

Inherited Changes of Habit or Instinct in Domesticated Animals.

The possibility, or even probability, of inherited variations of instinct in a state of nature will be strengthened by briefly considering a few cases under domestication. We shall thus be enabled to see the part which habit and the selection of so-called spontaneous variations have played in modifying the mental qualities of our domestic animals. It is notorious how much domestic animals vary in their mental qualities. With cats, for instance, one naturally takes to catching rats, and another mice, and these tendencies are known to be inherited. One cat, according to Mr. St. John, always brought home game birds, another hares or rabbits, and another hunted on marshy ground and almost nightly caught woodcocks or snipes. A number of curious and authentic instances could be given of various shades of disposition and taste, and likewise of the oddest tricks, associated with certain frames of mind or periods of time. But let us look to the familiar case of the breeds of dogs: it cannot be doubted that young pointers (I have myself seen striking instances) will sometimes point and even back other dogs the very first time that they are taken out; retrieving is certainly in some degree inherited by retrievers; and a tendency to run round, instead of at, a flock of sheep, by shepherd-dogs. I cannot see that these actions, performed without experience by the young, and in nearly the same manner by each individual, performed with eager delight by each breed, and without the end being known — for the young pointer can no more know that he points to aid his master, than the white butterfly knows why she lays her eggs on the leaf of the cabbage — I cannot see that these actions differ essentially from true instincts. If we were to behold one kind of wolf, when young and without any training, as soon as it scented its prey, stand motionless like a statue, and then slowly crawl forward with a peculiar gait; and another kind of wolf rushing round, instead of at, a herd of deer, and driving them to a distant point, we should assuredly call these actions instinctive. Domestic instincts, as they may be called, are certainly far less fixed than natural instincts; but they have been acted on by far less rigorous selection, and have been transmitted for an incomparably shorter period, under less fixed conditions of life.

How strongly these domestic instincts, habits, and dispositions are inherited, and how curiously they become mingled, is well shown when different breeds of dogs are crossed. Thus it is known that a cross with a bull-dog has affected for many generations the courage and obstinacy of greyhounds; and a cross with a greyhound has given to a whole family of shepherd-dogs a tendency to hunt hares. These domestic instincts, when thus tested by crossing, resemble natural instincts, which in a like manner become curiously blended together, and for a long period exhibit traces of the instincts of either parent: for example, Le Roy describes a dog, whose great-grandfather was a wolf, and this dog showed a trace of its wild parentage only in one way, by not coming in a straight line to his master, when called.

Domestic instincts are sometimes spoken of as actions which have become inherited solely from long-continued and compulsory habit, but this is not true. No one would ever have thought of teaching, or probably could have taught, the tumbler-pigeon to tumble,— an action which, as I have witnessed, is performed by young birds, that have never seen a pigeon tumble. We may believe that some one pigeon showed a slight tendency to this strange habit, and that the long-continued selection of the best individuals in successive generations made tumblers what they now are; and near Glasgow there are house-tumblers, as I hear from Mr. Brent, which cannot fly eighteen inches high without going head over heels. It may be doubted whether any one would have thought of training a dog to point, had not

some one dog naturally shown a tendency in this line; and this is known occasionally to happen, as I once saw, in a pure terrier: the act of pointing is probably, as many have thought, only the exaggerated pause of an animal preparing to spring on its prey. When the first tendency to point was once displayed, methodical selection and the inherited effects of compulsory training in each successive generation would soon complete the work; and unconscious selection is still in progress, as each man tries to procure, without intending to improve the breed, dogs which stand and hunt best. On the other hand, habit alone in some cases has sufficed; hardly any animal is more difficult to tame than the young of the wild rabbit; scarcely any animal is tamer than the young of the tame rabbit; but I can hardly suppose that domestic rabbits have often been selected for tameness alone; so that we must attribute at least the greater part of the inherited change from extreme wildness to extreme tameness, to habit and long-continued close confinement.

Natural instincts are lost under domestication: a remarkable instance of this is seen in those breeds of fowls which very rarely or never become "broody," that is, never wish to sit on their eggs. Familiarity alone prevents our seeing how largely and how permanently the minds of our domestic animals have been modified. It is scarcely possible to doubt that the love of man has become instinctive in the dog. All wolves, foxes, jackals and species of the cat genus, when kept tame, are most eager to attack poultry, sheep and pigs; and this tendency has been found incurable in dogs which have been brought home as puppies from countries such as Tierra del Fuego and Australia, where the savages do not keep these domestic animals. How rarely, on the other hand, do our civilised dogs, even when quite young, require to be taught not to attack poultry, sheep, and pigs! No doubt they occasionally do make an attack, and are then beaten; and if not cured, they are destroyed; so that habit and some degree of selection have probably concurred in civilising by inheritance our dogs. On the other hand, young chickens have lost wholly by habit, that fear of the dog and cat which no doubt was originally instinctive in them, for I am informed by Captain Hutton that the young chickens of the parent stock, the *Gallus bankiva*, when reared in India under a hen, are at first excessively wild. So it is with young pheasants reared in England under a hen. It is not that chickens have lost all fear, but fear only of dogs and cats, for if the hen gives the danger chuckle they will run (more especially young turkeys) from under her and conceal themselves in the surrounding grass or thickets; and this is evidently done for the instinctive purpose of allowing, as we see in wild ground-birds, their mother to fly away. But this instinct retained by our chickens has become useless under domestication, for the mother-hen has almost lost by disuse the power of flight.

Hence, we may conclude, that under domestication instincts have been acquired, and natural instincts have been lost, partly by habit and partly by man selecting and accumulating, during successive generations, peculiar mental habits and actions, which at first appeared from what we must in our ignorance call an accident. In some cases compulsory habit alone has sufficed to produce inherited mental changes; in other cases compulsory habit has done nothing, and all has been the result of selection, pursued both methodically and unconsciously; but in most cases habit and selection have probably concurred.

Revision #1

Created 13 August 2019 13:01:10 by Textpedia

Updated 13 August 2019 13:01:27 by Textpedia