

# HOW DOGS THINK

A NON-VERBAL LINK TO CANINE COMMUNICATION

by William E. Campbell

Have you ever seen a device or a program designed to correct a dog behavior problem that explained how smart dogs are and how they think? Most plans or gadgets enable owners, literally, to declare war on their hapless pets. Little or no concern is afforded to what the dogs happen to think about them. In fact, the implication is that dogs don't think at all ... either they just react to external stimuli like robots, or respond according to genetically controlled "drives." Dogs are rarely credited with the ability to solve a problem mentally; to analyze a situation; imagine ways to manipulate or control it, then take a pre-planned course of action toward a goal that was preconceived in the dog's mind. In short, the dog is considered a real dummy, then treated like a dummy. But this concept is not correct. Dogs are smart. They can, and usually do, think rings around their owners. And they can do it because most owners have never learned how to think like a dog.

## Understanding Non-Verbal Thinking

We all wonder now and then what our dog is thinking. If we wonder aloud, perhaps when mealtime is approaching and the dog is looking expectantly at us, we might say something like, "I'll bet Tippy's thinking, 'When is my dinner going to be ready?'" In all likelihood, Tippy isn't originating any thoughts about 'when dinner will be ready.' It is more likely Tippy is imagining (or 'imaging' in his mind) the words and movements you usually say and perform before getting his dinner; something like, "You want dinner, Tippy?" All that tail wagging and those pleading eyes are aimed at stimulating you to say it.

But, an inability to originate thoughts in a spoken language does not make dogs unintelligent. Even people don't actively think in a spoken language unless they actively 'speak' it. For instance, during a short vacation to Japan, if you don't already speak the language, you'll probably pick up the meaning of a few words. After a few natives look at you in the morning and say "Ohio," you may eventually learn that they're not curious about where you're from, but are wishing you a "Good Morning." Still, you won't think in Japanese unless you live there a few months and actively speak it. Even a pet Akita will never learn to speak or think in the native lingo because their voice boxes, tongues and lips cannot formulate the sounds of Japanese ... or English, or French, etc, etc. The limit of our dog's language-learning is the meaning of the sounds of certain words. Luckily, dogs are quick to learn the sounds that are important to them.

With this in mind, when Tippy is prodding us about serving dinner, we'd be wise to discard ideas about complete sentences being originated and thought about, and replace them with the non-language concept of mental images. To illustrate this further; when most Tippys are asking for dinner they actually look from their owners toward the place where it is served, generally the kitchen.

## **Evidence of Imagery**

Some very convincing research suggests that dogs think in sensory impressions; visual, sound and odor images, etc. This is not to say that they sit around on quiet days experiencing videos inside their brains. However, they likely share our ability to form and experience in their minds certain images, odors and sounds. The scientific basis for this idea came from Russia and was published in the US in 1973. A scientist name VS.. Rusinov<sup>1</sup> was studying the electrophysiology of the brain and had several dogs wired with brain wave equipment and radio transmitters. When the dogs were brought into the lab from the kennels for experimental

conditioning tests, the electroencephalograph machine was turned on to record their brain wave patterns. This was done at the same time each day, five days a week. One weekend, purely by accident, Rusinov brought a group of visitors into the lab and turned on the EEG machine. Lo, the dog that was normally scheduled for tests during the week at that time was sending wave forms nearly identical to his regular working patterns! When the testing time passed, the dogs' brain waves soon returned to their normal 'at rest' forms. I never found any mention by Rusinov as to whether the dogs out in the kennel were actually performing their conditioned laboratory behaviors. Chances are they were not, but one thing is almost sure; compared to human experience in similar types of studies, the dogs were apparently experiencing them mentally<sup>2,3</sup>.

The late Polish scientist, Jerzi Konorski,<sup>3</sup> taught dogs to salivate and expect food in their trays when a light flickered. This was done regularly every few minutes. However, after a few trials, the dogs started salivating and looking at the trays as if the food were actually there, even though the light had not flickered. Konorski ventured that the dogs were hallucinating about both the stimulus (the light) and the reward for salivating (the food). One thing is sure: Something was going on in the dogs' minds that made them behave as if they were happening.

## **Some Human Examples**

Before going on with dogs, let us consider some facets of our own 'mind's eye,' as suggested by Konorski. Imagine we have a date to meet a loved one at a busy restaurant. We get there on time and sit at a table near the door. Fifteen minutes go by, but no friend arrives. We begin to wonder if they are coming at all. We start watching people approach the door. Pretty soon, people with similar features almost cause us to call out to them. The more concerned and anxious we become, the more apt we are to mistake strangers for our friend. When he or she finally arrives, the

pleasure and relief we feel is often mixed with mild displeasure. We are ambivalent ... we have mixed emotions about meeting them in the future.

Almost everyone has mental imagery. Often, just the thought of a loved one conjures up their image. This can apply to sounds, as well. Think about your favorite musical piece and your can often hear it in your 'mind's ear.' These are positive images. They are emotionally pleasant. At the other end of the scale, recalling a terrifying experience can not only create its images, but sometime even make us shudder. This is an example of negative, emotionally unpleasant images.

## **Back To Dogs**

So it is with our dogs. When we are late getting home, or if they over-miss us because we spoil them with attention and petting every time they demand it, they very likely worry in images, too. They may well recall images of us and our activities, such as fluffing the pillows on the sofa, putting away record albums, handling magazines and books, putting on shoes just before leaving, sitting in a favorite armchair, etc. As a result of this, they often engage in activities which involve them with these images: Pillows wind up on the floor, albums or magazines are moved or chewed, a chair seat gets dug up, shoes are brought out of the closet. If they can't have us there, they try to interact with things that symbolize us.

If dogs really do store up and recall images of us and life's other objects and experiences, it follows that we might use this to our mutual benefit. But since most owners do not understand how dogs think, this imagery is where the seeds of most behavior problems are sown. Dogs receive and recall conflicting images of owners and many important experiences.

# The Puppy's Dilemma

Consider the new puppy whose owners come home at regular times and join in an ecstatically joyful greeting ceremony. This imagery is quickly ingrained, and the pup begins to anticipate the experience, just Konorski's dogs hallucinated about the flickering light and the food tray. However, as will happen in even the most well regulated household, one day the owner is late. The puppy begins experiencing the images of his tardy owners ... starts fretting, pacing. Well primed energies, ready for the greeting ceremony, demand an outlet as the adrenaline starts pumping.

What's going on in its mind's eye or ear? It probably imagines hearing footsteps, perhaps even sees the door open... which doesn't happen. But it should. This introduces conflict between what it wants and expects and what is really happening. Conflict creates frustration. Frustration produces anxiety, which triggers an even greater adrenaline rush. The pup searches for something real to satisfy its desire to 'experience' the owner ... a magazine or book it saw the owner reading recently. It is rich with the owner's scent. If it cannot have the owner there, it can at least have their genuine odor or taste. So it sniffs, tastes, maybe even swallows parts of the article. Naturally, this does not fully substitute for the whole owner, so the puppy's social appetite is not really satisfied.

Finally, here comes the owner. The puppy innocently launches into its joyous, semi-hysterical ritual. The owner starts to join in, but spies the pulverized magazine or book. What's this? Naturally, if not wisely, the owner angrily grabs the pup, drags it to the demolished object and scolds it, or slaps its snout or rump, or both. The pet's single-track mind is riveted on the owner. It yips, rolls over, or struggles vainly to escape. Punishment concluded, the owner angrily picks up the remnants of the article and storms to the trash basket.

# Psychic Trauma

The net result of this is a totally confused pup with a conflicting set of images of its owner. This sort of shock to the nervous system is called psychic trauma in both animals and humans. A conflict has been instilled between the positive image of the owner (happy Dr. Jekyll) and the negative (Mr. Homecoming Hyde). This creates frustration and anxiety about homecomings, growing in severity if the scenario is repeated a few times. (It is interesting that in many cases, owners tell us that the pup was fine for a day or so after the first punishment. This may equate to the human experience of repression, in which memory of the traumatic experience is suppressed, creating a sort of 'backwards amnesia.') Even when this occurs, since the punishment was not associated with the act of chewing up something, the puppy seeks out another article, perhaps a shoe, and the cycle is repeated until the total relationship between owner and dog is tainted with emotional ambivalence. Mixed feelings are eating away at the positive qualities of their relationship. Negative emotional impressions may start to dominate it.

At about this stage, many owners conclude that the punishment may not have been severe enough. That's why the correction was not permanent. So they intensify it. The relationship erodes further as weeks go by. Enough of this cascading negative effect and the owner is ready take drastic action. The dog, now hyper-sensitive to its owner's mood change, feels something is wrong. This often is reflected by new problems, such as submissive wetting when the owner comes home or approaches the dog at other times; off-schedule bowel movements or urination occur, etc.

Many pets act insecure, currying more favor when the owner is home, and hence, missing the owner even more acutely when left alone. Frustration and anxiety build, while the isolation-

related, tension-relieving behavior mounts. The unwitting owner, who originally may have thought the dog is 'getting even' for being left alone, begins to consider it incorrigible.

## **HELP!**

This is when outside help is often sought. A book is purchased. The veterinarian, breeder, pet shop, a trainer or behaviorist may be consulted. If lucky, the owner gets advice that brings genuine insight into pet/owner relationships and dog behavior. But, more likely, they find traditional quick fixes and the dog winds up in a desensitization program; gets dosed with anxiety relieving drugs or barbiturates; is stuck in a cramped crate or cage all day, or banned to the yard or garage, or has its mouth stuffed with chewed debris and taped shut for hours. Since none of these approaches deal with the causes, the 'thinking dog' and the total relationship with its owners and the environment, success is rare. The majority of these formerly precious pets find themselves rejected ... relegated to the local pound for five to seven days, where the odds are 3-to-2 they'll suffer society's 'ultimate solution'. But things don't have to be so grim, if the owners learn some 'dog think.'

## **Applying Positive Imagery To Solve 'Separation Anxiety'**

Dogs that misbehave when they are left alone are said to be suffering from separation anxiety. The term is a neat buzz-phrase; almost everybody uses it. It sounds professional. The trouble is, as a transplant from human psychiatry, it really doesn't convey much useful information. However, the term is here, so we'll use it in its broadest sense, which is; "a troubled feeling when left alone or apart from a certain person or persons." This allows us to recommend a remedial behavioral program that deals with the

realities of the dog's total relationships. First, however, we must be sure that the dog's veterinarian has ruled out the many physical/medical causes for anxiety, such as thyrotoxicosis, hyperthyroidism, pre-diabetes, encephalitis, allergies, hyperkinesia, etc. etc.

## **The Program**

Dogs that are unduly upset when left alone usually enjoy their owner's attention and petting whenever they ask for (or demand it) when the people are at home. To apply the imagery concept to this relationship, we could say the dog 'sees itself' as directing, or leading the owner. When it wants some petting, it nudges or otherwise stimulates the owner, and the owner complies. The dog wants out, whines at the door or at the owner, and the door gets opened. Mealtime approaches, dog whines and prances, and dinner gets served. When the owner goes from room to room, the dog is either ahead, leading them, or close behind. This is the reality of their relationship, at least in the dog's mind. But, when the owner leaves, against the dog's wishes, the pet is predictably upset, and problem behavior occurs. This can involve barking, chewing, pacing, self-mutilation, off-schedule bowel movements, urination around the house, etc.

The leadership problem can be turned about by presenting a different reality to the dog; one in which the dog is pleasantly, but firmly and consistently told to perform some simple act, such as 'sit' whenever it attempts to gain attention or affection, or whenever the owner wants to give the dog some attention. All 'sits', or whatever command is used ('down' is a good one for highly bossy dogs) are praised happily as 3 to 5 seconds of petting is awarded; then the dog is cheerfully released with an "OK" or "Free." (Free is a good release because OK is too common a word.)



If a really bossy dog refuses to obey, and many do when they realize their relationship is being turned around, simply ignore the situation, turn away and go on about some other activity, ignoring the dog. Some dogs have refused to respond for as long as four days before coming to terms with a follower relationship. However long it takes, after a few days the dog's image of itself seems to evolve from one of giving direction to taking it with compliance prior to being petted, getting dinner, going out the door, getting on the couch, etc.

In moving around the house, whenever the dog forges ahead, simply about-turn and go the other way. This must be repeated until the dog walks patiently behind or, better yet, doesn't even follow. It is also helpful, but not vital, to practice down-stays of increasing length during several evenings a week.

## **Images of Hyper-Emotionality**

Most 'home alone' problem dogs get extremely emotional when their owners get home; some even get excitable when regular departure times approach. To supplant these emotionally over-stimulating images, sit quietly for about five minutes before leaving, in the area where the dog will be left. No eye contact or speaking is allowed. Then, get up and go without looking at or speaking to the pet.

At homecoming, enter quietly and ignore the dog until it quiets down completely. Then it is greeted happily, but briefly, away from the door of arrival. This subdued routine soon replaces the dog's highly emotional mental images of returns and departures with calmness and serenity.

Here's the tough part for most all dog owners: When coming home the place is a mess! Pillows have been chewed, or the chair is tattered again, or a pile of poop graces the doorway, or

some other problem is evident. If we keep in mind that the dog has in the past suffered from conflicting images at homecoming, it is imperative that no emotion, or even attention, should be directed at the remnants of the problem; such as chewed up magazines, shoes, defecation, etc. Instead, after five minutes of ignoring the dog, it should be greeted away from the scene of the misbehavior, and then pleasantly taken outdoors or to another room and left alone while the mess is cleaned up. This avoids creating new (or reinforcing old) conflicting images of emotional reactions to, or interactions with, the debris, defecation, etc.

I have always called this 'the secret clean-up'. It has worked wonders as part of programs ranging from digging in the yard to housetraining puppies. Just why it is such an effective adjunct to correction programs remains to be satisfactorily explained. In the meantime, we'll have to say that the lack of an image of the owner and the mess is more beneficial to correction than is the image.

## **The Big Picture**

So, there it is. Dogs think in images and we can mold and change their behavior in hundreds of ways if we will think as they do. For instance, on the negative side, a set up whereby a car screeches to a stop, horn blaring, just as a dog starts toward the street from the sidewalk, then praising its retreat, is a valuable exercise in negative imagery. However, it must be repeated until the dog avoids the street when cars are not present, as well.

Teaching the 'panic' command to come needs the dog's name followed by a code word, a sound image that is exclusive to coming when it is absolutely necessary, and praise words or a vocal rhythm that is unique to that command, coupled with fast hand-clapping while taking a crouched position. These combined, positive images can create a dog that will dependably respond to

your code word and come to your praise. It is especially important to teach this command when the dog is out of sight, as well.

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