

Does my dog really love me?

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By Sarah Etter

Did Lassie really love Timmy? Or was she only saving him from disaster, time and again, so that he would reward her later with a tasty morsel from the dinner table?

Scientists, veterinarians and dog owners have long questioned the relationship between man and his best friend. Even philosophers have ventured opinions on the idea: Plato described dogs as "lovers of learning" and Voltaire refuted Descartes' theory that dogs were merely unintelligent machines.

The idea that dogs feel emotions, specifically love, is debatable. Though

older schools of scientific thought refuted the notion that dogs had human-like feelings, some researchers today believe the subject deserves more attention.

All mammals, including dogs, have a "pleasure center" in their brains that is stimulated by dopamine, the chemical that regulates feelings of happiness. For example, when a dog is playing fetch, dopamine is released in the pleasure center and the dog is "happy." Since humans have similar brain chemistry, can we assume that dogs and humans are much more alike emotionally than previously thought?

According to Fred Metzger, a guest lecturer in animal sciences at Penn State and a State College veterinarian, "Dogs probably don't feel love in the typical way humans do. Dogs make investments in human beings because it works for them. They stand something to gain from putting so-called emotions out there. The more 'cute factor' they give us, the more we feel like they love us. This makes it more likely that we will give them more attention, food treats, outdoor access -- all based on how much of a show they put on for us." Metzger theorized that dogs "love" us as long as we continue to reward their tricks and antics with treats and attention.

In a statement sure to shock dog lovers everywhere, Metzger added, "If we moved our dogs to our neighbor's house and that neighbor gave the dogs as much as we gave them and in the same motivational forms, I believe our dogs would adapt to the new life and would become as loyal to the neighbor as they were to us."

The idea that Fido's love could be easily transferred to the family next door may seem unsettling, considering the amount of time and emotion most people invest in their canine counterparts. However, Leslie Burgard, a certified dog trainer in State College, does not think the subject of puppy love is quite so simple.

"Their loyalty is unconditional -- much like that between a parent and child," Burgard said. "For the most part, our dogs would go to bat for us, even on our worst and most intolerable day. All parents have days when they may not really like their kid that much, but they always love them unconditionally; even parents of troubled or criminal children love them on some level. The love and the loyalty that drives that emotion is instinctual ... I think dogs have a 'love' or connection with their humans that is free of preconceived perceptions."

Susan B. Eirich, a biologist and psychologist and founder of the Earthfire Institute, thinks that primatologist Jane Goodall's research gives us a good indication that animals actually do have emotions. "From a behavioral perspective, it only makes sense that animals would experience emotions ... As Goodall notes, social animals must be able to read other animals in their society and must be able to maintain social bonds."

"When you think about it," explained Eirich, "strong emotion underpins social behavior and connection."

Eirich suggested that emotions underlie intraspecies communication, from barking to growling to the baring of teeth to show anger and aggression. So, are those "puppy dog eyes" signaling true love or a manipulation to get dog biscuits out of you? As long as science remains undecided, the meaning of your dog's "happily" wagging tail is up for interpretation.

Source: Penn State

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