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What We Know About Dogs

You kick the dog. You beat the dog.

Then the next hand comes down open —

empty, meaning nothing but good —

and the dog folds back from it, shaking.

Whose flinch is that?

The carpet, then. The dark bloom

spreading by the door

the dog stood at for nine hours,

nose to the seam, waiting

for somebody to remember the latch.

Whose stain is that?

And the chicken, raw and pink

at the lip of the counter —

three days of an empty bowl,

three days of the smell of a house

that eats without it.

Whose hunger is that?

We are generous about this. We say
the dog is not bad, the dog is afraid.
We say look at what was done to it.
We say it easily. We say it out loud.
We have built a whole vocabulary
for the flinch of a frightened animal.

So, tell me why the language runs out
at the edge of a person.

Tell me why the same flinch,
worn on a face we recognize,
stops being a history
and starts being a character.

The Flinch and the Fault: A Reader's Guide to "What We Know About Dogs"

The poem above works by withholding its subject. Three times it describes a dog behaving badly, cowering from a kind hand, soiling the floor, stealing food from a counter, and three times it asks the reader to assign blame. The reader almost never blames the dog. Only in the final stanza does the poem reveal what it has been asking about: whether the same reasoning survives the jump from animals to human beings. This companion piece explains why that jump is so hard to make, and why a substantial body of research suggests it is the correct one.

Begin with why the canine cases feel obvious. Aggression and other "problem" behaviours in dogs are not stable traits distributed across all situations; they are context-specific responses. In a survey of more than 4,000 UK households, Casey and colleagues found that dogs aggressive toward strangers entering the house were largely not the same dogs that were aggressive toward strangers outside the house, and that owners' use of punishment-based training was among the factors associated with aggression across contexts (Casey et al.). In other words, the behaviour tracks the circumstance and the treatment, not some fixed badness inside the animal. A dog that flinches is reporting on its past, not on its nature.

The poem's claim is that people read human behaviour by the opposite rule. Social psychology has a name for this. Lee Ross coined the phrase "the fundamental attribution error" to describe the observer's tendency to attribute behaviour to enduring dispositions while systematically discounting situational pressures (Ross). Daniel Gilbert and Patrick Malone, reviewing four decades of research on what they call the correspondence bias, identify several distinct mechanisms behind it: observers are often unaware of the situational forces acting on the person, hold unrealistic expectations about how people behave under those forces, categorize the behavior in inflated dispositional terms, and then fail to correct that first inference even when the

situation is later explained to them (Gilbert and Malone). The inference is fast and automatic; the correction is slow, effortful, and usually incomplete.

Bias alone, though, does not explain the asymmetry the poem points at. We manage the situational reading effortlessly for dogs. Something extra is at work when the flinching creature is a person. Part of it may be motivational. Melvin Lerner and Dale Miller's review of just-world research documents a persistent human need to believe that the world distributes outcomes fairly: that suffering is, in some sense, earned (Lerner and Miller). Believing a person's damage was caused by what happened to them threatens that assumption in a way that a dog's damage does not. It is more comfortable to locate the flaw in the sufferer.

The empirical case that human behaviour carries its history is now very large. The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study surveyed more than 17,000 adult members of a California health plan about abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction before age eighteen, and found a graded, dose-response relationship between the number of adversities reported and adult outcomes including depression, substance dependence, suicide attempts, and heart disease (Felitti et al.). The relationship was not a weak statistical shadow; adults reporting four or more categories of childhood adversity showed several-fold increases in risk relative to those reporting none. Anda and colleagues later argued that these epidemiological findings converge with neurobiological evidence: chronic early stress alters the developing brain in ways that plausibly produce the very outcomes the epidemiology detects (Anda et al.).

That neurobiological line has since been developed in detail. In a review of the imaging literature, Martin Teicher and Jacqueline Samson conclude that childhood maltreatment alters the trajectory of brain development in regions governing threat detection, emotional regulation, and reward, and estimate that maltreatment accounts for roughly 45% of the population attributable

risk for childhood-onset psychiatric disorders (Teicher and Samson). A person raised where the hand overhead was usually a threat develops a nervous system calibrated for a world where the hand overhead is usually a threat. That calibration is not a character defect. It is correct in its original context and does not switch off when the context changes.

The poem's third stanza, the raw chicken, points to something related but distinct: deprivation not only leaves scars but also degrades judgment in the moment. Mani and colleagues demonstrated this experimentally, finding that inducing financial concerns impaired cognitive performance among poor participants but not wealthy ones, and that Indian sugarcane farmers performed measurably worse on cognitive tests before harvest, when money was scarce, than after harvest, when it was not. The same farmers, months apart (Mani et al.). Scarcity itself consumes mental bandwidth. What looks from the outside like poor decision-making is frequently a downstream product of not having enough, rather than the reason for it. The starving dog on the counter is not revealing its character. It is doing arithmetic.

None of this abolishes responsibility, and the poem is careful not to claim that it does. Its question is about fault, not about consequence. A dog that bites is still a dog that must be managed; the point is that management premised on "this animal is bad," and management premised on "this animal is frightened" are different interventions with different success rates. The same distinction underlies trauma-informed practice in mental health services, which Sweeney and colleagues describe as a shift from asking what is wrong with a person to asking what happened to them, an approach oriented toward safety, trust, and collaboration rather than toward the diagnosis of individual defect (Sweeney et al.). It is a reframing of the question, not a suspension of accountability.

What the poem finally asks, then, is a question about consistency. The reader has already conceded the principle. Nobody blames the dog. The dog's flinch is legible as a record of what was done to it, and we say so out loud, and we feel humane for saying it. The last stanza simply notes that when the identical flinch appears on a human face, the same reader is liable to stop reading it as a history and start reading it as a personality: and it asks, without answering, what exactly changed.

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