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It's Complicated: Reflections on Pet Ownership and the Dynamics of Love and Domination

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Throughout my teenage years, I often reflected on my own and other humans' inconsistent treatment of animals. How can it be that we view animals differently depending on what species they belong to and in what context they are encountered? These thoughts were contextualized through my experience growing up in a household with both pets and human meat-eaters.

Studying Critical Animal Studies (CAS) theory made it possible to add an 'academic' lens to my reflections on the complexity and paradoxicality of pet ownership. One of the central texts in the literature on this topic is 'Animal Pets: cruelty and affection' (1984), in which Tuan argues that the domestication of non-human animals is an act that combines cruelty and affection. While studying the literature, I found myself returning to the concepts of *anthropomorphism* and *anthropodenial* as key elements in explaining the co-existence and interplay of love and domination that having a pet entails. Whilst anthropomorphism—the attribution of human characteristics or behaviour to a god, 'animal' or object (Parkinson, 2019, p.1)—is a frequently used term in multiple academic disciplines, 'anthropodenial', coined by the ethologist Frans de Waal, is not as common. The term refers to a "rejection of shared characteristics between humans and animals when in fact they may exist" (de Wall, 1999, p.258).

Last summer my family decided to get a new pet, a Labradoodle they named Luke. In just a couple of weeks, it became evident to me that Luke was a victim of both anthropomorphism and anthropodenial. He quickly became seen as an important family member with his own bed, personality, and Instagram account. He was in many ways treated as a human member of the family, but then in some

ways not. In contrast to human members of the household, Luke had very little autonomy as his daily regimen was in the hands of his owners. Although I had no doubts that my family cared for Luke, seeing them interact with him made me question how much of what they know about Luke is fundamentally true, and how much is an anthropomorphized version of his reality. Is scratching his paw on your leg really a sign that he wants to ‘play’ with you? Does jumping and barking when you come home really indicate that he has ‘missed’ you? What purpose did these anthropomorphic depictions and practices serve in my family members’ relationship with Luke?

Throughout this paper, my observations of Luke and my family will be utilised to reflect on the complexity of the relationship between a pet and its owner(s). I aim to investigate in what way anthropomorphic practices can serve an important function in legitimizing pet-owner relationships and the combination of affection and domination it entails.

Aim & approach

When non-human animal oppression is brought up and questioned in media and society it often concerns spaces—laboratories and factory farms—and/or practices—hunting, experimentation, meat production—in which animal exploitation and domination is self-evident, casting a negative moral assessment on the situation. However, the phenomenon of animals that are treated ‘good’ but still owned and dominated by humans has not been problematized to the same extent. I believe this phenomenon, particularly evident in pet ownership, can serve as an example to better understand humans’ ambivalent feelings towards and inconsistent treatment of, other animals.

This study explores the social construction of pets and how the concepts of anthropodenial and anthropomorphism can shed light on the complexity and ambivalence that permeates humans’ relationships with other animals. The purpose of this paper is not to argue for or against domesticating animals, but to investigate and challenge the anthropocentric cultural and social constructions that pervade modern society.

Throughout this paper, my ethnographic observations of my family and their pet Luke will function as a case study to explore the focus area of this paper. I have conducted my observations through an ethnographic participant-observer ap-

proach where, as Arluke & Sanders explains, the participating observer functions as partly a member, and partly a guest (1996, p.23). As a member of the family who has moved out of home and only interacts with Luke on occasional visits, I have a close familiarity with the subject without being so close as to be influenced by personal feelings of ownership. Although subjectivity is inevitable in ethnographic fieldwork (ibid, p.19), my level of access to the case study allows for ‘thick descriptions’ and an in-depth view of the relationship between my family and their pet. With this level of closeness to the subject in mind, I have made efforts throughout my observations to remain critical, and to ground my interpretation of these human-pet interactions and acts of anthropomorphization through the lens of CAS literature.

Anthropomorphism – a brief overview

Non-human animals are inevitably anthropomorphized when humans communicate with or about them, as humans’ understanding of animals is invariably anthropomorphic and “an interpretation in terms of human concepts” (Parkinson, 2019, p.25). However, as Parkinson and de Wall point out, there are different types of anthropomorphic practices. Parkinson’s notion of naive anthropomorphism and de Wall’s ‘anthropocentric’ anthropomorphism both refer to the act of naively attributing human qualities, thoughts, and feelings to animals based on wishful thinking and/or insufficient information (Parkinson, 2019, p.26ff; de Wall, 1999, p.260).

Parkinson argues that naive anthropomorphism can be harmful, as it contributes to a romanticized and stereotyped picture of what a non-human animal is, needs, feels, and wants. Critical anthropomorphism, on the other hand, derived from systematic interaction with other animals over time, can function as an interrogative tool to help humans understand and reflect on the non-human animal’s perspective and lived experience (Parkinson, 2019). Similar to critical anthropomorphism is De Wall’s notion of animalcentric anthropomorphism. Whilst anthropocentric anthropomorphism answers the question “What would I feel in this situation?”, animalcentric anthropomorphism seeks to answer “What would this animal feel in this situation based on its species-typical behaviour?”. De Wall argues that it is possible to explain the world from an animal’s viewpoint by using human language and concepts. Although we cannot know for certain what an animal is feeling or thinking, we can attain knowledge about an animal’s natural

tendencies, behaviors, and intelligence over time which can help us accurately describe and understand its experiences.

Research suggests that there is, to some extent, a common ‘interspecies language’ between humans and dogs, consisting of facial expressions, gestures, and physical behaviours that can help us interpret what a dog is experiencing or feeling (Cudworth, 2011, p.154). Although we cannot be certain that our interpretation correlates with the truth, Cudworth emphasizes that if we do not try to imagine what other animals are feeling “other species’ lives disappear from view” (ibid.). In line with Cudworth, de Wall argues that we should not fear anthropomorphism, but its opposite, anthropodenial. A rejection of our shared characteristics with non-human animals leads to a blindness to not only human-like characteristics of animals but animal-like characteristics of ourselves.

Anthropomorphization can therefore be described as a double-edged sword. It can work as an effective tool “in raising public awareness and concern for other animals” (Parkinson, 2019, p.18) as well as a reminder to ourselves that we are also animals who share biological and behavioral similarities with other species. However, used naively, anthropomorphic practices can justify human domination over other animals by naturalizing an anthropocentric worldview in which human values, needs, and ways of being are seen as the ideal. In short, anthropomorphic practices, can make non-human animals more visible and important to humans, with the risk of “losing sight” (ibid, p.1) of the real animal.

Friendship without Freedom

Since Luke became a part of my family, I have been surprised by my family members’ sense that they can communicate with Luke and interpret his feelings and needs. Throughout my observations, I noticed my family members’ reading of Luke was greatly dependent on his facial expressions. Parkinson (2019) points out the centrality of the face in humans’ interactions with other animals; when non-human animals’ faces are visible and similar to ours, we tend to feel like we understand and relate to them, facilitating feelings of connection and empathy (Parkinson, 2019, p.49).

My sixteen-year-old sister often shows me pictures she has taken of Luke and, without hesitation, explains how his countenance communicates what he wants or is feeling in different pictures. By showing me photos on her smartphone, she



Image 1: 'Hungry' Luke, March 2021

told me that Luke expressed hunger through 'drooling' (image 1), that he was tired because he was laying down still but following the camera with his eyes (image 2), and that he was sad because he had his head down and his eyes were shiny, indicating that he was 'tearing up' (image 3). Her explanations were strikingly similar to the ways in which humans express different emotions and needs, which made me suspect that I had just observed a case of 'naïve' or 'anthropomorphic' anthropomorphism. But even though I doubted the legitimacy of my sister's interpretations, I had a sense that they contribute to a reciprocal relationship between her and Luke. Although my sister's anthropomorphic interpretations might be 'naïve', they imply that she believes there are enough emotional and cognitive similarities between her and Luke for them to share meaningful experiences with each other. When my sister and Luke play in the backyard, go out for walks or 'chill' on the couch together, their relationship is more similar to one between two human friends than an object and its owner.

Even though my family members' interpretations of and interactions with Luke are well-intended and at first glance fairly mundane, they can also be argued to contribute to the false notion that Luke has agency. Luke's emotions, needs, and experiences are acknowledged many times throughout the day, but only through the lens of my family's anthropomorphic depictions and vocabulary. Tuan (1984)



Image 2: 'Tired' Luke, March 2021

would perhaps define this as an act of domination while Parkinson (2019) would call it naive anthropomorphism based on 'wishful thinking' (p.28). Such wishful thinking allows for anthropomorphic constructions which obscure the power imbalance inherent in the pet-owner dynamic. Projections of emotions of love and affection, or claims that a pet has missed its owner, for example, obfuscate the realities of ownership: that the pet is confined to its owner's house, that its diet and activity is controlled, and that it is almost entirely stripped of agency. In this way, applying human concepts to non-human animal behaviour can be seen as an inadvertent practice that legitimises the dynamics of human domination over other animals. Although my family is endeavouring to better understand Luke, their anthropomorphic interpretations also affirm their status as owners. In doing so, this perhaps distances them from the 'real' animal more than it makes them understand it.

Through anthropomorphic practices, pets are ascribed an identity and a personality, but they are still far from reaching the same status as human members of the family. Pets are often deeply loved, but also marginalised family members. Similar to humans, but not similar enough to have the same agency and autonomy. My sister refers to Luke as a friend whom she understands and can communicate with, but implicit in this "friendship" is Luke's inability to express his opinion and con-



Image 3: 'Sad' Luke, March 2021

sent. Luke is only allowed to go out when he is let out by her, only allowed to play when she feels like it and only allowed to eat when she puts food in his bowl. The 'friendship' between my sister and Luke lacks reciprocity. It is a charade comprised of anthropomorphic practices. When Luke is 'sad' (app. 3) my sister pats him on his head or belly, and when he is 'tired' (app. 2) she puts a blanket on him. These anthropomorphic depictions affirm for my sister her status as an empathic and understanding friend, letting her feel she is sensitive to Luke's needs and wants.

My sister humanizes Luke's facial expressions and emotions in ways that affirm that she is a good friend, while also having him as his plaything and denying him agency. Perhaps pet owners find comfort in anthropomorphic practices as it conceals the harsh truth about pet ownership—that their beloved pet is confined and controlled in every single aspect of its daily life by themselves. If so, one could argue that it is not anthropomorphism, but anthropodenial—dismissing similarities between owners and pets—that underlies and legitimizes the pet-owner dynamic. If we admitted we share emotional, cognitive, and biological similarities with other animals, maybe we would start to ask ourselves whether it is morally right to claim ownership over them.

New sites of anthropomorphism - pets on Instagram

As a result of the increased mediatization of society, the anthropomorphization of pets has entered new domains. A survey made by Mars Petcare in 2016 found that every sixth pet owner has created a social media profile specifically for their pet (Better cities for pets, 2017). Luke is not an exception to this trend, and my family quickly created an Instagram account for him once he came into their lives. The account has been updated regularly and has over 70 posts with pictures and videos of Luke accompanied by captions written from 'his' perspective. The content is shaped and framed to please and entertain humans and is centered around the stereotype of 'the cute pet'. 'Luke' shares his everyday life with 'his' followers and interacts with other human and 'dog' accounts through comments and direct messages. The anthropomorphic gaze is evident—the posts tell a story about a dog that celebrates his birthday and Christmas, wears clothes, drinks water from a glass, enjoys listening to birds chirping, and goes on dates with other dogs. Although the act of running an Instagram account from the perspective of a pet can be seen as overly anthropomorphic, it has become clear to me that creating this mediated narrative about Luke is an important way for my family to express their appreciation and love for Luke. Through the Instagram account, they can articulate and share with others what a wonderful dog Luke is, how fun he is to spend time with, and the fact that he has become an important family member.

Through the account Luke's life and experience is once again interpreted by my family members, this time using Luke as the narrator. Implicit in the mediation of Luke is the collective recognition of the impossibility of a dog running an Instagram account. In this way, the account functions to entertain and amuse humans, rather than as an attempt to understand or reflect on Luke's actual lived experience. The mediated version of Luke on Instagram is far from critical or animalcentric anthropomorphism, as it does not aim to get as close to the non-human animal perspective as possible. The 'Instagram pet' is perhaps a new site of anthropomorphism that functions to gratify pet owners and obscure pets' status as 'property'—bought and controlled by their owners.

Although the Instagram account makes no direct claim to be an accurate representation of Luke's experience, the 'Instagram pet' is a mediated construction that can be harmful as it affirms the perspective that animals not only should, but

want to, be with, entertain, and love humans. Much of the content on 'Luke's' Instagram is centred around his interactions with humans which creates an anthropocentric narrative where Luke's life and happiness is dependent on humans. Thus, legitimising anthropocentric dynamics of human-animal relationships in which non-human animals' function in society is to "satisfy our various lusts for protein or companionship" (Malamud, 2012, p.13), thereby facilitating and justifying non-human animal oppression and exploitation.

Concluding thoughts

Through my observations of Luke and my family, I have come to realize that anthropomorphic practices can serve functions of both love and domination in pet ownership. Observing my family's interactions with Luke and seeing them ascribing meanings to his mannerisms and behaviors made it clear to me that anthropomorphism is one of the few tools we have to make sense of other species and articulate in what ways we might be similar to them. Even though we cannot be sure our interpretations are accurate, they make it possible to take part in shared meaningful experiences with other animals, facilitating feelings of love and affection for other species.

However, the reflections made throughout this paper also prove that anthropomorphic practices can hide the true nature of pet-owner relationships. My family expresses their love and appreciation for Luke through anthropomorphic practices, but are at the same time stripping him of agency, privacy, and independence. Anthropomorphic practices have the power to make us forget that the relationship between a pet and its carer is, in its raw form, one between an owner and his property, or maybe even a captor and victim. The CAS perspective, employed throughout this paper, elucidates the complexity and calls into question the ethicality of pet-owner relationship.

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