



ASK THE TRAINER

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Is That a Russian Physiologist on Your Shoulder, or Are You Just Happy to See Me?

His name is Pavlov. Ivan Pavlov. And he's watching you...

Russian physiologist Ivan Pavlov first documented Classical Conditioning – learning through association – at the turn of the last century. While researching processes of digestion, Pavlov found that the presence of the researchers in their white lab coats created an increase in the study dogs' saliva production.

This effect redirected Pavlov's intended research, when he realized that he had stumbled upon something previously undocumented. Pavlov discovered that a Conditioned Response, an uncontrollable bodily reflex such as salivation, could come to be elicited by a neutral stimulus (something that has no inherent meaning), such as the ringing of a bell. Conditioned Responses also include emotions – joy, fear, irritation, relaxation, etc. The crux of Classical Conditioning is that these responses are not controllable through conscious intent; rather, they are reflexive.

Typically, when we train our dogs we focus on consequence-based learning, also known as Operant Conditioning. When a dog sits, his owner gives him a cookie. This dog learns that sitting causes cookies. When a dog lunges at another dog, perhaps his owner yanks on the correction collar. This dog learns that lunging causes pain.

Learning by association, as opposed to consequence, is called Classical Conditioning. Rather than being contingent on the dog's actions, the cookie (or other stimulus) is instead contingent on something in the environment. That lunging dog in the example above might instead learn that the appearance of that scary dog down the street means that a really tasty treat is about to appear. She didn't do anything to "earn" the cookie, it was fed to her because there was another dog in the environment. She's learning to associate the presence of scary dogs with the appearance of yummy cookies.

Operant and Classical Conditioning do not exist in vacuums. Whenever you apply a consequence to a dog's behaviour ("sit = treat" or "lunge = pain," as above) Classical Conditioning is always at play.

Let's consider the example of teaching a dog to sit through two different methods:

If trained without force, when you say "Sit" your dog will comply because she is excited at the prospect of possibly getting a treat. She is happy when she hears you say the word "Sit" because of the associations with this word and this behaviour.

Some trainers will say "Sit," and if the dog does not sit they will give a sharp jerk on the collar around her neck. When this trainer says "Sit" the word does not hold the potential of good things happening, as it does in the previous example. Instead, the word "Sit" is a threat that something unpleasant is about to happen, and the dog has to figure out how to avoid it.

Let's now consider the example of the dog who lunges at other dogs. The jerk on the leash is applied as a consequence, and the result might be a suppression of this behaviour. The dog might stop lunging at other dogs. However, consider what the dog is learning through association. She gets hurt and frightened every time she

sees another dog. What do you suppose her emotional response is going to be when she sees a dog? Chances are she will become even more upset about other dogs, only now she is afraid to lunge at them.

Despite thinking that they are simply applying a consequence to a behaviour, this person has unwittingly compounded the problem. The dog's lunging was originally driven by an upset emotional state, and the consequence that stopped the lunging, at least for the time being, has made the dog more upset or fearful. This is why punishment so often results in a fast-acting, however temporary, suppression of a behaviour that may recur in a more potent and resilient form.

Classical Conditioning affects not only behaviours, like salivation as Pavlov studied, but more importantly it affects emotional states. How you choose to train your dog affects not only how your dog behaves – what she does or does not do – but how she feels. Understanding this is the recognition that dogs are sentient beings. To quote animal trainer Bob Bailey, "Pavlov is always sitting on your shoulder."

Resources

"Pavlov is Always Sitting on Your Shoulder" by Bob Bailey:
<http://www.coherentdog.org/arc2006/rebpavlov.htm>

"Treats for Growls?! Changing an Aggressive Dog's Mind" by Jess Rollins:
<http://tinyurl.com/2wk5d6k>

"The Poisoned Cue: Positive and Negative Discriminative Stimuli" by Karen Pryor: <http://www.clickertraining.com/node/164>

Training Aggression? Counter-Conditioning a Dog to Blowing in Face. Video by Dr. Sophia Yin:
http://drsophiayin.com/resources/video_full/counter-conditioning_a_dog_to_blowing_in_face