

The 100 *Silliest* Things  
People Say about Dogs

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## PREFACE

The 100 Silliest Things People Say about Dogs are all based on old-fashioned ideas about Nature in general, and about dogs in specific. In this book, I debunk various myths and fables that most people still believe in, replacing them with real insight into real dogs. As you read along, you'll see your dog doing things I talk about in this book. You'll discover new things in him each day, things you never noticed before because you didn't know what they meant — or that they even had any meaning. You'll also find your relationship with your dog improving, as you interact with him on the basis of real understanding instead of the old dogmas. I hope you will feel the same excitement I felt as I made my discoveries.

Even if you've always believed in all of the myths this book debunks, you remain innocent of any wrongdoing. You probably, just like me, somehow ended up with a dog one day. And, just like me, you probably thought, 'I'd better get some advice from an expert, to be sure I do it right.' When they told you their silly ideas, they probably sounded so self-confident that it didn't occur to you to doubt they knew what they were talking about.

The same thing happened to me. After getting degrees in social and behavioural sciences, I ended up some years later with an adult dog. All I needed to do was use the same techniques I'd used in the behaviour lab — reward the behaviour I wanted, and make sure I didn't reward behaviour I didn't like. Piece of cake, perfect dog.

I wasn't exposed to all the stories dog people tell until I got my first puppy. I realised that raising a young animal, with all its species-specific developmental requirements, was a totally different thing than simply applying the laws of behaviour to an adult. Time to research dogs. I read every book I could get my hands on and talked to many trainers. All sources agreed that dogs live in a hierarchy, and that they spend all their time being either dominant or submissive to each other. They told me that even play is about determining relative rank within the group; that any request my dog made to me (to fulfill one of his needs, to play with him) was a secret attempt to increase his own rank in the hope of taking over someday. I was told I needed to make sure I was the Alpha Leader. The nice way to do this involved a number of things, which were explained to me as a sort of psychological warfare. I was told to ignore all requests from my dog. I should always go before my dog through a door, to show that I was the courageous leader. I had to eat first before I fed the dog, since the Alpha wolf always eats first and then determines who gets to eat next. The dog wasn't allowed on the couch, since the Alpha wolf always lies on the highest spot when the pack is resting. I should never approach the dog, since the submissive wolf always approaches the dominant wolf — but on the other hand, I should make sure the dog moves aside when I'm coming through, since the dominant wolf never moves aside for the lesser pack members (I sort of wondered how I was going to do this one without approaching the dog...). Even if he was lying somewhere, I wasn't to go around him, but to step over him, because otherwise I was letting him command the avenues of access to the territory. And so on and so on, about how it is absolutely crucial to maintain your Alpha rank.

This all seemed a bit far-fetched to me. I wondered why everyone started talking about wolves every time I asked them about dogs. I also kind of wondered why all had gone so well with my previous dogs, who were all allowed on the couch. But who was I to argue with people who claimed to know so much, or scientists who claimed to have studied dogs? Most of the trainers also urged me to train the pup with punishment. I definitely had to get a choke chain, get angry at behaviour I didn't like, and do things like jerking on the puppy's neck if he was leashed or, if he wasn't, throwing cans of coins or marbles at him, or squirting water in his face.

But I never used any kind of punishment. I was too experienced in the lab and knew what kinds of horrible side effects punishment has on an animal, besides the fact that you can teach it perfectly well without it. But I did believe the rest, for a while. When I saw dogs together in a park, I thought I saw all kinds of rank-establishing behaviour. But I was only observing the dogs for short intervals, of course. My doubts began when I started to have many and various dogs in the house and to observe their group behaviour for long periods of time, in groups with ever changing composition. I could hardly believe my eyes. There was no dog who always lay on the highest spot. It was always a different dog who was first to go through a door. All of them avoided collisions any way they could, usually by both dogs moving aside a little. The way they behaved around food and toys didn't follow the rules, either. They seemed above all interested in being considerate to each other and avoiding arguments where possible, not about winning. In fact, none of my own observations confirmed any of what the experts had told me about dogs.

I decided to delve deeper into the literature. I also started my own research project. After fourteen years, a totally new picture of canine reality emerged — a reality that means we have to adjust not only the layman's beliefs about dogs, but also the things science is saying about them. It turns out that many scientists have written about dogs without observing them first hand. When they have, it has been under highly artificial circumstances (in the laboratory). Only a few have attempted to observe dogs in their natural habitat. Many defined this as 'dogs not under human influence', failing to see that domestic dogs are *always* under human influence. Most observed for relatively short periods, or short intervals over a longer period — altogether a few months.

In fact, if you want to understand a social species, you have to observe a group of animals in their natural surroundings, and you have to observe them for at least one whole life cycle of an average member of the species. I suppose no one thought we had to do it with dogs, because they are so familiar. We assumed we already knew about them, and that we only needed to work out some details. Wrong.

This book is based on real live observations of real live dogs, in their natural surroundings, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, for fourteen years. The intensity of my study gave me the chance to discover which information was irrelevant and which was important. It was an anthropological study: besides watching them, I also participated in the dogs' social system, trying to discover and use their rules of interaction instead of imposing my human ones upon them. By allowing the dogs to teach me, I gave them a chance to contradict the myths we have built up about them — a chance to be heard, as it were. It turned out not to matter at all to the social structure who went through a door first, or who got to keep food or a toy. Those things were different every time, and are not what their social structure is based on. Nor is their social structure based on threat, aggression, or power — perhaps the most damaging myth of all. The dog's social system is based on a few simple rules of politeness that are aimed above all at not disturbing the peace.



## **Myth 1: The dog is a descendant of the wolf, and because of this we should regard him as a sort of tame wolf in our living room.**

The idea of the dog as a tame wolf has a huge romantic attraction for us. We imagine the great grey wolf of the northern regions of the Earth, a powerful wild animal weighing 160–220 pounds, who spends his days hunting deer, moose or elk. We dream of our own ancestors finding (or stealing) a wolf puppy and raising him with lots of TLC. We imagine this pup growing up to be man’s friend and companion, and bearing tame pups for us. After thousands generations of this, we supposedly produced the dog as we now know him. We see a direct line of descent going from our own dog straight to the mighty grey wolf we see on Discovery Channel. Wow, a wolf in our living room, what a powerful feeling!

We now know that this isn’t how it happened. Our ancestors didn’t tame the dog at all. The dog most likely tamed himself. Besides, the dog’s ancestor isn’t the mighty grey wolf of Discovery Channel. That wolf didn’t exist yet when the dog began to split off into a new species — the grey wolf as he is today had yet to evolve, just as the domestic dog did. What you need to imagine is a much smaller animal, who had already split off from the wolf family line, some 200,000–500,000 years ago. This ancestor wasn’t a specialized hunter like the wolf is, but rather what biologists call a ‘generalist’ — an animal that is not limited to one special food source or environment, but that can adapt to various situations. This smaller ancestor probably looked somewhat like the dingo and other primitive dogs who still live in the wild today. It may not have been a pack animal. In fact, pack living is rare among canids. So, like most of the generalist canids we see today, the dog’s ancestor probably lived in pairs and temporary family groups, able to deal both with being together and with being alone.

So now you are picturing a smaller, more dog-like kind of animal. What did this pre-dog animal do that led, in the end, to the present day dog? And did we have anything to do with it? The answer to both questions lies in our own development as a species. Like most species, we struggled along for millions of years, our numbers limited by the availability of food. Then, about 130,000 years ago, we invented the bow and arrow. This was a great leap, but — contrary to the myth — it didn’t mean that the dog’s ancestor immediately joined us to help with the hunt. The dog was still just a wild animal, and like all wild canids — right up to the present, and even if they are raised in a human home — he remained totally useless to us during the hunt.

So our bow and arrow didn’t mean that some wolf was suddenly able to work as a tracking and hunting dog, as the myth tells us. It did mean that our ancestors suddenly had a much easier time getting enough to eat. They started to leave small dumps behind at their encampments, dumps where there were edible leftovers for others to find. A new food source opened up for other species in the area. And when a new food source opens up in a particular environment, some animal always moves in to exploit it. In this case, a few of the sometimes hunting, sometimes scavenging, small ancestors of the present day dog were the ones who made the move. These were individuals who were attracted to a much easier (and safer) way to make a living. All they needed to do was trail along behind groups of humans and eat at the dumps we left behind. Perhaps they still ran into roaming, human-fearing relatives occasionally when their paths happened to cross, and perhaps they sometimes still mated with these animals — but most of the pups would come of

mating at dumps, between loner animals who were now getting a living by scavenging our waste. This was the beginning reproductive separation, and thus of the formation of a separate species.

So, probably about 130,000 years ago, we have a number of these dog-like ancestors who split off and entered a new ecological niche. Partially reproductively isolated in this new niche, they began to develop specifically doggy characteristics. In order to meet at the dump and thus be able to mate, these animals had to have special qualities. They had to be prepared to eat ready-made food instead of hunting (the food you give your dog is, up to this day, still made of our waste, even the most fancy and expensive brands). If they lived in groups, they had to be willing to give this up in favour of wandering around alone or in pairs (even at the dump, there wouldn't have been enough food for a large group). They had to be able to share space (the dump) with strangers of their own species who had also discovered this new source of food. And — most important of all — they had to have a less-than-average fear of humans. These animals were in the process of making a choice. They were farther from their cousin the wolf than ever, but they weren't domestic dogs yet, either. The choice that some of them made led them down the road to becoming, at this juncture, a sort of pre-domestic dog. This animal's anatomy was still adjusted to a life of travelling as they trailed along behind groups of nomadic humans. This is probably why archaeologists don't find typically doggy remains from this period. The dog's body hadn't changed yet, even though his behaviour and his brain were already changing. But before this animal could become a real domestic dog, our own species had to make its next step.

This next step came about 12,000 years ago, when we developed agriculture. Humans stopped roaming as hunters and gatherers and started living in permanent settlements. Now the pre-dog could also settle down and live permanently at the dump. Now he wouldn't run into relatives who were still hunting and still shy of humans, not even by accident. There would be no more mating with hunters, not even occasionally. His body could now adapt to a non-travelling life, besides the changes that had already taken place in his brain and behaviour. Within a very short time, the dog as we know it today was a fact. This is the period when truly doggy skeletal remains showed up. The other branches of the family continued on their hunter's way, and became the wild dogs you now see on Discovery Channel. The present-day grey wolf has nothing to do with it.

**Fact:** The dog and the wolf are related to each other in the same way you are related to your sixth cousin, and in the same way we are all related to some other types of primates (monkeys and apes). We share an ancestor, that's all. But the dog most definitely didn't descend from the grey wolf, any more than you descended from your cousin.

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## Myth 10: Dogs live in a dominance hierarchy, with the Alpha dog at the top as the absolute leader.

One of the things we hear most about dogs is that dominance is extremely important in organising their groups. The story goes that their interactions are all about gaining and maintaining status. The dog with the higher rank dominates the dog with the lower rank, who submits. Dogs are always trying to climb up the ladder, because they know higher ranks bring bigger advantages in life. This whole story is, yet again, based on tales about how wolves organise their packs. This is the one myth about dogs that virtually everyone seems to know — not only beginning dog owners, but even people who have never had a dog and wouldn't want one. I rarely meet people who don't believe in this myth.

Therefore, it will probably surprise you to hear that we now know (thanks to Dr L. David Mech) that even *wolves* do not live in a dominance hierarchy. To live in a dominance hierarchy, and to base your behaviour towards others on who has which rank, you have to be able to do quite a bit of abstract thinking. You'd have to have a map of the social structure in your head, in which you are comparing various ranks with each other and assigning these ranks to yourself and others. Neither the wolf nor the dog has the large frontal lobes in the brain that would enable them to think in such abstract terms. A dominance hierarchy also requires a stable group that is organised in a rigid structure. Dogs do not live in stable groups. They live semi-solitary lives, which are enriched by fleeting friendships. As we will see in Myth 11, the groups dogs do form are not at all rigidly organised. The structure of dog groups is, rather, highly flexible, which is the whole reason they are so good at absorbing infinite numbers of strangers. And the final strange thing about this myth is that no one has ever yet been able to find a real dominance hierarchy within a group of dogs, no matter how hard they looked or what kind of statistics they applied. The whole idea is utter nonsense.

So what is going on? How could science make such a blunder, and how did this myth end up being so firmly rooted in our minds?

If we want to understand this, we have to go back a little further in history and look at ourselves. It is common knowledge among historians that humans have always projected the structure of their own societies onto the animal kingdom. The ancient Egyptians, for example, lived in a society governed by a royal family, whose members were demigods. Divinity, and links to divinity, were very important in organising Egyptian society. Many Egyptian gods were portrayed as animals, and this was projected back onto the animals in the mundane world, assigning various divine characteristics to various animals. In the Middle Ages, when our societies were organised into nobility versus impoverished, vulgar peons, people also divided the animal kingdom into noble versus common animals. The noble animals were believed to have the same qualities as human nobility. They were beautiful, graceful, clean, courageous, wise, chaste, loyal, chivalrous, and so on. The common animals were like human commoners. They were seen as ugly, clumsy, cowardly, cunning, promiscuous, sneaky and so on. The lower animals were ruled by, and they respected, the noble animals. The human nobility had exclusive rights to the owning and hunting of noble animals, while the human peons had to limit themselves to peon animals. This distinction between noble and common animals still exists among hunters to this day, where the hunting of noble animals still enjoys more status than, say, rat-catching.

Although we now like to think of ourselves as more rational and less superstitious, the fact is that our projections onto animals did not stop when the modern age arrived. With the rise of industrialism, we reorganised our own societies to operate on the basis of competition rather than birth. We still find it interesting to have a title of nobility, but you aren't really Someone unless you are capable of competing on the basis of personal prowess and skills for a place on our social ladder. Social status is not based on magic or on accidental parentage, but on our personal ability to dominate in open competition with other human beings. A trust fund does help, of course, but this is only because it gives us a head start and an edge in our competitive enterprises. We are willing to look up to someone like Donald Trump, who began with thirty million and made more of it by competing ruthlessly with his peers; but there is no creature more despised than the trust fund child who devotes his life to spending Daddy's money and hoping we will be in awe of him merely for having it. In our society, someone must lose in order for someone else to win, and we adore the winner. We believe that he is naturally superior to the loser in some way.

How very accidental that, just as we were rearranging our societies according to this model, someone just so happened to discover that the animal kingdom works according to the principle of competition, too! How very accidental that this insight came at the end of the nineteenth century, just in time to reassure us that the rather unpleasant world we were creating was the only possible outcome of natural laws! See, see, even animals are constantly engaged in ruthless competition, in which only the strong and dominant survive. We are now beginning to understand that this was a projection (see Myth 14), but we do still live in a competitive market society, and this makes it difficult for most of us to let go of the old ideas.

But, besides the question of whether competition as such is a natural law, there is another problem. Though our market society is, indeed, obsessed with winners and losers, it is not organised in a strict and rigid dominance hierarchy. In fact, the more our societies are based on open competition, the less of a dominance hierarchy we have. We have human rights and civil rights and freedom of speech, and we don't simply have to do what rich people tell us to do. If Donald Trump shows up at your door, you can tell him to go jump in a lake, and there's nothing he can do about it.

So where did this idea of a strict dominance hierarchy among animals come from? In fact, this particular idea is a much more narrow projection than the general projection of competitive organisation. The dominance hierarchy is an anthropomorphism (the projection of human qualities into a thing or an animal) that has its roots in a very specific time and place in our history. It is also one of the most tragic things for animals that 'science' has ever produced, because the idea of a dominance hierarchy is commonly used to justify all kinds of strange and cruel practices towards dogs. It is the justification for seeing rebellion in everything a dog does, and for cruelly crushing that rebellion. It's okay to beat him, kick him, shock him, strangle him, because all of this will teach him his rank. Then once he knows his rank, he will automatically obey and do everything we want him to do. The cruelty this idea has generated will no longer surprise you once you have absorbed the following: the idea of a strict dominance hierarchy among dogs was introduced into science by a Nazi (yes, you read that right, a Nazi): Konrad Lorenz.

Most people don't know that the entire science of animal psychology got its start in Hitler's Germany. This happened in Berlin on 10th January, 1936, when the German Society for Animal Psychology was founded under the auspices of, and sponsorship by, the Nazi government. Konrad Lorenz was co-editor and an important contributor, writing many articles for the Society's journal, *Zeitschrift für Tierpsychologie*. Unlike some others

who stood at the roots of animal psychology as a science, Lorenz never had problems with the Nazi authorities. On the contrary, he joined the party as soon as he could (1938), and the Nazis liked him so much that he was appointed professor of psychology at the University of Königsberg in 1940. The admiration was mutual. Lorenz worked at the Race Policy Bureau. In 1942, he participated in examining 877 people of mixed Polish–German descent, selecting who would and who wouldn’t go to a concentration camp to be murdered. He believed firmly in superior and inferior races and consistently expressed great contempt for the latter. He believed in a strict, hierarchical society, in which an absolute authority ruled to whom all owed obedience. And, just as humans had always done before them, the Nazis — including Lorenz — projected their ideas about human society onto the animal kingdom. This is illustrated by the Nazi Cult of the Wolf.

It just so happens that the Cult of the Wolf played a very important part in Nazi ideology. The wolf was held up as an example, to show that the Nazis were merely trying to reorganise society according to noble, natural laws. Projecting, and without bothering to read any science or to gain any real knowledge, the Nazis (and Lorenz) depicted the wolf as a noble, wild, hardened, ruthless animal who possessed all kinds of wonderful Nazi characteristics. The wolf lived, just like the Nazi, in a closed and elite group. He was, just like the Nazi, absolutely loyal to this group, ready to unquestioningly sacrifice his life for the sake of the group if the need arose. The group’s structure was just as hierarchical and rigid as the structure of the Nazi Party. Each wolf had a rank he strictly adhered to, submissive to those above him, ruthless to those beneath him. Most important perhaps, the wolves were led by a sort of Führer: the Alpha Leader. The Alpha Leader was a strong, always male wolf, whom all the other wolves worshipped and obeyed at all times, and who was fiercely desired by all the female wolves (yes, even the Nazis had sexual fantasies). And now come all the other things we are told about dogs. The Alpha Wolf receives deference in all things. He is always the first to eat and the first to go through a door. He is always up front in any kind of procession, and he always gets to sit or lie higher than the other wolves. The other wolves hurry out of his way when he is coming through. They are constantly giving off submissive signals in his presence. The Alpha Wolf can bite anyone he likes without getting bitten back. He is so utterly sure of his authority that he can, when in the mood, behave mercifully towards his inferiors — for which these inferiors are then infinitely grateful and worship him all the more. The similarity to Adolph Hitler can hardly escape us.

In general, it is taboo among scientists to personally attack the author of a theory, but this taboo does not (and cannot) apply when the author ignores all evidence to project his purely personal prejudices onto the thing he is studying. Such behaviour leaves us no choice but to address the personal background that led to such prejudices.

Lorenz was specialized in studying birds. His ideas about wolves had their sole source in the Nazi Cult of the Wolf, not in science. His ideas about dogs were shaped by — as he later put it — the false gods he’d adopted as a young man. He informally observed his own dogs in his living room while he took part in Nazi activities. He first published *Man Meets Dog*, which was based on these observations, in 1949. There were as yet no published studies of the domestic dog, thus nothing to contradict Lorenz as he daydreamed just four years back to his Nazi Cult of the Wolf. He watched dogs who had been raised only by himself or given to him by his Nazi friends, and who only left the estate he lived on in his company. Lorenz’s dogs were all Chow mixes and Norwegian elkhounds. He in fact had no idea about how dogs other than his own behaved, or how his own would have behaved if they had been properly socialised. But that didn’t matter.

Lorenz limited himself to popular publications about dogs — an arena in which everyone is free to present their own opinions as fact. It was an arena that permitted Lorenz to ignore Schenkel, who was at the time the great authority on wolves, and who strongly protested some of Lorenz’s ideas about dominance and submission among them. It was an arena in which Lorenz has been caught in more than one blatant lie, but also an arena where lying has no consequences. Here, Lorenz had total freedom to continue (consciously or unconsciously, it doesn’t matter) spreading the Nazi view of nature — and he used this freedom persistently until the day he died. The idea about dogs living in a dominance hierarchy very like the Nazi Party, and that dogs spend the whole day thinking about power, is nothing more than Konrad Lorenz’s fictional legacy to us.

In a sense, Lorenz admits this in his book *Man Meets Dog*. He writes, ‘In humans, the bonding with ideals only happens once: beware the man who, in an impressionable period of his life, gives his heart to false gods.’ Indeed, after the war, Lorenz adamantly refused to repudiate his Nazi ideas. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1973, as co-founder of the ‘science’ of animal psychology. The prize made him powerful in the scientific world, a power he used to suppress contradiction of his theories as long as he lived. Confronted with this, our brave scientists chose to then just ignore Lorenz’s past. (See Myth 99 for explanation of this cover-up.) It was only after his death in 1989 that most of Lorenz’s theories were finally abandoned as invalid. The main one that still survives is his theory about dogs and dominance, and it’s time to get rid of this one, too. How many of us truly want to treat our dogs as if we’re a Nazi dictator?

**Fact:** The idea of dogs in a dominance hierarchy with an absolute Alpha leader at the top has its origins in Nazi ideology rather than in the real behaviour of dogs. This may be a shocking and rather uncomfortable thing for all of us to acknowledge, but this fiction about dogs has caused so much suffering that it is high time to call it for what it is and to dump it. The quicker we do this, the less shame on us.

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## Myth 11: Retake: Dogs live in a dominance hierarchy.

We have now seen that this is a rather evil human projection. Now we come to the question of what dogs actually do, if they don't engage in dominance all the day long. If dogs don't live in stable closed groups (which they don't), and if they are constantly having to meet strangers (as they are), and if the groups are constantly evaporating, changing and re-forming, then how do these groups arrive at any kind of stable or even workable organisation?

The answer is, in a nutshell, that dogs live in what we call an 'autopoietic, complex, self-organising system, which will tend to move away from chaos and towards any one of many available stable states within its state space.' Now this sounds complicated and technical and hard to grasp, because it is full of jargon. But as with most things, it is not so complicated at all if only you remove the jargon. Which we will now do.

A system is a collection of parts, but it is not any old collection of loose parts. A stamp collection is not a system. To form a system, the parts have to be somehow connected to each other. Because they are connected, they constitute a whole that is distinguishable from the surroundings. But tying a bunch of tin cans together still doesn't make them into a system. A system has parts that move in relation to each other, in order to perform some function or reach some goal. A coffee machine is an example of a system, whose parts move in a coordinated way and in relation to each other, to perform the function of producing a cup of coffee. A car is a system. The parts are set in motion and work together when the function of the car has to be fulfilled — getting some load from point A to point B. However, neither of these machines is complex or self-organising. They are not complex because there is only a single arrangement of parts to choose from. If a spark plug falls out or you put water in the petrol tank instead of the radiator, then the whole thing stops working. It's no use trying out putting the coffee filter under the pot for a change. There is also only one equilibrium to choose from: a certain mixture of petrol and oxygen (or coffee and water), the right octane (or voltage), the timing of the sparks exactly right, various gaps just exactly so wide and belts just so tight. These systems are not self-organising. They are put together in a factory by some power outside themselves, according to a design that someone else thought up. If their balance gets lost, these systems are not able to restore the lost equilibrium themselves. Some outside power has to take them apart and put them back together again, restoring them exactly to the state they were in when they came from the factory.

A self-organising system is one that is capable of creating some kind of order inside the system without outside help. The parts move on their own and they can be arranged in various ways. They move around with respect to each other until the system arrives at some kind of equilibrium. When the parts move, they don't move randomly. They follow certain rules. These rules are internal to the parts themselves, something in their own nature that limits their movements and behaviour. One example of a self-organising system (hereafter: SOS) is a bunch of atoms in a bell jar. The atoms are connected to each other by the fact that they share a physical space in which they continuously collide with each other and exchange energy. Their system is distinguishable from the outside world — they aren't colliding with any atoms out there just now. The goal of this system is to spread the available energy around evenly. The atoms will move around, obeying the laws of thermodynamics, until this even division is reached. At this point, the system has

arrived at a stable state. There are many arrangements of atoms that will work. It doesn't matter if a particular one is over here or over there. If you heat the bell jar, the atoms will begin to move again until the energy is again evenly spread around. They do this without external help, moving around according to their own internal rules, colliding and rearranging themselves until a new equilibrium (this is, a stable state) is reached.

A second example of an SOS, one that starts to look a little more like dogs, is a room full of people at a party. The collection of parts (i.e. people) in the room constitutes a small social system, for as long as the party lasts. It is bounded by the walls of the room, and distinguishable from the outside world full of non-invited people. Inside the room, each person is a part in the system. These living parts of the system move around, following certain internal rules, until everyone in the system is in a comfortable position. This works a little differently than a bell jar full of atoms that have no feelings. In an SOS that consists of living beings, one of the factors that affect the search for balance is each living creature's feeling of well-being. This makes our party a *complex* system: equilibrium is being sought on more than one level at once. Each system part (each party-goer) attempts to find an inner balance of feeling good, while at the same time not disturbing the balance at the level of the party as a whole.

The goal of this social system (our party) is to provide maximum enjoyment for a maximum number of guests at the same time. The system is not in equilibrium until everyone has a drink, a good place to sit, and a conversation partner they like. At this point, the inner balance of all guests is stable, while the social system itself is in balance as far as the goal it is meant to achieve. All the parts will remain where they are as long as this balance is maintained.

This lasts only so long, until someone's drink is empty, or until conversation partners get bored with each other. At this point, there is a dip in the individual well-being of a number of system parts, which also means a dip in the larger system's fulfilment of its own goal. Some system parts may start to move around, looking to repair the dip — refilling a drink or shifting conversation partners. But it doesn't have to be a dip that causes change. It can also happen that some new and interesting guest arrives. Some of the party-goers will see a chance here to increase their internal state of well-being yet more, compared how it is with the person they are talking to. They may shift positions so as to go talk to this new, interesting guest. Here, it's not a dip triggering change. Instead, it's the chance of yet more fun that gets some parts moving. They can gain this increased enjoyment without causing the whole system to crash, and in fact, their own improved fun level will move the larger system even closer to its goal of maximum fun for maximum guests. Some of the parts in our SOS will, thus, start moving around, taking up new positions in relation to each other, until their dips are restored to the previous level, or until their fun is even more maximised — upon which the system has found a new equilibrium on all levels. There are many various arrangements of party-goers that will serve the function of maximal fun — there is more than one equilibrium to choose from, both on the level of the individual and on the level of the whole.

The movement of parts is not, however, arbitrary. It is governed by internal part variables (since people enjoy different things), by external factors (like which chairs and drinks there are to choose from), and by certain rules. All of our participants follow certain rules as they seek new balances. These rules are, in this case, the rules of politeness at parties. For example, the evening must progress without embarrassing scenes or heated arguments. You don't throw someone off his chair by brute force, there are certain

subjects you do not bring up, and you do not conspicuously join the conversation group that includes the man who just found out yesterday that you are having an affair with his wife. These are rules that limit the behaviour and movements of the system parts as they continually seek equilibrium on the individual and the social levels.

The rules are internal to the parts, imparted to them and made into part of who they are during their production (i.e. during their upbringing by other human beings). The party-goers follow these rules voluntarily. If everyone behaved in an egotistical manner, seeking only to maximise their own internal well-being position (e.g. when the lover did give in to the temptation to show off to the husband, or if someone was just tipped off her chair onto the floor), the whole system (the party) might deteriorate into a non-fun free for all. No one wants this to happen. People who break these rules risk getting thrown out in order to maintain system stability, because after all, the whole point of the system is to maximise fun for as many guests as possible, and not just for one selfish boor. So we know that too much selfishness will make things unpleasant not only for everyone else, but also for ourselves. We ourselves gain by participating in keeping the system stable (i.e. civil) and are willing to make smaller sacrifices in order to get this gain.

As we maximise our positions according to our own internal states, juggling variables only we can know about (tired legs, thirst, boredom), while yet allowing the rules to limit our behaviour, the system as a whole organises and reorganises itself without interference from any central, organising authority. In fact, we absolutely want the system to *self-organise* by our making our own choices and following our own internal rules as we move around in the party's social landscape. We want the party to reshuffle itself again and again into a comfortable equilibrium for all system parts, by those parts being free to move and rearrange *themselves* as inner states (thirst, boredom) and outer circumstances (a new guest) change. It is extremely irritating to us if our hostess insists that we talk at length to her unmarried son or daughter, or if she tries to make us sit in a certain spot, drink her favourite drink, or eat more than we want to.

Now to get back to dogs. Every time multiple dogs — and that means even just two — share a physical space, they immediately constitute an SOS, which will immediately start to move away from chaos by seeking an equilibrium. The dogs' SOS is very similar to our party. It too is a complex system that looks for delicate equilibriums on more than one level simultaneously, taking many invisible variables into account, and with many different equilibriums to choose from as it self-organises. When a dog sees a stranger, his inner equilibrium might go off balance — his adrenaline level might rise, his feeling of safety might suffer a dip, or his curiosity might be aroused because he expects an increase in his well-being. These are internal variables that depend on his experiences in the past with strangers. Either way, he wants to restore some kind of internal balance. At the same time, he will want to know that the larger, social balance — the peace in the group — is still safe. The domestic canine SOS has the same goal as our party: maximal well-being and safety for all the parts (in this case dogs) who are sharing the physical space at that particular moment. Just like our party, each part will execute a search to maximise its own inner well-being and stabilise its own part state, while at the same time maximising (or at least preserving) the stability, peace and fun of the larger social landscape the dogs occupy together. And, just like our party, they do this without reference to any central, organising authority.

So when dogs meet each other, they immediately start looking for the return of both the internal and external equilibriums that have been disturbed by the sight of

each other. But if they don't know each other, there may be some danger involved. After all, a dog always carries his weapons with him, and you don't always know if the other guy is going to follow the social rules, or whether he is going to understand your signals and react normally to them. So the first thing dogs have to do is check out whether the other dog is going to use his weapons, and whether he understands and uses the common language. (More about these signals in Myth 12.) After some exchange of signals, it becomes sufficiently clear that there is a common language and that neither dog is going to get violent right away. Both dogs can now at least predict the other's behaviour in the domains of language and aggression. This is the crucial minimum of predictability that has to be established before the interaction can progress safely to the next stage.

It can be that this next stage is simply moving off to follow their humans. The next time these dogs meet they will still know about each other and the meeting will be less tense. It can also be that the dogs stick around to play with each other. In this case, the next stage of exploration starts: learning about each other's personal preferences and boundaries. As the dogs play on a field, they discover various things about each other. The first dog is very anxious to keep the stick his owner just threw and wants the second dog to stay several feet away from it. The second dog likes contact games rather than a ball or a stick. They can't talk to each other, so the dogs have to find this out by trial and error. The first dog growls when the second one so much as looks at the stick. The second dog can conclude, 'Okay, that's important to him and he wants me to keep some distance.' The first dog sees the second one stop or move away, and then he knows, 'All right, he understood my signal, and he values peace in our relation enough to let me keep my stick.' The second dog makes all kinds of 'come chase me' gestures, which show the first dog that this is the kind of game he wants. Secure enough now about his stick, the first dog might leave it for a moment to indeed play a round of chase along the border of the field. If the second dog bumps the first one during this game, he might get a snarl. This tells him that the first dog is not comfortable with such close contact. He might drop his tail, fold his ears back, move away a little — he's saying, 'Okay, I got your message, and I didn't mean any ill.' Or he bumped into a third dog during the chase, and these signals are saying, 'Oops, didn't see you, sorry.' These dogs are not being dominant and submissive. They are simply exchanging information about their respective inner states so that they will become or remain predictable to each other. Predictability about each other's likes, dislikes and personal boundaries allows them to find or maintain equilibrium in their relations with each other. When all the dogs in the physical space have found some equilibrium, then the larger social system has also arrived at one of its possible balances. The dogs play cheerfully, sharing space, taking each other's preferences and boundaries into account, dashing past each other at exactly the right distance each dog needs, no problem.

These relations generally have to be established one on one. Because dogs learn about each other by exchanging signals, they have to look at each other to learn. It is looking at the other that causes your feelings specifically about him to arise and change your inner state, which you then signal. It is by looking specifically at you that the other dog sees the signs of your internal state. So a dog can only concentrate on one relationship at a time. This is one of the reasons a dog will freeze up and stand totally still when he is being smelled by a whole group of other dogs. By freezing up, he is giving a non-violence signal, but is saying nothing more. He keeps his mouth shut for the moment, as it were, because you can only have complicated conversations one-on-one. If he is very socially

secure, the dog might just flip onto his back for the whole curious crowd ('I just know everyone will be charmed by the sight of my belly'). This is a safe signal to send out to a collective, one that can't offend anyone or lead to difficult conversations. If he does this, the whole group gets the important message, some predictability about the new dog in one go ('He knows our language and has no violent intentions'). The preservation of the general safety in this dog's presence is immediately clear to all.

What we usually see happen is that the more self-assured dogs sniff the frozen newcomer for a sec, then just walk away. Often, one dog will stay near the newcomer. This is because he still doesn't feel sure enough about the newcomer to share the space with him. His inner state is still out of balance (maybe he's had bad experiences in the past, and his adrenaline level is still a little high due to this new dog showing up). He is still looking to restore his inner equilibrium, and wants more information. To get more specific information, the dogs will have to look straight at each other, and this is just not possible in a group. But now the others are gone, and our insecure dog stands there growling. I call this growl a threat gesture because the growl means the dog perceives a threat to his safety or well-being. With this threat gesture, he is basically telling the new dog that he feels unsure of himself, and is asking for reassurance so his inner state can settle down. If the new dog gives a calming signal, for example turning his ears outward and lowering his tail just a dot, he is saying, carefully, 'You don't need to worry, I'm no threat to your safety or well-being.' The first dog's adrenaline might drop a little, and so does his tail, while he stops growling ('Okay, I feel a little less worried now'). When the second dog sees that the newcomer feels less tense and thus less likely to lash out defensively, the second dog can safely take the non-threat signals a little further. He folds his ears all the way back, drops his tail completely, and starts to move a little. The first dog feels yet more reassured, and gives signals to express this. The second dog sees the decrease in tension and feels safe breaking eye contact to smell the other dog's lips or backside, or even to make a little play jump. This signalling of decreasing tension goes back and forth, until both dogs have restored their inner equilibrium. To put it differently, the dogs each begin to trust each other, which enables them to relax and share a physical space. Don't worry — 'trust' is not anthropomorphism here. Even among humans, trust is nothing more than the feeling that the other is sufficiently predictable that your internal state is not disturbed by fear of danger in his presence.

After this, in play, or in walking further together, the dogs explore each other's personal boundaries. Just like our party-goers, each dog has an internal state of well-being that he wants to preserve. This well-being can be affected by many variables, depending on the dog's history. A dog's behaviour and choices in seeking maintenance of well-being have nothing to do with some personality trait that is written in stone (e.g. 'dominant' or 'submissive'), but are the result of the dog's experience in the past. The choices are also influenced by his internal state from moment to moment (tired or not, hungry or not, full of adrenaline or not). Some dogs have learned that a tennis ball is the most wonderful play opportunity they will ever get, so they are fierce about keeping the tennis ball. Other dogs don't see any meaning in the tennis ball and will give it up willingly to another dog. A dog's personal zone is larger or smaller, depending on his experience in the past with intimate contact. The dog on a diet is obsessed with the bread someone strewed around for the birds. The castrated dog doesn't much care about the female in heat who just showed up. And so there are many different well-being positions in life, which are all highly personal, and which each dog will try to preserve. The outside observer can't

always see these variables, but this is no reason to pretend they aren't there. That we can't see them doesn't matter, as long as we know, watching the dogs, that they are trying to preserve a certain internal balance, exchanging one thing against another according to their own insights (not ours!) about what serves them best at that moment.

As they are balancing their internal equilibrium, one of the things dogs keep an eye on is the equilibrium in the larger, social system they share with the others. If this system becomes unstable, it is, just like our party, unpleasant — and perhaps dangerous — for all present. When two dogs have an argument, it's unpleasant for both of them — adrenaline levels shoot up, they have to expend a bunch of energy, and it always feels kind of scary because you never know absolutely for sure what the other guy will do. So social stability is one of the variables that affect dogs' inner well-being, and they are very good at keeping an eye on it.

This is why dogs are so sensitive to social space. Again, they learn as they go. Two dogs are racing around the field, playing tag. One of them runs very closely past a third dog, who is lying there chewing on his tennis ball. This third dog jumps up and does some protest barking and air snapping, then returns to her ball. The running dog looks to us like he didn't even notice this, but in fact he picks up on this social-space information on the move and without batting an eye. If we keep watching, we see that the next time he passes, he does this at a greater distance from the chewing dog. Even in wild play, dogs pick up on what's going on in the larger picture and change their behaviour to accommodate and keep the system stable by not perturbing the other dog too much.

This is also why dogs are willing, to a varying extent (depending on their personal histories), to make trades or give things up to each other in order to restore a threatened or lost social balance. Two dogs who have just met both run after a ball someone throws. As they approach the ball, one of them starts to growl. The other dog can't know what kind of history is behind this, but he knows the growl is a sign the other feels worried about the outcome and that the relationship could now become unstable — a conflict might arise. So he slows down and lets the first dog get the ball. After all, he has plenty of tennis balls at home, and to him the ball is an excuse to play the running game. The growling dog notices this. The next time they go for the ball together, he doesn't growl, but he gets the ball again just the same. Later, the second dog's owner is giving him a treat. This dog is on a diet and is always hungry, so this time *he* growls when the first dog approaches. 'You can have the ball, but you sure can't have my food.' The first dog moves off a little and watches from a greater distance. The hungry dog notices this. The next time treats are handed out, he may still keep an eye on the other dog, but he might not feel he has to growl. He's seen that the other is willing to keep a little more distance around food. (It just so happens that in this other dog's home, tennis balls are scarce, but food isn't.) The two are each learning what is and isn't important to each other's internal well-being equilibrium. They take this into account in their interactions, and thus keep the social system stable.

This is not a dominance hierarchy, but a system of mutual trade-offs. One dog is willing to trade a little playing space for peace on the field. Another dog will give up a ball, another food, receiving the resource 'peace' in return. This is a complex SOS, which seeks equilibrium on multiple levels at once. The dogs are not trying to 'dominate' each other, but are seeking compromises, to bring all levels of the system into acceptable equilibriums at the same time. Dogs do not try to selfishly maximise their own well-being anymore than our party-goers did (see also Myths 14, 15, and 16). And you can't tell

what's truly going on just by watching the visible physical resources. In the first place, as we have already seen, social stability is one of the factors that affect dogs' inner well-being. Arguments (social instability) decrease everyone's well-being by making all feel less safe. In the second place, and this is something scientists seem to have forgotten, dogs greatly enjoy each other's company. The very presence of the other adds to a dog's personal well-being. So when a dog 'sacrifices' something (e.g. the tennis ball), this isn't really a sacrifice. The dog is making a choice, an exchange, between two things he values. In such a case, we can only conclude that the dog apparently values the avoidance of a conflict, or preservation of the good relations with the other dog, more than he values the thing he gave up.

So the behaviour we have been taught to call 'dominant' is in fact merely an exchange of information, upon which the dogs then make choices. It is a search for a mutually satisfying balance between two dogs. It is not up to us to determine that one dog has 'won' and the other has 'lost.' In doing so, we fail to take their own variables into account (which are the only ones that matter!). In fact, the dog that gives up a thing thinks he is making a satisfying, and in his own eyes winning choice, given his own valuation of all the available options and taking all the multiple equilibriums into account that he wants to preserve. Assigning more value to a thing that is taken by force is a truly typical *human* projection! This projection has led scientists to miss another reality. If we watch un-blinded by labels and projections, then we see that dogs most often get hold of an object by the handy use of charm, calming signals, and distraction tactics. There's not a dog in the world who then values the object less because he got it this way. And it is another human projection to call these tactics 'submissive', when in fact they are simply an expression of greater social skill. It is, generally, the socially unskilled dog or the distressed dog, who reverts to force to take a thing, and it reveals much about us (and nothing about dogs) that we would consider such a dog 'superior' or assign leadership qualities to him.

With our picture in place of dogs exploring each other's boundaries and making compromises to reach inner and outer equilibriums simultaneously, we can now describe the rules the dogs follow as they do this. During my fourteen-year study of dogs, I was able to discover these rules and test them exhaustively. These are dogs' own rules, not ones thought up by a human — although humans greatly improve their relationships with dogs if we obey these rules (which we don't always do). In any case, every socialised dog carries these rules inside himself, just as our well-brought-up party-goers have internalised the ones they learned growing up. Dog rules are, however, different from human rules, and there are not so many of them. Here they are:

**1) We will not use aggression in social interactions, but will limit ourselves to signals and avoid damaging each other.** This is *the* main rule dogs depend upon. It is extremely traumatic for a dog when another dog does not honour this rule and attacks for real. (And don't try to tell us that humans have this rule too, or we will know you never watch the evening news.)

**2) We will respect each other's personal zone and not enter it without permission.** This rule is important, but it is less important than Rule Number One. It isn't so much traumatic as somewhat threatening when a dog disobeys this rule. When this happens, you may see some snarling and snapping, or maybe even a short, ritual 'fight' (which isn't

really a fight — see Myths 12, 13, 33 and 34). This is a rule we do share with dogs, though we disobey it more often. (The dog who disobeys this rule is just as pathological as the human who engages in sexual harassment on the work floor.)

**3) We will be considerate of each other's personal preferences once we have learned to know them.** How far this consideration goes is, as we have seen, dependent on each dog's internal state at a particular moment, balanced against the wish to maintain both relationships and social peace. (See Myths 14, 15 and 16 if you think your dog doesn't obey this rule.)

With these three simple and elegant rules, internally carried by each part of the domestic canine social system, the dog system is able to achieve one of the many possible equilibriums with amazing flexibility and speed. Each dog ends up with the things he values most at that moment while social peace is preserved, and the dog who consistently does not obey the rules get thrown out of the system (which chasing away can be a collective enterprise). We cannot determine some kind of hierarchy among the dogs in this balance (unless we are willing to project), because we cannot know how the *dogs* are valuing the things they add and subtract from their position in the whole. All we can do is observe that each dog has reached a position he is happy with. This position is not reached by brute force, but by voluntarily seeking compromises. It doesn't interest a dog in the least whether some other dog has 'more'. In fact, dogs don't even have the brain structures that would enable them to think the concept 'more' or 'less', conceiving of and comparing sizes or quantities. This kind of math is quite beyond them. All a dog knows is that he has his own personal 'enough' (more on this later, in Myth 14). Therefore, this dog SOS works excellently well. A dog group can absorb practically unlimited numbers of dogs quickly and flexibly, as long as everyone follows the three simple rules.

At the beginning, I said that dogs live in a complex, autopoietic, self-organising system. Now we understand 'complex' and 'self-organising'. But what does 'autopoietic' mean? It means, quite simply, that the system is capable of producing and repairing its own parts. You don't have to take an autopoietic system to the garage, or buy new parts for it. It is self-perpetuating and self-maintaining. Autopoiesis occurs when a system consists of living creatures. A dog bears pups without external help, and dogs all around the world raise pups — if humans don't interfere — into functioning system parts who know and voluntarily follow the rules. As we have seen in Myth 6, the ability to take part in the social system is learned, not inherited. Dogs do this part production quite well all by themselves.

A dog must interact with other dogs while he's a pup so as to learn the rules, otherwise he may end up having trouble participating in social interactions. An adult dog who didn't play enough with others in his youth may need finishing (as a part) if he is to function in a social system. Another dog may have a traumatic and damaging experience, and end up needing 'repair' to be able to function again in the dog social system. We may need help repairing our dogs, but dogs are quite capable of repairing such a part themselves without outside help. They will help the traumatized dog get over his fear, providing him with reassuring social experiences. It's actually quite touching to watch how socially skilled dogs react to fear in another dog — we could learn a lot from them. The socially clumsy (or incomplete) dog gets snapped at and snarled at, until he tempers his clumsy behaviour and starts to act more politely. The other dogs aren't 'dominating'

him, but are providing this incomplete part with some learning experiences he missed out on, and he is learning as he goes. As long as the hooligan refrains from using aggression (i.e. delivering one or more uninhibited bites, thus inflicting damage on other system parts), he will be able to learn from other dogs how to take part in the system.

Thus there are two production processes, which make sure the system is producing and repairing its own parts. One of them is the biological process of bearing and raising offspring. The second production process is learning. Learning is crucial both to the production of socially functioning offspring and to the repair of parts that don't function optimally for some reason.

So learning is an important production process in the dog SOS. Learning takes care of the production of functioning system parts and repair of damaged or incomplete parts. Their ability to learn enables dogs to take the deviant signals into account that they encounter, for example, from a dog whose tail the humans have cut off or bred to be permanently curled up on his back. Their learning ability, their readiness to seek compromise, and their three simple rules enable dogs to absorb members of other species into their social system. A dog can learn how to interpret the signals, and thus predict the behaviour, of a parrot, a cat, a human, if only we allow him to go through the right learning experiences. He is then able to use these signals across the species-boundaries, to seek equilibrium and construct an SOS with all kinds of non-dog species. It's actually miraculous — or maybe not, given the context the dog evolved in.

Dogs live in a flexible and complex self-organising system which is capable of seeking and finding equilibriums on multiple levels at once (all the dogs in equilibrium while the social system also finds a balance). The system produces and repairs its own parts. There are three simple rules that determine the system's movements by the individual parts independently and voluntarily following those rules, without some central authority guiding things. The system functions to find the maximum available safety and well-being of all the present participants. There is no hierarchy. There is only a whole range of possible balances, both for each individual participant and for the system as a whole. Each equilibrium is arrived at as the dogs seek compromises, weighing various choices, and seeking a balance between their own well-being and the stability of the social landscape (which is also an element in their well-being). A dog who can't compromise can't take part. His behaviour destabilizes the social system, making it unsafe or uncomfortable for other participants. Dogs aren't preoccupied with power, but rather with building mutual predictability and trust, so the system can balance in one of the many acceptable equilibriums it has to choose from. These 'acceptable equilibriums' are situations in which each dog present has a well-being position he is satisfied with. Giving up a ball or a bone to preserve the relationship and the social peace does not mean the dog has 'lost.' It means that he has made a trade-off, shifting from the well-being position that included the ball to a position that included something else he decided was more important.

The ability to follow Rule Number One, no aggression (i.e. no uninhibited bites and no attempting to inflict real damage on others), is essential, however. Aggression makes a dog unable to function as a part of any dog social system. He will always be attempting to sabotage the entire system. His presence makes the social system unsafe for all the other participants. He can't be repaired, because this is too dangerous — he will be trying to destroy other system parts rather than to learn from them. The dog does not exist who is willing to risk his internal equilibrium to such an extent that he may cease to exist as a living system himself! (See re: exceptions to this in Myths 38–40.) Dogs who do

engage in aggression, or who will risk their existence as a living system in order to fight, are not products of nature. They are a result of human tampering with dogs. Repair is impossible, and the owner has the responsibility to keep the dog away from other dogs.

**Fact:** The domestic dog's social system is, thus, much more complex — but also much more elegant and intelligent — than a mere 'dominance hierarchy.' This 'dominance hierarchy' model is clumsy and anthropomorphic, and does not do justice to dogs.

Semyonova, A, *The social organisation of the domestic dog; a longitudinal study of domestic canine behaviour and the ontogeny of domestic canine social systems*, Carriage House Publishing, The Hague, The Netherlands, 2003. [www.nonlineardogs.com](http://www.nonlineardogs.com).

## Myth 29: The domestic dog is a naturally aggressive species.

One reason people believe this myth is because of the romantic idea that the domestic dog descended from the great grey wolf (see Myth 1), which he didn't. We now also know that the domestic dog isn't a hunter, but that he became what he is precisely because he gave up hunting to scavenge our leftovers (see Myth 4). But all these romantic ideas don't die easily. It is now fashionable among biologists to talk about the domestic dog as a 'predator'. What they forget to say when they tell us this is that sheep, tapeworms and mistletoe are also predators. A predator is anything that has to eat from another living being, maybe or maybe not killing it in the process. A predator is not necessarily a hunter. Dogs have to have a certain amount of animal protein, but so does a tapeworm. The dog gets his protein by eating our leftovers, while the tapeworm actually steals stuff we still need right from under our nose. This biological wordgame has brought us right back to the old, false picture of the dog as a killer whose desire to kill is always right there under the surface just dying to get out. This need to feel we have a barely contained killer walking obediently next to us tells us something about ourselves, but it remains a false perception of the dog.

Then there is a second thing that contributes to this myth, namely confusion about what we mean by the word 'aggressive'. Strictly speaking, aggression is some act that is intended to cause harm or pain. In everyday speech, we also use the word for acts that are intended to dominate or intimidate another. We use the word not only for acts that cause physical pain or damage, but we also include behaviour that is intended to cause psychological pain or damage. When we're talking about humans, this broad definition isn't entirely wrong. We are such an aggressive species that when we so much as raise our voices, this is often a real indication that danger is at hand — that we may attack the person we're shouting at. We often fight to the death about things. Our social intercourse is strongly based on competition and domination, so we are often on the offensive and a lot of what we do is indeed aimed at dominating someone. We have complex minds, and are able to damage each other psychologically and emotionally. In the end, we may rightly call much human behaviour aggressive. However, dogs are not human, and it's not fair to project human qualities onto them.

So what is going on with dogs? Dogs are non-human animals. Biologists know and acknowledge that fights to the death between members of the same species are very rare in Nature (as long as you leave us out of the equation). This is because a non-human animal recognises others of his species as a kind of social partners. Dogs are special, because they are able to include us and many other kinds of animals on this list. When they are dealing with social partners, non-human animals usually use only what biologists call 'ritual aggression'. This is a kind of social discourse. The animals simulate a fight, but they aren't actually trying to damage each other. The thing is, if it's social discourse (which it is), it can't simultaneously be aggression. It's one or the other — either an animal is trying to damage his opponent, or he's not, and if he's not, well, it's not aggression. Among dogs, aggression means delivering an uninhibited bite to the other in question, using the full and uninhibited strength of the jaws. Normal dogs rarely do this. In fact, the basic rule of dogs' social interaction is that they will *not* revert to uninhibited biting, even in a very heated argument (see Myth 11). A dog who does use aggression is frightening to other dogs. They think he's insane, and will do their best to avoid him. A dog who

reverts to aggression can't be part of any canine social system. Aside from the fact that other dogs avoid him, he will destroy any social system he joins by destroying the other participants.

Let's take a look at what normal dogs really do. If you observe without projecting, and if you understand their language, you see that dogs generally do everything in their power to avoid aggressive encounters. Dogs have an extended warning system they use to tell the other that they are feeling worried and to ask the other to please keep a little distance. We've seen (in Myth 12) that it's not aggression but anxiety that makes a dog use his warning signals (threat signals). We know that the use of anxiety inhibiting medicines greatly decreases threat behaviour in most dogs. Knowing this, we know that biologists make a mistake when they call threat behaviour 'aggressive'. They miss the point that these signals express worry about what the other is going to do. They miss the point that these signals function specifically to give the other lots of time and opportunity to avoid a confrontation. We know that even when the other ignores the signals, and it does come to a confrontation, both dogs use their teeth with great reserve. In fact, they don't use them at all except symbolically. They wave their teeth around, maybe pinch the other dog a little — even a toothless dog is not the least bit at a disadvantage in one of these symbolic 'fights'. It remains easy during the whole affair for one of the dogs to stop the symbolic show of teeth by giving off a subtle signal that he's seen enough and is satisfied that the other dog will follow the non-aggression rule. This signal can be so subtle that we don't see it. To us, it looks like the 'fight' — which wasn't a fight but an exchange of signals in a social discourse — suddenly ended, for no visible reason. We examine our dogs and find not a wound anywhere, or at the worst a small puncture caused by a fang — which is a kind of wound dogs get just as often in rough play, analogous to the child who comes home with a skinned knee after an afternoon of roller skating. We have to conclude the dogs were not being aggressive to each other, no matter how scared the whole thing made us feel.

Before a normal dog 'bites' a human, he also, very reliably, uses his entire warning system to give us the time and plenty of chance to avoid a confrontation. Just because we didn't see it, doesn't mean he didn't do it.

Mistakes start with the fact that we often have no idea how a situation looks or feels to the dog. A dog might be lying in an armchair with a high back and arm rests. It looks comfy to us, and we forget that the dog is — in his own perceptions — lying in a corner without a quick exit. He might be lying on the rug in the middle of the room, and we want to get a book from the shelves behind him. We head for the bookcase, not even thinking about the dog as we focus on the spot we expect the book to be. We don't realise that we are — in the dog's perceptions — suddenly walking straight at him with quite a decisive step, starting to enter his personal zone while he's in a supine position and can't shoot out of our way very quickly. His language isn't our native language, so we often don't see the signals he's sending us (that he's worried about why we're approaching, and to please give him time to stand up and move away). We don't see how long and how hard the dog has tried to avoid a confrontation. It seems to us like he suddenly lashed out. We think he 'bit' without a reason, and that this means he's aggressive 'by nature'. We're so shocked by his lashing out that we don't notice we aren't damaged, and that his 'bite' was only symbolic. Again we fail to understand his native language. All we have is some spit on our sleeve, perhaps the imprint of a tooth on our unbroken skin, or (if the dog was very scared) a small puncture with a bruise developing around it. Our bones and

tendons and muscles are all intact. Among dogs, this is all a very clear sign that no damage was intended, and that the bite wasn't in any way meant to be real. To another dog, this *inhibited* bite is a clear sign that the 'biting' dog is, despite his anxiety, trying hard to preserve the peaceful social relationship. We humans totally miss this message. We forget what a dog can do with his teeth if he wants to, we ignore the role our own behaviour plays, and we foolishly call this symbolic, highly controlled gesture 'aggression'.

Strong selection against aggression is woven throughout the domestic dog's origin and entire evolution as a species. If you look at things fairly, you'll see that normal dogs do everything in their power to avoid the use of aggression. Real aggression among domestic dogs is an anomaly. When it does occur, it is not because the dog is a naturally aggressive species. Aggression in dogs is usually a result of human tampering with a breed's genes, or of traumatic experiences a dog has had in his life up to that moment. Many of these traumatic experiences are due to the Nazi myth that we have to be dominating our dogs all the time. This myth leads us to behave in ways that are confusing and frightening to dogs, often leaving them no alternative but to lash out. Bad science has burdened us with a self-fulfilling prophecy that has nothing to do with what dogs actually are.

**Fact:** The domestic dog is, by nature, anything but an aggressive species.

**Please also read:** Myth 30, however, because we don't want you drawing the wrong conclusions from the facts about natural, normal dogs.

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