

Service Animals: Serve us animals: Serve us, animals

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The term 'service animals' describes animals who render assistance of some sort to people with disabilities. This essay examines the boundaries of this concept of service animals, and also the blurriness around the edges, a blurriness which surfaces when we consider service animals in relation to companion animals, working animals, military animals, pack animals, harness animals, prison animals, and comfort animals. In some sense, all people have disabilities: none of us is perfect. There are a range of 'animal powers' that people do not have as keenly as other animals do. This sense of the animal strengths that humans lack combined with a sense of entitlement means that in our perennial disability we are inclined to harvest, or coopt, or borrow, or steal some aspect of those abilities, that able-ness, from other creatures.

The term 'service animals' describes animals who render assistance of some sort to people with disabilities. I am interested in the boundaries of this concept of service animals, and also the blurriness around the edges; this blurriness surfaces when we consider service animals in relation to companion animals (the animals formerly known as 'pets'), working animals, military animals, pack animals, harness animals, prison animals, comfort animals.

'Comfort animals' evokes the term 'comfort women', who were forced into sexual slavery, raped and horribly abused by the Japanese military during World War II. Comfort animals are in fact not at all like comfort women – they may provide comfort, as we snuggle with them, to people who are for some reason uncomfortable, somehow afflicted. But the commonality is the idea of 'comfort', that is, of course, our comfort – the human's comfort in relation to comfort animals, the man's comfort in relation to comfort women. The World War II term, with its insidiously exploitative, Orwellian connotations wrapped around the simple, pleasant word 'comfort', fuels my anthrozoological¹ cynicism; the idea of 'service', too, carries a polyvalence that begs investigation.

Though my definition seems concisely focused – 'service animals render assistance to people with disabilities' – consider the proposition that, in some sense, all people have disabilities: none of us is perfect. Everyone could be more *able*, more *enabled*, more fully *capable*, of doing something. Every person lacks, for example, a dog's keen senses of smell and hearing, or a bird's highly-refined sensitivity to a threatening predator, or a horse's bulk and strength, or a seal's ability to insulate against extreme cold. There are a range of 'animal powers' that people

do not have as keenly as other animals do: sight, smell, speed – all the senses which facilitate a better attunement to one's environment and a better ability to prosper, safely and powerfully in that environment: flight, camouflage and disguise, hibernation, toxic defense – powers of adaptation and survival.

In taking on animal strengths, can we take without taking? 'Taking' the sightedness and instincts of a German Shepherd, training and transforming that animal into a guard dog, or a guide dog, is one way of appropriating animal powers. With comfort animals, people take the serenity of a cat or dog or gerbil (who seems unaware of how anxiety-filled the human world is) and harvest some of the animals' gentleness, their sanity, their happiness, their coping-skills. Do people 'take' the serenity of these animals, or 'share' their serenity? Probably it varies according to the specific situation, the specific person, and the specific animal.

This sense of the animal strengths that humans lack (the dog's powerful sense of smell, the horse's strength, and so on) combined with a sense of entitlement means that in our perennial disability we are inclined to harvest, or co-opt, or borrow, or steal some aspect of those abilities, that able-ness, from other creatures. This paradigm offers an interesting way to think about our own sense of limit, our own sense of inferiority to other animals; and it may suggest dynamics by which that able-ness may be shared between two species, between a human and another animal. It may suggest ecologically interesting moments of trans-species harmony, coexistence, mutual support. Or we may see the foundation of a relationship that, while predicated upon people's sense of inferiority to other animals' talents and abilities, manifests itself

in a trope of jealousy, denial, and imperialism. That is, humans may decide to take, abrogate, exploit, animals' abilities for their own benefit, in which case the ecological equanimity described above would instead manifest as usurping and controlling whatever animal strengths we desire and need for our human progress.

'Service' is etymologically related to 'subservience', calling attention to the dynamics and consequences of hierarchy. The *OED* defines 'service' as the condition of being a servant; the fact of serving a master (as a servant or as a slave) ("service" *OED*). There's a religious sense of the word – one does God's service, one serves God, by obedience, piety, and good works. The ritual of public worship itself is called a service. A devout person's service denotes her service to God (so perhaps, by implication, an animal in service to people analogously evokes a person's service to God, suggesting that we are to service animals as God is to us).

A soldier is 'in the service', as is a public employee – we speak of the diplomatic service, the civil service, Her Majesty's secret service – so by this association, the service animal may be regarded as a participant and supporter of some larger civic mission. Other civic services are provided not just by people but also by technology: telephone service, electric service, broadcasting service, internet service.

We fill cars with gas at service stations. There is a supra-human (posthuman) sense in which anything that adds to the benefit, the infrastructure, of our society comes under the heading of service. The designation of 'service animal' fits into this space, this custom, this ideology, of expecting support for our systems and pleasures and needs. We are used to being serviced.

Going back further into the word's history, 'service' describes feudal allegiance, fealty, homage. We see a trace of this in the deference of the polite assistant or clerk who announces that she's 'happy to be of service.' The *OED* sends one off in myriad directions, stirring up a bundle of provocative associations, explicit and subliminal, lurking in the language. I want to unpack the word to reinforce the point of the pun, the echolalia, in my title: 'Service animals; serve us animals; serve us, animals'.

The first iteration of 'service animals' is meant to be merely descriptive of this topic, this category, this class of animals, though at the same time, the category is not as simple and straightforward as it seems. We can detect and deconstruct a wealth of subtextually derogatory characterisations lurking here, and despite the seeming terminological precision, there's some fuzzy imprecision – therapy animals, harness animals, *et al.*: where do

we draw the line? The second iteration conveys the demand of the imperial consumer (in which the empire is the dominion of humanity, and the subalterns are, as described in Genesis, the other animals who exist for people to use as we see fit). *Serve us animals*. We want animals . . . on platters, in cages, on leashes, wherever. And finally, the third iteration is meant as a direct address, a command, a fiat, from the oppressor to the oppressed: serve us, animals. Jump. Entertain. Guide. Protect. Carry. Die. Interestingly, people do not often actually verbalise this command to other animals: we don't have to, because it goes without saying that we expect animals' service, and in any case, they don't understand us: most of them don't speak English. We don't tell seals to serve us their pelts, or pigs to serve us their ribs, or elephants to serve us their tusks. We just take – perhaps the command would be superfluous, or perhaps the command is inherent in the taking. But we do, actually, tell dogs to serve us – Fetch! Heel! Come! Good dog! It is because dogs are so readily trainable to 'serve us' in these ways that they have become the prototypical service animal, which is the guide dog.

The Animal as Guide

Today guide dogs are often called 'seeing eye dogs', a phrase originating in a specific business, The Seeing Eye, the oldest extant dog training school. Located now in Morristown, NJ, it was founded in 1929 by Dorothy Harrison Eustis who had been a dog trainer in Switzerland, training police dogs, when she learned about a German school that was training dogs to help German soldiers blinded by mustard gas in the Great War. She wrote an article about it in the *Saturday Evening Post*, and was besieged by blind American soldiers who wanted her to create a similar facility for them (The Seeing Eye, Inc., n.d.).

Today, people who come to The Seeing Eye are assigned a dog and a trainer. Over a month-long course, they learn how to navigate the world around them with their dogs. The most common breeds are German Shepherds, Labrador Retrievers and Golden Retrievers, though other breeds include Poodles, Collies, Dobermans, Rottweilers, Boxers, and Airedale Terriers.

In the last few decades, the service animal rubric has expanded to include many other animals besides dogs for many other disabilities besides visual impairment. Miniature horses have been impounded into duty to perform services similar to guide dogs. Some people find them more trainable, more mild-mannered, and less threatening than large dogs – and they can live and serve for as long as 30 years, significantly longer than a guide dog. Monkeys are used by people who are quadriplegic or agoraphobic; goats by people with muscular dystrophy; and people with anxiety disorders

have conscripted cats, ferrets, pigs, iguanas, and ducks as service animals. There are parrots for people with psychosis. It may seem counterintuitive to put a parrot on the shoulder of a psychotic person, but one such person profiled in the *New York Times* credited his parrot with helping him to keep from snapping, or exploding. Sadie the parrot accompanied him in a backpack-cage, and when she sensed him getting agitated, she would 'talk him down,' saying, 'It's ok, Jim. Calm down, Jim. You're all right, Jim. I'm here, Jim' (Skloot 2008 n.p.).

When animals help us by doing things we cannot do for ourselves, this probably makes people appreciate more keenly the value of other animals, the importance of animals, and maybe even, in a larger sense, the ethical desirability of a more egalitarian, even-handed, respectful relationship with other animals. It seems likely that a person using a guide dog or a service parrot develops a profound appreciation for how smart, loyal, and supportive another animal can be. Certainly, the people who use these service animals are prone to this enlightenment, and possibly even those who simply see people using service animals develop a heightened respect for the animals' powers and their value.

But what is in it for the animals? Maybe the dogs and parrots come to appreciate the intense inter-species bond that they are involved in, and value the feelings of their human companion's dependence, and appreciation. Or perhaps parrots don't like zipping around town in a psychotic person's backpack. Included in the recent trend of more variegated service animals, we see comfort animals for old and disabled people; prison animals (a variant of comfort animals) who help mitigate the violent atmosphere of incarceration.

Military animals include bomb-sniffing dogs and patrol dogs. In the past, armies have used horses and mules in a variety of ways, as well as carrier pigeons. Hannibal used elephants to cross the Alps. It is not a stretch to regard such animals as service animals. News stories describe the bonds that form between soldiers and military dogs in Afghanistan and Iraq, recounting the intensely loving devotion that soldiers express, and the intense mourning on the soldiers' part if these animals die (and also on the animals' part if the soldiers die), and the services these dogs may render for soldiers with PTSD. This seems comparable to the relationship between blind people and guide dogs.

Other service animals include helper monkeys (capuchin monkeys, who often help paralysed people and others with mobility impairments: scratching an itch, picking up dropped objects, turning on a DVD player, turning the pages of a book) and dolphins (who are supposedly therapeutic for depressed and autistic children who swim

with them to learn compassion, though Lori Marino and Scott Lilienfeld have done much work to debunk the myth of the supposed benefit to autistic children from swimming with dolphins, and also to expose the trauma that the dolphins themselves experience in this enterprise (2007). Cats are sometimes considered service animals: they can supposedly be trained (though this may seem unlikely) to alert people to danger by pawing at them, to notice in advance the onset of a seizure, and even to use the phone for help if a person is unable to. More credibly, cats are excellent comfort animals: often used in animal assisted therapy to improve a person's physical, social, emotional and cognitive condition. Monkeys, parrots, lizards, and other animals are also used in this capacity.

As guide dogs are joined by parrots and horses and ducks in the service animal cohort, I wonder what this profuse proliferation means. Are we somehow reverting to the ark-story, where people gather up tokens of every animal in existence and remove them from their natural habitats – enclosing them, capturing them, 'saving' them, in a human structure? And then are these animals indebted to us because we have saved them from nature, bringing them into the promised land of human culture?

There is a sense of dominionism, manifest destiny, in our recent additions to the canon of service animals. We are expanding our service corps, expanding the range and realm of 'services' they can provide us. As when Europeans began to expand the range of spices, gems, silks, furs that 'serviced' their fashion and culinary cultures, to support the expansion of imperialist networks and markets, animals, too, figure as an unexploited resource: here are more services we can harvest from them, augmenting our own potential 'wealth'.

This profusion perhaps pathologises our socio-ecological isolation as a species: the loneliness, the inadequacy, of the human, the merely human. It is undesirable to be locked inside a bubble, a climate-controlled, pesticide-treated, hermetically-sealed capsule designed to efface the outside world. We do need animals. We need comfort; we need to rub up against cats, and worms, and sheep. But balanced against this is the exploitative paradigm by which other animals' existence is appraised in terms of how they may assist us.

Service animals are fetishised: they are so valuable, so 'smart', because they help us – because we can use them to remediate clearly-defined human deficiencies. We appreciate them. Does this make us appreciate other animals (those without training certificates) less? Are service animals the exceptions that prove the rule, that most animals do not seem to help us all that much? 'The dogs go on with their doggy lives,' as W. H. Auden (1989) wrote in *Des 'Musée de Beaux Arts'*. Note also

that animals do help us in all kinds of ways that may not register in our consciousness: pollinating flowers, fertilising crops, sustaining the ecosystem . . . but in any case, who said it was their job to help us? Where did they sign up for that?

Representations of Guide Dogs

Images of guide dogs date back as far as frescoes from Herculaneum 2000 years ago according to Michael Tucker (1984). Looking closely at a few visual images, out of the many dozens I have found², will elucidate some traditions of representing service animals and the people they serve.

The depiction of a person accompanied by a guide dog usually invokes the tropes of pathos, vulnerability, abjection. The blind men, though obviously disempowered, often show a strain of quiet admirable endurance: mixed with the pathos, perhaps even somewhat mitigating the pathos. This seemingly paradoxical representation of wretchedness and dignity in a single figure might be explained by the fact that we, the viewers – the *sighted* viewers, obviously, looking at a *sightless* figure – are seeing the abject and vulnerable character that the artist makes visible to us, and at the same time, the subject who cannot see himself: who is, mercifully, 'blind' to his own abjection, and thus, perhaps, less upset than we sighted viewers by his miserable condition. In his own blindness, he may transcend the physical vulnerabilities

and disabilities that are so striking to those who see him.

There is an atmosphere of alienation, isolation from society; sometimes a kind of otherworldliness as the blind men stand in a tenuous dog-dependent limbo. Blind people, in artistic representations, are frequently portrayed as beggars. A blind beggar (often identified by the alms-cup he carries) is a common Christian allegory: we all are beggars here on earth, living on the charity of God and our fellow men; we are blind and only Faith can guide us.

Many of these dogs resemble the men they accompany, which makes sense simply because it is the same artist depicting both characters and the artists' style and medium, accentuates this affinity. Also, it's a truism that people tend to look like their dogs (or, perhaps, dogs look like their people), but still, this resemblance accentuates a stylistic/aesthetic sense of evenness, reciprocity, and connection, between the two creatures. In Rembrandt's *The Blind Fiddler* (figure 1), consider the shaggy man and the shaggy dog: the two share a general scruffiness, and a similar style of facial hair. The blind man's posture, his face, his beard, are all reiterated in the image of the dog.

In Jacques Callot's *L'aveugle et son chien* (figure 2) note again the very similar posture, and the general demeanour of both figures: the man's hair and the dog's fur are texturally identical. And in *Blind beggar with a Dog* (figure 3, artist unknown), once more we see a clear parallel in terms of the musculature of man and dog, and



Figure 1. Rembrandt, *The Blind Fiddler*, 1631



Figure 2. Jacques Callot, *L'aveugle et son chien*, 1622

their temperament – they seem, like these other pairs, very well-suited for each other: cut from the same cloth. Such similarities suggest an exception – an exception that proves the rule, I would suggest – about the prevalence of dominionism when we consider a tableau of human beings and other animals. In many of these guide dog images, the keen sense of connectedness and reciprocity indicates that these most abject people (blind, indigent, disempowered, often shabby or dirty) have forfeited some measure of dominion over the other animals that most people possess as our birthright.

A 1797 French print (published by Chez Joubert, figure 4) depicts a blind man who seems less alienated than some of the other blind men: this character, again with begging cup, is reasonably well-dressed and in sociable contact with others, though the caption informs that he remains somewhat isolated in his blindness, unable to enjoy the full bounty of social interaction: he has accidentally stepped on a woman's dress and torn it, but 'ah, if he could only see' the nude beauty he has exposed.

Are the dogs in these images mere compositional accessories, like the blind man's stick and alms-cup? Or are they significantly related, linked, to the human subjects? I think the answer is: some of both. Almost always the dogs are compositionally diminutive – smaller – though occasionally, as in Jules Bastien-Lepage's *The Blind Beggar* (figure 5), they are equivalent to the people in size and energy. We are naturally inclined to appraise

images quantitatively: whatever colours, or tropes, or figures, cover the largest percentage of the canvas are those that we notice most pointedly and that we are likely to value most heavily. Bastien-Lepage's equivalence of dog and person is, again, an exception that proves the rule, which is that the guide dog, like any figuration of 'the other', tends to be a diminutive element. This results in a bit of a paradox: as I have noted above, the guide dogs are in some ways 'like' the people they accompany in form and demeanour, but these likenesses are also imbued



Figure 4. *Ah, s'il y voyoit!*, 1797

with a binary inequality: the animals are, we might say, like but lesser.

And the equivalence that Bastien-Lepage suggests is not only visually and compositionally measurable, but also experientially and dynamically significant. Thinking about an equivalence of 'energy' between the two figures in *The*



Figure 3. Blind Beggar with a Dog, Italian, late 15th century



Figure 5. Jules Bastien-Lepage, *The Blind Beggar*, 1868

Blind Beggar, we might at first perceive an absence of energy: both boy and dog are still, resting, exhausted. But this certainly is, indeed, an equivalent energy that they convey: at the moment we see them, *low* energy, but we might expect, after they have recuperated, they will both rebound with a higher level of movement and dynamism. Bastien-Lepage's suggestion in this painting is that the two creatures here live in tandem.

Few women appear in these images. Probably these artists see men as being able to make their way in the world despite their disability, while blind women are presumed to be too overwhelmed by the combination of their disability and the patriarchy – more likely to be stuck inside in a home or institution – so they remain unserved by animals.

Looking at these images, I wonder about how the dog may be implicated in this abjection: how that animal may share, or may transcend, the humiliation of his human blind companion.

In *Dance of Death*, by Swiss engraver Jaques-Anthony Chovin (1744, figure 6), the human subject is on his last legs, about to die: a point clearly visible in his stooped and feeble posture, his ragged clothes, and all the more semiotically emphatic as he meets with death. Wielding scissors to cut him off from life, Death reiterates the Greek fable of Atropos cutting the thread of life, but here with the interesting variant that it is the leash, the connection between the man and the guide dog, that is about to be severed and which signifies the blind man's death. The dog allowed him to find his way through the world. When death cuts that link, the man is figuratively dead. The dog looks up at the person, about to be separated from him, with anxiety, I think: perhaps the dog anticipates his freedom, but there is also a balance between the man and the dog that death is about to cut and that will result in imbalance for both man and dog. They seem suited to



Figure 6. Jaques-Anthony Chovin, *Dance of Death*, 1744

each other, connected to each other, and in the imminent loss of that connection we can see a relationship of mutual interdependence.

All these images aspire to depict a sense of harmony, mutuality, between the human blind figure and the service animal. They convey a compositional and imagistic sense of balance, cooperation, easy and fulfilling coexistence, even energy, between the blind man and the dog. The man and dog's movement, their progress in the world, seem to reinforce each other dynamically. The two figures often seem happy, and willingly connected to each other. These images suggest the foundation for a rather rare human consideration of interspecies equity.

Conclusions

Does the person who depends on a service animal have an admirable relationship to another member of another species, or is he weakened? Is the guide dog smart, useful, valuable, valued? These dogs are, clearly, very intelligent: do we understand that intelligence, do we appreciate it, do we perhaps even take the next step, and extend that insight that *this dog is intelligent* to the larger implication that lots of animals have intelligence that we are not aware of?

Service animals augment our own inadequacies – as do companion animals, military animals, work animals. Guide dogs amply and gloriously fulfil a rubric of value to their human users. But what about annoying animals, scary animals, stupid animals, useless animals? (The question is sarcastic – these are not judgements that are ecologically or ethically proper for people to make, though we make them anyway.)³ They fare poorly in our rankings. They suffer by comparison to the exemplary animals that work so hard to help us, suggesting the negative repercussions of fetishising of service animals. The 'good' animals make the others look lazy, hostile, useless. They set an impossible and ridiculous standard for animals: helping us. What have you done for me lately?! Are service animals the 'Uncle Toms' of the animal kingdom? Unthreatening, servile, seemingly happy with their lot; they do not make trouble; they live to serve.

Human expectations of animals' services – our sense of entitlement to these services – exemplifies what Peter Singer (1975: 8-9) calls 'speciesism', thus violating Jeremy Bentham's moral principle of equal consideration of interests: 'each to count for one, and none for more than one'. Just as racism and sexism violate the principles of equality, Singer writes, so too speciesism 'allows the interests of [our] own species to override the greater interests of members of other species. The pattern is identical in each case.' The discourse of anthrozoology invites the interrogation and deconstruction of even such

an intimate human-animal interaction as service animals: one might even say, '... especially such an intimate human-animal interaction ...'

As numerous artistic representations suggest, there is at least a subliminal tendency to conflate 'intimacy' and 'equality' when looking at the relationship between a person and a service animal. But this supposition sidesteps a vast tradition of speciesist exploitation in which we are prone to conflate an animal's intrinsic value with his or her usefulness to humans. It is tempting, and flattering, for people to imagine that other animals are eager to help us in our times of greatest need, and that they are gratified by our symbiotic or dependent relation with them.

In closing, there is an alternative perspective, an idealistic ecofantasy, suggesting one way we might problematise, unpack, and co-opt the idea of service animals. On the one hand, envision every animal you see as a service animal – and think about the services they're providing. The bright red cardinal bird is wearing a brilliant new outfit to remind you that it's March, and you should move out of your hibernating winter phase and step into your spring regeneration phase, along with the rest of the natural world. Time for you to put on a bright new outfit, too, and get with the game; be in the season. The elephants you see in a nature documentary service you by spreading seeds in their faeces to replenish the savannahs, by revitalising African grasslands. They dig water holes that assist the survival of other species, thus sustaining biodiversity in their habitats, thus preventing the ecosystemic degradations that lead to global warming, thus keeping our coastal cities from being flooded (for at least a few more years): a pretty vital service rendered.

And on the other hand, besides seeing every animal as a service animal, we may also learn to think of ourselves as service animals: turnabout is fair play. What kinds of services do we provide? What kind of services should we provide? Ecologically, it's symbiotic. Ethically, it's altruistic – but it can also be seen as self-interest (which is often an easier sell than altruism): Do unto others as you would have others do unto you. Think about the ecosocial onus of playing our part as good citizens and rendering services where we can, if only for the selfish reason that this would allow the other animals to continue more easily and more prosperously to render their services back to us.

Earlier I invoked a religious service, the civil service, telephone service: connoting service as a metaphysical calling, a civic mission, a foundation for a more desirable and more functional and durable community. Thinking about how much aid and ability a blind man gets from his guide dog, imagine how amazing it would be if people

could render a comparable level of service, a comparable value of service, to some of the other animals who share our world.

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End Notes

1. Anthrozoology refers to the study of interaction between human beings and other animals.
2. See, for example Tintoretto's *The Blind Leading the Blind*, 16th C.; Isaac van Ostade's *A Blind Man and his Dog*, c. 1640; Pietro Faccini's *The Blind Beggar with Sitting Dog*, c. 1590; Marie-Alexandre Alophe's *La fin d'une triste journée*, 1838; Otto Dix's *The Match Seller*, 1920; Elizabeth Frinck's *Blind Beggar and Dog*, 1957; Clive Hicks-Jenkins's *The Blind Boy and his Beast*, 2007.
3. See Nagy K and Johnson P 2013, *Trash Animals: How we live with nature's filthy, feral, invasive, and unwanted species*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

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