

Both Ends of the Leash

Honest as the Dog is Long

Dogs score high on seeing and telling it as it is

Patricia B. McConnell

I was at the local shelter on a mission, in a hurry to meet a dog and give a speech. Cruising through the kennels, my mind wasn't on the dogs on either side of me – until I was slammed to a stop by a face that might as well have reached out and grabbed me by my shirt. Big brown eyes in a fawn-colored frame. Silky ears. A slip of pink tongue peeking out from under a moist, black nose. “Who is she?” I asked as I skidded to a stop. “She has such an honest face.”

“She” was Lacey, a surrendered Collie cross, and her face, like Helen of Troy's, launched not a thousand ships but a concerted rescue effort that didn't end until she had been settled into her new home. Something about her face stopped me in my tracks and generated, in an instant, a determination not just to save her, but to find her the perfect family.

It's hard to describe what it was that so affected me, but it had a lot to do with what some call an “honest” face. I often use the term myself, even though I'm hard-pressed to accurately describe it. I'm reminded of society's failed attempts to categorize good art or offensive erotica – we can't really say what it is, but we know it when we see it. The best I can do to describe a dog's “honest” face is to say that it looks relaxed and open, like the faces of people who seem to radiate honesty and benevolence.

Ah, but there's the rub. Honest people, yes, but honest dogs? We know for a fact that people can be honest or deceitful. But whatever am I thinking to attribute the quality of “honesty” to a dog? If only some dogs are honest, then it follows that some dogs aren't – and dishonesty is a characteristic usually attributed only to people.



Do dogs have it in them to be deceitful? Certainly, there are good reasons to argue that they don't. Dishonesty may be rampant in our own species, but the process of lying is complicated and requires no small amount of brainpower. Say, for example, that you're in an antique store and you break a valuable vase. Knowing that the vase costs more than you can afford, you lie to the store owner when she asks if you were the one who broke it. But look what the lie involves – an abstract understanding of the future consequences of admitting you broke the vase (“If I pay for the vase, I can't pay the mortgage and then I might lose my house...”), and an awareness that the storekeeper, who has a mind much like your own, can be manipulated to your advantage.

Understanding that others have their own points of view is no small accomplishment. Children don't develop this ability until they are around four years of age – ask a two-year-old to hide from Daddy and he'll cover his face with his hands. At that age, he believes that if he can't see Daddy, then Daddy can't see him. However, children over the age of four or five are beginning to realize that everyone else has a mental life much like their own, and are able to imagine the world from the perspective of others. In other words, there's thinking (which most, but not all, people believe that dogs can do) and then there's thinking about thinking, which we don't know if dogs can do or not.

In *The Truth About Dogs*, author Stephen Budiansky suggests that they can't. He's not saying that dogs don't have thoughts, but that dogs can't think about the thoughts of others. Others argue the opposite: Stanley Coren, in *How Dogs Think*, gives examples

that he believes illustrate intentional deception in canids. In one of his stories, a dog takes advantage of another dog's brief absence from the room to steal the pig ear he was chewing. She then lies down on top of it and returns to chewing on her own pig ear. The second dog returns and searches for his pig ear, which remains safely squirreled away under her body. With the other dog still in the room, she finishes hers, stretches out her forepaws like a satisfied diner at a four-star restaurant, and maintains her place. Then, as soon as the second dog leaves the room, she pulls out his pig ear from under her belly and finishes it up in peace. Clever girl.

There are other examples of what looks like strategic deception in canids. In one well-documented story, a female arctic fox was being harassed mercilessly by her own young when she brought home the food she'd caught and killed for them, and she herself was beginning to go hungry. Finally, while being swamped yet again by her voracious litter over a kill, she jerked her muzzle upward toward the distant horizon and gave the short, sharp alarm bark characteristic of her species. Her kits immediately dashed into the underground den to safety – while she ceased attending to phantom predators and ate her first good meal in days.

We have to be careful about attributing intention and mental processes to an animal we can't interview (“Excuse me, Ms. Fox, but could you tell us what you were thinking when you barked at seemingly nothing?”), but there are enough credible stories like the ones above to suggest that their cousins are capable of stretching what we call the truth. At least some dogs, some of the time. But what stands out when you look for such stories is that credible examples of dishonest dogs are rare. Dogs may be able to lie, but it doesn't appear they do it very often. Surely part of the reason we love dogs so much is that, compared to members of our own species, dogs are pillars of truth.

The debate about what goes on in the mind of a dog will continue for decades, if not forever, but it seems clear that we are sure about a few things. We know that in general, a dog's mind is much simpler than ours, and tends to focus mostly on the present. That's undoubtedly one of the reasons that dogs are so good for us – we tend to obsess on the past and the future, and must spend years practicing meditation

techniques to master what dogs do as a matter of course. We also know that dogs vary tremendously as individuals, and that some tend to be smarter about learning to associate a sound and a behavior, for example. And some seem to be better at problem solving, appearing to strategically predict how their behavior will affect others and then doing what they can to manipulate the situation to their advantage.

This suggests that the ability to be dishonest is a continuum. For better or worse, we humans are brilliant at it, while our canine companions are awkward beginners. It might be that because dogs are so bad at it, it's easy for us to imagine they can't do it at all. Perhaps if a dog were writing this column, it would be titled “Can humans use their noses?” After all, compared to dogs, our noses are practically dysfunctional. We are so bad at using them that dogs must wonder if we are capable of smelling anything at all.

Meanwhile, Lacey, the “honest-faced” dog from the shelter, did indeed find a good home. Her new guardians can't tell you if she's an “honest dog” or not, but she is good and benevolent and joyful, and the adjective still seems to fit. Honest.

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