

From the Kitchen

30 March 2011



Recently, Number-One Daughter took a photo of the spoodle prostrate in front of a Buddhist statue. Was he praying or merely enjoying the sun on his hairy body? Or, the thought just struck me, he may have been offering obeisance to the Sun.

What goes on in a dog's brain? Does it extend beyond the next meal, the next walk or the next loving contact from one of its humans? It is impossible to tell. Much of the time I am unaware of what transpires in my own head, let alone in the head of the sentient humans around me.

We assume things about other people and animals based on our own experiences. We would like to think that our pets understand us to a greater extent than is likely. I notice how the dog's understanding of my words diminishes when I deliberately stop myself using hand gestures and other body language.

Do *we* understand our pets? When the dog starts whining, is he hungry? Does he need to be let out? Does he want attention? When I respond by asking him, using a sentence with complex syntactical structure, he sits down and looks at me with his head cocked to one side, imploring me to speak simple Dog. And don't even ask me to speak Cat!

It seems quite clear that dogs dream. My dog can be lying spread out on the floor, his paws making little movements as if he is running, his eyes moving rapidly behind their closed lids. Every now and then he lets out a little bark. In the case of human dreaming there are various theories of what the brain is actually doing: integrating the day's experiences; allowing the unconscious room to express itself; processing things from the past; solving problems. What purpose does dreaming serve in dogs? Do they suffer emotional traumas that need working out? Does my dog dream of actually catching a rabbit instead of always having to give up when the rabbit escapes into the heart of a blackberry thicket? Or does he experience himself soaring into the sky, still chasing that duck?

I know that dogs have a keen sense of place. Even when being driven in the car (yes, he has a chauffeur) the dog perks up when we approach places where he has been allowed to run around, even if it was only once and many months ago. How does he map his environment? Does he even have a cohesive map or is it a matter of simply recognising unconnected places? I notice him becoming more agitated as we approach one of these places and then, as we pass it and leave it behind, he moans (I'm sure of it) and lies back down on the back seat with a sigh. After a while he will sit back up and look around – looking for the next recognisable spot?

I have established that the dog can anticipate being allowed out for a run as we approach a recognisable place. But is it true anticipation or the triggering of an automatic response to a visual or olfactory stimulus? Are the whine and the sigh signs of disappointment (which would indicate ability to anticipate) or am I guilty of anthropomorphism? If the dog can

anticipate, then he has a sense of present and future and, presumably, the past, as the anticipation of future events needs to be based on past experience.

Dogs visually recognise other creatures as dogs at a distance. This is quite remarkable, as dogs come in so many sizes and colours and variations in shape. My dog behaves very differently on seeing a tiny dog (of the handbag variety) than when he sees a cat of about equal size – he wags and wants to meet the dog, doesn't wag and wants to chase the cat.

Apparently unable to resist chasing rabbits in the forest, the dog acted as protector of a rabbit we briefly babysat and which was free-ranging in the dining room for a few weeks, even chasing off a fox which had the temerity to peek in at the rabbit through the floor-to-ceiling window. How does the dog decide the difference between wild and domestic rabbits?

All this brings me back to the question of the relationship between the dog and his universe and what notion he has of that universe. I doubt that he thinks about it as we would understand 'thinking', but he does have to make enough sense of it to allow him to respond to it appropriately. I *am* sure that there is more going on in his brain than mere responses to sensory input. But the numinous? No, I don't think so and he probably was not responding to the Buddhist statue in any spiritual way – he has just cocked his leg and pissed on it!