by their front paws, for example) and to a host of perceptual ways of taking in those with them. Yes, they lack the reflective and rational capacities for the kind of communication that adds another dimension to human friendships, but this sort of shared understanding or communication that dogs do employ is important also among humans as another "level" of understanding.

We are not only rational beings, but also feeling creatures as other animals are. If a dog's way of encountering and making sense of the world were exclusive to dogs, we would never know what they comprehend or what their actions mean, but we make similar gestures inviting others to play, for example, or immediately apprehend in another human's guttural response, something very like a "growl" of annoyance. Since a dog's way of understanding the world overlaps with the human way, mutual understanding is possible to some extent, even if it's not perfect. We don't even understand ourselves or other humans perfectly, so that standard is way too high to be interesting or significant. Imperfect understandings can go a long way to opening worlds to each other and to keeping us walking down the difficult path of "knowing thyself" and also knowing other beings, such as our dogs.

Being Caught Up in the World

Maurice Merleau-Ponty was a French philosopher who died in 1961 at the age of fifty-three, but not before turning philosophy on its head by using psychology's observations about the nature of perception to show that as knowers of the world we get our primary sense of time, space, the qualities of things around us, the social sense of situations, and the sense of relations with other people, from a "bodily knowing," through a resonating with our surroundings. Perception not only registers physical characteristics of what is around us, but does so inseparably from also giving us emotional, imaginative, memorial, social, practical, motivational, personal, and symbolic senses of these objects, their relationships, and their context.

When I see Bhakti come running up to me, I have an immediate bodily and perceptual sense of whether she is tired or peppy, dissatisfied or content, playful or concentrating on getting food. I have an echoing in my own visceral sense of my body of these states in her or of the rhythm of her gait, I have implicit intimations of our long history together in its varied ups and downs, such as the fearful time when she had a huge liver tumor three years ago, and her sleek body is only perceived in an implicit comparison with that bloated version of her, in projections of our walk later today to be taken in the woods, in the comforting enjoyable snuggling and playing within our shared relationship with Judith, in the context of knowing her frequent proclivity to sit in the sun on a dry, sunny day.

However, this sort of sense of perception that contains so many elements inseparable and without any explicit thought or expression seems also to be experienced to some degree by Bhakti about me. She may bark and protest if she sees me lacing up my running shoes or taking the car keys since this is inseparable from the sense of being left alone without the walk or dinner coming, that the leash gets a wag of anticipating the walk or this street a protesting pull in some other direction since it is the veterinarian's, my tears will prompt a jump on the lap and licking of the face or arms to cheer me up, or my taking up the stalking posture and moving slyly towards her will be met with her legs outstretched and the twitching back and forth of the head in play posture. Neither I nor Bhakti have to rationally construct these meanings. As a human, I may reflect and modify my initial "take," as when I realize that she is late for her insulin shot and maybe that is why she is dragging along, but often our "initial take" remains as my guide.

Even our sense of location, of direction, and of orientation are more felt, in emotion, in the visceral depth of the body. This gives us our sense of "belonging"—an experience vital to both humans and dogs. When humans feel as if they don't belong, they're anxious, out of sorts, and stressed. Dogs, when they sense they are not where they feel at home, seem to experience the same feelings, as they whine or rear things up, or pace nervously.

Being There

Merleau-Ponty offers a story in explaining this more felt and immediate sense of space. He recounts a period of his life when he is

vacationing down in the south of France, but World War Two is still not over. He says that as the weeks go by, his life becomes permeated with the rhythms of the village around him, being concerned about the harvest, the rainfall, and the level of the river, like all the locals. His sense of his body is one that has meshed with the world around it, feeling connected to the fields, in tune with the rhythm of the rising sun, the passing of rain clouds, and the pull of the market. However, as soon as he hears about a bombing in Paris and is overcome with worries about the safety of his family and friends, he is "no longer there" in the village, but instead is riveted to Paris. His body is directed towards it through tension, worry, concern, and feels centered in its pulse. He feels his "belonging" among those people he loves in Paris, not where he is physically located at the moment. He can reason to himself that he knows he's in this physical location, but his experience is dislocated from that logical conclusion. Fortunately, in the flow of everyday life, these two most often coincide: where we are physically located and where our ties of emotion and concern are centered at that moment are the same or at least largely overlap, but having them out of sync shows us that it is the emotional lines, felt through the body, of connection and orientation that give us a primary sense of being located, directed, and belonging within a place.

Merleau-Ponty also looks at indigenous peoples' description of home: it is not a spot on a geometrically laid out grid, or at a certain distance from topographical landmarks, but is rather "the place of *peace* and *warmth*," the site of "*belonging* and *security*." This is expressed in their languages. "Home" is an important matter to both humans and dogs, and is established first by a felt understanding of the body whose perception is woven with memory and emotion, not by rational judgment. This is important for the possibility of friendships between humans and dogs, because it's an example that points to a level of common understanding of their respective realms of experience, that might serve as a basis for communication and shared "understanding" in friendship, since all definitions of friendship require some sort of shared understanding and communication.

By showing that we're first and foremost feeling, perceiving, expressing bodies caught up immediately with whatever is around us, Merleau-Ponty's account also makes humans into more relational beings, inseparable from their environment. Since we can

reflect and detach from our more immediate experience, we have more leeway that animals do in seeing ourselves apart from our environment, but they also may gain an acuity of being aware of their environment we lack.

My favorite example of this immersion and acuity with the environment is the bird, the Clark's nutcracker, which inhabits the mountain pine forests of the Southwest. During a few weeks in the late summer and fall, the nutcracker hides caches of two to five seeds in up to two thousand locations. Each bird needs to retrieve at least three thousand of these stored seeds to make it through the harsh alpine winter. Experiments have shown that they can return to their caches as reliably after 285 days as after 11 days. The bodily sense of these places in the surroundings is one that has been "mapped" into the bird's immediate perception, just as we find in hummingbirds who have a sense of which flowers they have visited, as bees finding their way back to the hive given the angle of the sun on their flight back, as East African elephants having a sense of where the water hole is to be reached forty miles into the desert and several feet underground, and so on with many animals. These animals do not have to reflectively ponder where to find these things in their environment, but rather they are drawn by felt bodily pulls and pushes, as if the perception of the world in its shapes, colors, and outlines were a kind of inmutable map. Brain science verifies Merleau-Ponty's suggestion that these cognitions do not rely upon parts of the brain involved in abstract reasoning or explicit memory.

What We Share with Dogs

If we look at our dogs with this idea of gaining a sense of who we are only from the relationship with what surrounds us, we can see that we may have grown into *shared understandings* of the home we share with them that are vital to both human and dog in their sense of self. Perhaps, for our dog, the den is the place for resting in the cold winter and feeling contentedly warm in front of the fire and for watching for birds outside the back window in summer when they come to the bird-feeder, the forest across the street is the area for trying to catch rabbits, the park is the place to rush other dogs in confrontation and to get a sense of exhilaration by running or catching a fishbee, that this neighboring house is one to be wary of given the vicious and larger dog who used to live there,

that this hole is a possible comfort for the groundhog who lives there but is a galling nuisance in giving him somewhere to escape to, those steps are to be avoided so as not to slip and fall as happened a few times before, the refrigerator is the source of interesting items to be devoured, that cupboard is dangerous as the place of medication syringes, the bed is to be jumped on at night for the chewing of bones, and so forth. It's obvious, however, that if these are the dog's felt sense of things, the partnered person may share many of these feelings and senses of the environment, such as the contentedness emanating from the den of being in front of the fire in the winter, or the thrill of the woods in hunting for rabbits, or being scared of that house and its monstrous hound, or being frustrated by the hole of the groundhogs, or being habitually drawn to the refrigerator.

For my friends, who think of animals as biological machines, pushed and pulled by "drives," they would never realize that Bhakti has a good sense of the world around her without abstract reasoning, since for them as for Descartes, all meaning comes from thought of some sort. Yet, Bhakti's immediately felt sense of things is a similar to the same sense I have of many shared aspects of our home and its environs. Our shared sense is not only about objects, but about daily rhythms of time and space within which we live together: in the late afternoon, it's that time to start circling the food dish, to keep an eye out for what might be for dinner on Bhakti's part, and on mine to start getting the ingredients of our dinners assembled; at late night, it's the time for Bhakti to cock an ear for strange intruders like mice in the pantry or burglars in the yard, and I do so to a lesser extent; the morning is the time for Bhakti to wait by the door for the mad dash to the grass for ablutions, and I do so in another location; or the row of suitcases is the cue for Bhakti to get ready for a ride and stay in obvious sight and whine so as to not to be left behind, and for me to not forget to get Bhakti and install her in the back seat; or the putting on of coats is the immediate down-looking, slinking, and perhaps crying lament of being abandoned again and of Glen to feel a little sad to live a world where Bhakti can't come and to feel a little guilty about leaving her. These meanings are not pondered reflectively, but are the attractions and repulsions, traps and siren songs, delights and securities, registered in the perceiving canine body as it runs or walks or shuffles through the house and neighborhood and echoed in differing but often similar ways by the dog's human companion.

Dogs and humans are more similar beings than we might have thought. Much of our immediate grasp of the world and home in which we live with them over a period of years becomes very similar or at least analogous, and in many ways shared. Understandings, concerns, delights, anticipations, memories, expressions, fears, rhythms and many dimensions of the daily activities are grasped, reacted to, and responded to in ways that overlap. Both dog and human are also caught up in many of the same relationships, living within the matrix of the same environment, events and people. Looking at this felt, embodied level of life, we might be able to meet our dogs in avenues of mutual or at least partially mutual understanding of the kind that makes for friends. We might have to rethink the nature of friendship and care outside the rational and reflective grasp of things.

Reconsidering the Nature of Friendship

About ten years ago, I vacationed with three good friends in the area above Arroyo Seco, New Mexico, in the vicinity of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, for a month of enjoyable reading, relaxing, and hiking. The hiking was exhilarating, following trails through deep forests and up the sides of peaks, crisscrossing numerous mountain streams. Bhakti was only about three years old then and loved to hike.

As my human friends and I struggled across the streams, teetering on slender log bridges or hopping from stone to log, Bhakti would race across the top of the log and wait for us on the other side. I wanted to get to the top of Lobo Peak (12,115 feet) during our stay in the area. It was a bit daunting that early in our stay a hiker had been trapped on the peak during a late afternoon thunderstorm, struck by lightning, and killed. At least once a week my friends—humans and dogs—and I would start out on the hike to the peak. After the fourth time that we turned back somewhere along the trail, because one or more of my friends got too tired or too fearful of the impending afternoon thunderstorms, or were too distracted or indifferent to the project, I formulated a plan for the next to last day of my month's stay at the cabin that exchanged my human friends for a more trustworthy and well-matched partner for the climb, Bhakti.

I got up at 5:30 a.m. when all my human friends were still sleeping and took only Bhakti with me. What followed was a glorious

day on the trail while Bhakti and I scrambled across creeks, through forest and alpine meadows, up steep rock climbs, until we reached this heavenly perch in the sky at the peak. I took a picture of Bhakti with all the surrounding peaks about her as she stood on the sky. It is a moment I will always remember, but it is far more than that. It became one of those memorable shared experiences with Bhakti, a shared significant effort, rhythms of hiking matched to one another, and also shared communicated feelings along the trail of happiness in the trek together and affection mutually expressed at breaks when Bhakti would curl up in my lap and give me a little lick on the ankle or hand as I would pet her or cradle her.

Without a Friend . . .

However, it was more than just a memorable experience as it became a symbolic touchstone of having a bond of friendship between us. It involved perseverance, strength, joy in physical exertion, an ability to pick up the rhythms required by this particular trail and mountain, a watching out for the partner in climbing (as Bhakti does every twenty paces or so—runs ahead and turns around to watch me and make sure I catch up to her and then continue, as I also do for her at times), a shared sense of being tentative enough to rest at certain intervals and to pace oneself, an attentiveness to the environment, and other "excellences" of character and behavior in a specific situation, which is precisely Aristotle's idea of virtue. He does not mean "virtue" in a moralistic sense of meeting a standard of morally correct behavior, but rather virtue is the actualization of potential excellences of the organism by using its powers well to augment the well-being of the organism and its situation.

I mention Aristotle in looking at classic Western philosophical ideas of friendship, because his ideas about the role of shared "virtues" in friendship are relevant to the embodied approach to friendship, unlike many other ideas which tend to emphasize the importance of the mind over the body. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is probably the most famous statement in Western philosophical history on the nature of friendship, as well as the most powerful cultural validation of the importance of friendship, with its statement, "For without a friend who would choose to live?"²

² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VIII, section 1.

I admire Aristotle for giving us reasons to question many kinds of friendships that people in our culture embrace: those relationships based on providing us pleasure or those that help us with practical aspects of our lives. This gives us a chance to be more critical about our friendships.

For Aristotle, even if the pleasure is continuous and ongoing in the other person's company or even if the utility the person provides to our existence is of vital and continued importance, these are not really friendships. They are superficial substitute measures for the real thing and will end with the cessation of pleasure or practical need. It's easy to see how we are thrown together with people for periods of our lives out of some shared usefulness or some ongoing pleasure, say in boating together or in going out to delectable dinners, but that we know that Aristotle is right, that the depth of a true friend is lacking. One "friend" loses interest in boating or changes eating habits, and there goes the supposed friendship! By contrast, Aristotle's true friendship is determined by sharing key virtues, working on developing these virtues together, a shared commitment to these virtues and a mutual concern for the other's well-being. Friends help each other to become better people in working together to realize these shared moral capacities, and this is their focus in the relationship.

If Aristotle's ideas of friendship were to apply to my relationship with Bhakti, then Bhakti would have to be more than a mere object or occasion of pleasure for me and offer me something besides being the provider of usefulness in chasing away possible burglars (doubtful for a Chihuahua) or making sure I got exercise by walking her (doubtful for a seven-time marathoner) or meeting some other practical need. The nature of my interaction with Bhakti would have to help me work on developing my virtues in the shared activity of her developing her virtues.

... Who Would Choose to Live?

Like other significant principles in the history of Western philosophy, Aristotle's ideas on friendship have often been interpreted in a very rationalistic way that has put a primacy on our rational abilities to be a true friend and therefore would rule out friendships with dogs and other animals. Aristotle's idea of "mutual goodwill" has often been understood as being able to rationally and reflectively envision a friend's possibilities and project a path of how this

person could realize these character excellences, such as kindness, honesty or temperance, and then deliberately commit to helping the friend pursue these virtues. This sort of regard for the other would require reflective capacities that dogs don't seem to possess. Moreover, some, like my skeptical friends, would claim that dogs are only interested in what Aristotle deemed superficial alliances with their humans of practical usefulness and perhaps some shared pleasures, like going for a walk or romp together, not to mention frisbee tosses or mountain hikes. On the human side, we might only care for dogs for enjoyment of these same activities and their usefulness in scaring away burglars or foxes. That would also make these not true friendships, according to Aristotle.

These objections could be carried further by thinking about friendships along the lines of eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant. For Kant, what is worthy of respect for myself or for others, is the rational ability to see what is morally right in a universal way (as a law) and to mold our actions to their dictates, no matter what our urges and feelings are. For Kant, this sort of respect has to underlie affection for a friend or else it is just a feeling, nothing more. The affection for another might help me gain a specific focus for my rational abilities in assessing my friend and our relationship, but without that rational intervention there is no real friendship. Needless to say, neither Bhakti nor any other dog shows any evidence of having the ability or interest in making these sort of rational assessments and commitments, nor would I or other humans find any way to apply them to the canine world. Thus, for Kant, as for Aristotle, no true friendships are possible between members of our separate species.

Yet if we consider Aristotle's emphasis on the immediate emotional, imaginative, visceral responsiveness of organisms to their situations, there are senses of friendship that could open an avenue between Bhakti and me, humans and dogs, as friends. Aristotle was one of the few philosophers in the Western tradition until the nineteenth century, to have understood virtues not as rationally articulated values, but as "dispositions" of the entire person to act spontaneously in a certain situation. He was not interested in ethics as a set of rules, but as self-transformation into a different sort of person. According to Aristotle we are like a work of art that we can keep shaping by developing different habits, so that we will then respond spontaneously with a developing excellence of virtues.

I may at a certain age have been a boorish and unhelpful participant in discussions, insensitive to the other person's point of view, but in working at learning how to listen, maybe at first literally biting my tongue and forcing myself to follow other people's words, making myself ask five questions per meeting about their point of view, I would gradually train myself to be a person who will *spontaneously* be disposed to listen to other people's stories, concerns, and ideas. This idea of developing practical wisdom is a holistic response of emotional being, feeling, intuition, bodily remembering, imagination, and vitality, analogous to what I have called "embodied understanding," which may be vital to both humans and dogs (as well as other animals) in understanding and responding with excellence to the world. Dogs are able to lick the faces of their upset human companions, move their puppies away from danger, or protect another pack member from a predator, at this level of spontaneous acting upon immediate feelings called forth by the situation.

Virtue in Humans and Dogs

In my description of a few experiences with Bhakti, I have tried to articulate instances of shared actions that brought out virtues in each of us, but also if we consider the long-term effect of living with our dogs, we might add to this account, since the development of virtue and the friendships that promote this take a rather long time. Not only may many humans and dogs become better attuned through their own efforts to virtuous action in their environments, but they might develop through being and working together the dispositions to perform these actions that Aristotle thought were the virtues.

Prisoners in jail for serious offenses, who seem to lack sensitivity to other people's needs, may be given dogs to raise. In teaching these dogs how to behave and in caring for their needs, the prisoners learn to become more caring people. In sensing the dog's gratitude and affection, they find an affirmation that allows them to care in return. Another example might be a distracted philosophy professor who learns to curb his frustrations and become more patient when his dog won't eat its normal food, needing special accommodations. He also becomes more reliable and responsible when his dog needs insulin shots every twelve hours, and in many ways learns to respond to his dog's nonverbal claims upon him, to

mold himself into a more patient, caring and responsible person. Of course, this second case is mine. It is not a one-way interaction: Bhakti might not be so lean and fit at thirteen, if she had not responded to my urge for a walk when she was feeling lazy, nor as continually affectionate and expressive if she had not been raised by someone who constantly offered affection, interaction, and gentle play. Living together, dogs and people form a bond on this non-rational, fully felt level of disposition, in which they help each other become better people, the power that Aristotle believes friends can share.

This is not to say that the all-night talks with good human friends, or the debates over what actions are ethical or not, or the sharing of the myriad of exclusively human experiences don't provide a dimension of heartfelt friendships and excellence to our lives that can't be provided by a dog. However, there are aspects of friendships with dogs that are equally powerful. One of these is the dog's large nonverbal set of expressions of affections, such as nuzzling, licking, or resting against one's legs while sleeping. These spontaneous, direct expressions of affection build another sort of bond over time.

With dogs humans have to learn to bridge a gap, to try to sense the world of a being that experiences things so differently. This capacity and intention is itself a virtue of friendship—to reach deeply in one's sensibility and sensitivity. This psychic stretching adds something to humans' abilities that many of our human friendships lack, that nevertheless we should cultivate in order to increase our sensitivities to those who are very different from us among the human community, too.

Aristotle is right. Who would want to live without friends? I know that I can't conceive of life without my human friends, but I also can't imagine how much poorer my life would have been with my dog friend, Bhakti—named for the Hindu path of enlightenment through love.

What Philosophy
Can Tell You
about™ Your Dog

