



Aug. 23, 2017

It's a question that may make some of you snort. Are dogs a higher form of parasite? What a question, you say. But it's been bandied about in philosophy-of-dog circles lately and if you dig deeper into the notion, it just could make you squirm.

The idea is that dogs have evolved from wild scavengers to animals

who share our homes and food by relentlessly studying us and perfectly manipulating our emotions. Since parting ways with their wolf cousins thousands of years ago, dogs have expertly maneuvered from the edge of the fire to the edge of our beds while wolves who want nothing to do with man number fewer than 300,000 worldwide. There are now 75 million dogs in the U.S alone. It's hard to argue that dogs don't have a winning strategy.

Out of all the species on the planet, dogs are the only ones who take the time to observe man and developed singularly shrewd skills in reading human emotions. They know our moods and what makes us happy and react instinctively with a tail wag, a nudge, an adoring smile — whatever it takes to make us want to nurture them and bring them another dish of that food. No, not *that* one, the expensive stuff.

According to the parasite theory, we're being played.

Dogs are not really as smart as we think they are and don't actually have as wide a range of deeper feelings as we think they do, so says the theory. They've simply evolved to know our triggers and punch them without mercy to keep the good times coming. They know just how to gaze into our eyes so we'll tell everyone, "See how much he loves me?"

But wait, isn't that giving a dog too much credit? If dogs are not really as intelligent as dog lovers think, how could little Fifi so cynically carry out such an ambitious and sustained campaign? Parasite theorists counter by pointing out that a mosquito doesn't *know* it's a parasite. Neither does a flea. They simply do what they were made to do. And so does Fifi.

Over the last 30,000 years, we made *Canis familiaris* into the perfect parasite by culling those who didn't act and look as we desired. We kept the ones who looked adorable, frisky, and loving. We credit

them with emotions and traits they never really had. They just kept a poker face and went along with it. We did it to ourselves, the theory goes.

I'm not buying it and you probably aren't, either. Some who hold to the social parasite theory say they really do *like* dogs, but they're just being unsentimental and scientific. But MRI scans in recent years have looked into the minds of dogs. They've recorded the same emotional centers lighting up as ours do. That's pure science.

True, we've shaped the dog with selective breeding, everything from the teacup Chihuahua to the Irish wolfhound. We've as much as possible bred out aggression and encouraged dogs who crave our companionship. Why would we do otherwise?

Dogs don't fake their feelings. Researchers have measured the level of dogs' oxytocin, the intimacy hormone, after interaction with their owners and found it shoots up. Again, pure science.

It's *my* theory that the parasite theory is a reaction to America's skyrocketing love for dogs. We're crazier about our dogs than ever and some people simply don't like dogs or lack the capacity to see what all the fuss is about. They resent seeing dogs in stores or restaurant patios. They cringe at the baby talk, dog sweaters and dog spas. People who savor their dog's company must be emotionally flawed, they say.

Or, could it not be that we're more open and aware? Science continues to pin down points we already knew just by sitting quietly with our dogs, scratching their ears and enjoying their warm, furry bodies next to ours: we were made to love. And so were they. My dogs may have me right where they want me. But I have them right where I want them, too. Let the academics puzzle over it.

Maybe one day they'll evolve, too.