

An Unacceptable Indulgence?

By Robert Lewis

Don't accept your dog's admiration as conclusive evidence that you are wonderful. Ann Landers

We bipeds love quadrupeds, especially *Canis familiaris* (the barker) and *Felis catus* (the meower).



Annually, we spend billions of dollars on our beloved pets. The pet food market alone is worth an estimated \$94.5 billion. According to *bloomberg.com*, the pet industry is poised to swell from \$320 billion today (2024) to almost \$500 billion by

2030. Those monies could put \$1,000 dollars in the pockets of five hundred million earthlings, which begs the question if yet another #MeToo has been silenced by the prerogative of the purse.

There are 700 million around the world currently living in extreme poverty, defined as living on less than \$1.90 per/day. *Ipso facto*, there is no mistaking where our priorities lie, which is good news for our favourite four-legged friends and damning news for far too many human beings on the planet.

Despite the preponderance of empirical evidence to the contrary, most pet owners will vigorously insist that they value human life more than any animal's life, an insistence that collapses in the crucible of observed behaviour. To wit and by analogy: I can declare to the world that I am a

charitable person, but if I don't give to charity, am I charitable? The answer is incontestably 'no,' because we are judged and judge others not by what we say but by what we do. We only have to ask the needy to know that, despite my declaration, I am not charitable. Which means pet lovers have managed to finesse a disconnect that enables them to proclaim that they value human life more than animal life, while spending their human capital – time and money – on their cherished pets.

However inappropriate, if not impertinent, is it fair to ask what sleight of mind permits pet owners to insouciantly budget perhaps hundreds if not thousands of dollars yearly on their cats and dogs while the homeless sift through their garbage, or another malnourished child dies in the arms of its mother? Or more generally, why do human beings care for the well-being of their animal friends more than the well-being of the multitudinous impoverished of the planet?

According to UNICEF 3.1 million children die of starvation every year. The French poet Stephane Mallarmé writes that "dying of hunger gives you the right to be born again," but we know they don't get a second chance; meanwhile our darling dogs are chomping at the bit waiting to be served their \$50 bag of vitamin enriched, cheddar rippled chow burgers.

Every pet owner in the world stood in front of the mirror knows that the life of any starving child is worth more than any pet, so why are human beings unable to act according to what they know is right?

Since this perversion of values meets the minimum requirements of nihilism, defined by Nietzsche as "the devaluation of value," and is a worldwide phenomenon, there must be reasons for it, and by 'it' we refer to pethood and the 94% of pet owners who regard their animal friends – dog breath notwithstanding – as part of the family.

All human beings want to love and be loved, and to feel needed; and our treasured pets, more than the world's destitute, satisfy that apparently non-negotiable *desideratum*. We can hug, hold, fondle and cuddle our pets, make room for them in ours beds, just as we don't want to see, much less come in contact with the unwashed, grimy community of the homeless, shadowy figures we try to pretend aren't there; and when they are there, in our faces, we pay them to disappear. Of course nothing is preventing us from diverting the monies we spend on pets to organizations that feed the starving, but we get nothing back in return: no hugs, no company, no love. The only thing to be had from giving to starving children thousands of miles away is a clean conscience, which apparently isn't enough.

When human beings are in the loving mode, where love is defined as the pure attention lavished on the other, be it biped or quadruped, the immune system enjoys a boost and serotonin indices go up. Physiologically and psychologically, the pleasures derived from pethood by far outweigh the pleasures derived from caring for the homeless or hungry. Which means the playing field isn't level, that compared to the quadruped, the biped is constitutionally disadvantaged. Pets comfort us when we're sad and lonely; we can touch them when there is no one else to touch; they provide us with a purpose in life, an excuse to get off our butts, and a pretext to meet new people. Unlike for the homeless, we grieve and bury our pets when they pass on.

Singles, in particular, look to their pets to supply their emotional deficits. If the true language of love between couples consists more of sounds than speech, pethood uniquely enables that special dispensation. It's not the homeless but our cats and dogs we allow to curl around our legs and lay their heads on our pillow.

Among mankind's special pleasures, there is none more satisfying than exercising power. Through reward and

punishment, pet lovers are supreme masters over their pets. The *lingua franca* of the typical pet owner is the command function that reduces human speech to the equivalent of monosyllabic barking (sit, heel, no), That the person-to-pet-relationship is extravagantly asymmetrical is easily finessed with a saucer of fresh milk or bowl of Purina. Pride of pet is proportionate to obedience.

Pet lovers (*insanabilis hypocritae*), most of whom are guilelessly vocal in their advocacy, present themselves to the world as caring, compassionate human beings, but in point of fact they are motivated by selfish ends, looking out more for themselves than for the cause they trumpet. Based on the unceasing, self-righteous dialogue that underpins the pet lover's most cherished delusions, we are made to believe that their priorities stem from kindnesses that benefit millions of animals worldwide, whereas the most important kindness is to and for themselves, vouchsafing the observation that man becomes truly creative when justifying his pleasures.

There is no getting around the fact that pethood is a pleasure pet owners find hard to refuse. Even the poor, living among people poorer than themselves, allocate an obscene percentage of disposable income on their prized pets.

What we all ask of our pets, and they never fail us, is that they be incurably stupid and non-judgmental. In the presence of our pets we want to be able to 'unselfconsciously' attend to nostril upkeep, flatus disposal, and lounge around in underwear the Tide box is eyeing with suspicion. The moment our pets begin to show even the smallest inclination of developing faculties of judgement, there will erupt a holocaust the likes of which the planet earth has never seen and pet incineration will be the next growth industry.

As to the wretched of the earth, and no nation is excluded, they exist because human beings are constitutionally unable to care for other human beings other than family, relations and a

small circle of close friends, which includes our pampered pets. It's one thing to care intellectually for the world's impoverished; it's altogether something else to care existentially. If I truly cared for the needy, I would not purchase a new flat screen television but would divert those monies to the hurting and helpless.

Since pethood is demonstrably beneficial for both mental and physical well-being, and human nature is, for the most part, intractable, should pet-lovers be excused for catering to their pets at the expense of human suffering? It seems that pethood is a pleasure that only those of evolved conscience can refuse; meanwhile the path of least resistance continues to meet no resistance. Next to caring for the hungry and homeless in our midst, pethood is walk in the park. In an age where appearances trump all other considerations, one would think that it is in every pet owner's self-interest to show that he/she regards human life equal to an animal's life, but pet lovers are quick to form insular communities that safeguard them from inconvenient truths that quickly wither thin next to their emotional attachment to their pets.

Reduced to its lowest common denominator, the worldwide culture of pethood is a constant reminder that we are a flawed species, for whom doing daily diligence at the altar of self-gratification is its own justification. And dare we mention that the species is presently stirring up a cocktail of lethal chemicals that imperils all of earth's life forms, including our darling pets.

If having read to its concluding paragraphs this invective parading as a reason-based denunciation, and if winning my respect means anything, you only have to look me in the eye and in the spirit of confession declare: "Yes, I value my pet more than most human beings."

By entering an unsettling truth into the public domain you are now a better person than you once were, and no one can ask

more of you than to take the next step in your life's journey.

But, *pet amans caveat*, not to take that first step is to throw your essential humanity into question.

Image by Keniett J. Vazquez via [wikicommons](#)