

The Theology of Dog Training in Vicki Hearne's *Adam's Task*

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Abstract: “The Theology of Dog Training” demonstrates the rich and surprising ways in which religion plays a primary role in how people make sense of their relationships with their companion animals. In the first sustained analysis of *Adam's Task* in religious studies, I argue that feminist writer and dog trainer Vicki Hearne describes a form of relational redemption that allows for the restoration of a prelapsarian language between humans and animals; a recovery of a time before humans sinned against God and subsequently lost their authority over animals. Training, which begins with the act of naming a dog and bringing them into the moral life, is Hearne's attempt to restore what was lost in the Fall for both humans and animals. In making this argument, I join a growing community of scholars who are committed to bringing animal studies to the academic study of religion. In addition to analyzing religion as it occurs in non-institutional spaces, I examine phenomena that would not necessarily be considered religious, but, as I show, make ethical and religious claims on human–canine relationships. By investigating institutions, texts, and practices in contemporary America that traditionally have not been identified as religious, my article shows how religious beliefs and forms can help us build an ethics of multispecies relations.

Keywords: animal ethics; animal studies; dog training; redemption; gender and animals; Donna Haraway; Vicki Hearne; the Book of Genesis; Adam and Eve; sin

1. Introduction

In *Adam's Task: Calling Animals by Name* (1986), feminist writer and dog trainer Vicki Hearne uses religious language to develop a theology of dog training, showing the potential for these seemingly mundane practices to become imbued with religious significance. Through her writings, Hearne weaves together theological arguments with personal narratives about training “real” dogs in specific social, political, and geographic contexts, embodying what Donna Haraway calls “situated knowledges.”¹ As opposed to basic obedience skills acquired by the average dog owner, Hearne is instead interested in the more advanced forms of training integral to competitive canine sports, such as agility and tracking—all of which require an extensive knowledge of canine behavior as well as a shared commitment on the part of both the human and the dog. In Hearne's work, theories of dog training and redemption are governed by a feminist-oriented epistemology that interprets human and canine interactions through particularity and individuality. Although

¹ Donna Haraway uses the phrase “situated knowledge” to argue that “feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see. These are lessons that I learned in part walking with my dogs and wondering how the world looks without a fovea and very few retinal cells for color vision but with a huge neural processing and sensory area for smells” (p. 583). By privileging personal experiences and location, Haraway argues for “situated and embodied knowledges and [she makes] an argument against various forms of unlocatable, and so irresponsible, knowledge claims” (ibid.). (Haraway 1988).

Hearne has a complicated relationship with feminism, she argues that “an animal trainer, however, ends up eventually involved with gender if not gender theory.”² In Hearne’s logic, to train and write about animals necessitates an engagement with gender. As Hearne notes, women are over-represented in the world of animal sports and training. At the same time, “men, or at least some bits of the mind traditionally associated with men, don’t seem to notice very much about animals, and jump to conclusions...and failing in their hurry to notice the sort of detail that never escape’s a dog’s attention.”³ It is this radical form of attentiveness to animals—what Haraway calls “situated knowledge”—that aligns Hearne’s work with other feminist scholars and activists who also write about animals. Alongside ecofeminists, including Carol J. Adams, Josephine Donovan, Lori Gruen, and Val Plumwood, Hearne challenges what feminist theorist and literary scholar Susan Fraiman refers to as “deeply embedded humanist assumptions concerning gender and animality.”⁴ Such assumptions include a series of binaries that link women and animals together through shared negative stereotypes, while defining masculinity against these associations. These binaries include the association of women and animals with the body over the mind, feeling over reason, and passivity over agency.⁵ As Susan Fraiman also points out, these scholars all share something else in common: “the admission that theorizing seriously about animals might have something to do with *liking* them.”⁶ The language of liking and even loving dogs features prominently in Hearne’s writing.

One of the central claims of this article is that love in human and canine relationships cannot be separated from questions about power, and even violence. Because Hearne is sensitive to the ways that power dynamics structure her dog training techniques and her relationships with her own dogs, she is just as interested in moments when dog training fails to result in redemption for the human and the dog involved. These unsuccessful encounters serve as a reminder of both the limits of what one can know about another creature and the potentially generative lessons that arise from moments when interspecies communication falters. While Hearne does not use the rhetoric of redemption explicitly, I argue that a theology of relational redemption structures much of her writing about dog training, which is suffused with religious imagery. In *Adam’s Task*, Hearne describes a form of relational redemption that allows for the restoration of a prelapsarian language between humans and animals, a recovery of a time before humans sinned against God and subsequently lost their authority over animals. Training, which begins with the act of naming a dog and bringing them into the moral life, is Hearne’s attempt to restore what was lost in the Fall for both humans and animals.

Although dog training allows for the creation of a new language between a human and a dog, making it possible for dogs to enter into what Hearne calls “the moral life,” Hearne’s theology of training is inseparable from her use of aversive training methods. Hearne tries to re-characterize what dog training is by founding it in a theology of a redemption that is rooted in an individual human–canine relationship. Training is not simply a pragmatic practice about teaching dogs to obey human domestic norms, but a long, non-linear process. The goal is not basic obedience, but the constitution of a shared religious life and relationship that surpass species boundaries.

² (Hearne 1991a, p. 203). Hearne describes her relationship to feminism as follows: “Gender theory has always been a nerve-racking business for me, because whether it was the old gender theory, which is now called sexism, or the new gender theory, which is now called feminism, I keep turning out not to be a woman no matter who is doing the theorizing. I don’t mean that I turn out to be a man, exactly, just not a proper sort of woman” (*Bandit*, p. 202). While many feminists would object to this characterization, it is in line with Hearne’s suspicion of labels in general.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

⁴ (Fraiman 2012).

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 99–100.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 115. Italics in the original.

However, despite her best intentions, Hearne's theology of dog training reproduces the very same kind of anthropocentrism she seeks to resist.⁷

2. After the Fall—Vicki Hearne's Conventual Theology of Training

Vicki Hearne was one of the earliest voices calling for scholars to take dogs seriously as subjects of philosophical and theological inquiry. In *Adam's Task*, which has become a foundational text in animal studies, but one that has not yet received significant attention in the academic study of religion,⁸ Hearne focuses on dog training as the bridge between theoretical and practical knowledge.⁹ Hearne's unique claim that there is an intrinsic relationship between philosophy and dog training motivated her to write a book that strives to bridge these two seemingly disparate fields. Through her own experiences, Hearne observes that the philosophers who theorize animal life and the animal trainers who work with "real" animals have not found meaningful ways to talk to one another.¹⁰ In her experience of academia, it was frowned upon to use any sort of anthropomorphic language that attributes a "concept of self" to animals.¹¹ In contrast, her work as a trainer of dogs and horses was filled with people who used "highly anthropomorphic, morally loaded language."¹² As she explains, trainers speak of animals in such a way that recognizes that "animals are capable not only of activities requiring 'IQ'—a rather arid conception—but also of a complex and delicate (though not infallible) moral understanding that is so inextricably a function of their relationships with human beings that it may well be said to constitute those relationships."¹³ From the outset, Hearne insists that her audience take dogs seriously as intelligent, judging, and thinking creatures who are formed with and by relationships with human beings. Although they are decidedly not human, Hearne maintains that dogs possess vibrant inner lives that warrant attention, care, and love. Thus, the book is fueled by Hearne's "passion to find a way to write about the language of people who actually work interestingly with animals" that will also resonate with her colleagues in academia.¹⁴

While Vicki Hearne is indisputably foundational in animal studies, the particular form of training methods that she advocated make her a controversial figure.¹⁵ At the time that Hearne was writing *Adam's Task*, dog training had started to move toward a method that can be broadly characterized as "positive reinforcement," an approach that is widely endorsed by animal

⁷ I want to be clear at the outset that I am not arguing for a causal link between anthropocentrism or violence against humans and prelapsarian commitments as such. Instead, I want to think through the theological and ethical stakes of Hearne's particular reading of the story of Eden for human/animal relationships. For a very different take on the role of language in shaping Christian conceptions of animality, see (Hobgood-Oster 2014). For another important study of the animal capacity for religion that argues that "we must allow for the possibility that what gets called religion may not be predicated on the uniquely human property of language," see (Schaefer 2015).

⁸ This is a sampling of scholars in animal studies whose work engages with Hearne's thinking: (Dayan 2016; Kuzniar 2006; Rudy 2011; Weil 2012; Wolfe 2003).

⁹ Hearne also was a horse trainer and writes about horse training in *Adam's Task* as well. To read her writings on horse training, see (Hearne 1986, Chp. 4–6, pp. 77–165). In this article, I focus on her writings about dogs.

¹⁰ (Hearne 1986, p. 4).

¹¹ Ibid., p. 7.

¹² Ibid., pp. 6, 8.

¹³ Ibid., p. 8.

¹⁴ (Hearne 1986, p. 8).

¹⁵ Vicki Hearne was a student of William Koehler, the author of *The Koehler Method of Dog Training* (1966). Koehler's book has become so controversial that it opens first with a note from the publisher that begins, "Brace yourself. If Bill Koehler occasionally jolts your sensibilities, he will cheerfully tell you that they needed jolting anyway, and go right on helping you make your dog a happy, well-adjusted, well trained, self-respecting, obedient yet spirited companion" ((Koehler 1962), Note from the Publisher). After the note from the publisher it includes a lengthy affidavit from a well-known Hollywood dog trainer that attests to Koehler's skills.

behaviorists and trainers today.¹⁶ This behaviorist philosophy is rooted in operant conditioning, which is “the science of reward and punishment and all the fascinating detail of exactly how dogs behave to get more of the former and less of the latter.”¹⁷ In contrast, Hearne believes that to use positive reinforcement methods like food is to “bribe” a dog and therefore to create a transactional relationship between the human and the dog.¹⁸ Although she does not put it exactly in these terms, Hearne insists that dogs respond best to negative reinforcement (what she calls “corrections”), which includes aversive methods such as choke collars, leash yanking, ear twisting, and electric shock.¹⁹ Until her death in 2001, Hearne remained an outspoken advocate of these types of negative reinforcement, maintaining that the dog is not being coerced, that the dog can “always decide to bite me and split. I have known this to happen. [The dog] is free, or rather she is not free, in the way that babies aren’t free.”²⁰ While dogs do not have total freedom—something that Hearne believes would be undesirable and untenable in human society—she still wants to insist that her philosophy of training allows dogs to make their own choices and desires known. In her account, dogs can express their feelings and possess some agency by biting the trainer or running away. Many trainers today would disagree, suggesting that pushing a dog to the point of a fight-or-flight response does not constitute a form of freedom, but a lack of attention to a dog’s warning signs of discomfort. Dogs very rarely bite without warning, and it is a highly-controversial decision to push them to this point.²¹

In *With Dogs at the Edge of Life*, theorist of law and literature Colin Dayan, who is one of the few prominent academic defenders of Hearne’s training methods, describes a time Hearne gave a lecture at the campus where she was teaching.²² Her description of the ill-fated visit captures both Hearne’s maverick spirit and the reason why she remains controversial:

I remember Vicki’s visit to the University of Arizona in 1994, where her words and presence struck terror in the hearts of many dog-loving professors in the audience. She urged that the character and responsibility earned through absolute obedience to the craft of training give dogs both a language and a presence squarely in the world. My colleagues complained: ‘Her use of force is fascist.’ One woman boasted, ‘I use a clicker to show my dog who is boss.’ That evening at a cocktail party, Vicki, who dared to take out a cigarette, was told to go outside. Ignored by everyone, there she stood for the next few hours, alone, in the desert on a terrace under the stars. She had been banished, I thought. Vicki had stamped in hunger for the word, sweated to the cadence of reflection, and beaten out

¹⁶ American dog trainer Jean Donaldson defines positive reinforcement as “the initiation of something, which increases the frequency of the behavior it immediately follows” (Donaldson 2008, p. 61). For Donna Haraway’s discussion of positive training methods, see (Haraway 2008, pp. 210–14).

¹⁷ (Donaldson 1996, p. 71). Operant conditioning is different from classical conditioning, in which dogs can learn to predict important events, but they can’t do anything to increase or decrease the likelihood of these events. All they can do is prepare themselves for them (ibid.).

¹⁸ At one point in *Adam Task*, Hearne states that “anyone who would offer a bribe to a Bull Terrier sinks in the dog’s estimation, [and] really plummets to contempt and suspicion” (209). In contrast to this argument, Donaldson says the following about a client’s statement that “[she] want[s] her [dog] to love me for me, not because of the food” (Donaldson, p. 66): “For many, many people, it is not good enough (potentially corrupting in fact) for the dog to do what we’d like, to be obedient, polite, and friendly because of a well-executed reward history. He must do and feel what we’d like for the right reasons. Incisiveness regarding motive is such a pervasive feature of the human brand that we have a hard—no, wait, impossible—time imagining a mind without it” (Ibid.).

¹⁹ Karen Pryor defines negative reinforcers as “things a person or animal will work to avoid” (Pryor 1984, p. 4). For more on aversives, see (Donaldson 1996, p. 63). For critics of Koehler and Hearne, the distinction between a correction and a punishment is just semantics—both use physical punishment to train the dog.

²⁰ (Hearne 1986, p. 57).

²¹ The polarizing trainer Cesar Millan has come to represent the embodiment of these types of training techniques. For an informed perspective on why these forms of training are dangerous, see veterinary behaviorist Sophia Yin’s article (Yin 2009), “The Dominance Controversy.”

²² (Dayan 2016, p. 20).

thought in brutal prose. The promise of language and the rapture of thought held always tight in the leap, the retrieval, the tracking of dog (20).²³

As Dayan details, her colleagues perceived an authoritarian and even fascist quality to Hearne's dog training methods. By the 1990s and particularly in a liberal university setting, the use of physical force in dog training was taboo, and Hearne refused to change her methods.²⁴

While Hearne's efforts to explore the theological dimensions of training are laudable, her critics also had good reason to be concerned about her methods, which often used fear, physical force, or pain. Such techniques fail to convince fellow dog trainer, Suzanne Clothier, who is known for what she calls "relationship-centered dog training," which relies on the kinds of positive training methods Hearne dismissed.²⁵ While Clothier and Hearne's other critics are deeply troubled by her training methods—a sentiment that I share—I argue that closer attention to the role of religion in *Adam's Task* makes it clear that interspecies violence and inequality are part and parcel of Hearne's theology of relational redemption.²⁶ As signaled by the title *Adam's Task*, the *Book of Genesis* is crucial for understanding Hearne's theology of animal training and the types of training practices she advocates.²⁷ In her exegesis of the creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2, Hearne states that "Adam gave names to the creatures, and they all responded to their names without objection, since in this dominion to command and to recognize were one action. There was no gap between the ability to command and the full acknowledgement of the personhood of the being so commanded."²⁸ Hearne thus reads this prelapsarian moment as an instance of what animal training should aspire to: a relational process of mutual recognition between the human and the animal, or, as Hearne puts it, between "persons." And yet, as all familiar with the Adam and Eve story are well aware, this idyllic arrangement does not last. In her reading of Genesis 3, Hearne argues that as a result of Adam and Eve's primordial act of disobedience, most animals "turned pretty irrevocably from human command...refus[ing] to come when called, to recognize our naming."²⁹ In Hearne's terms, the Fall broke down the mutual recognition between humans and animals—and this communication breakdown is linguistic in nature. However, Hearne emphasizes that not all animals turned away from humans, "thus giving us a kind of second chance to repair our damaged authority, to do something about our incoherence. Training, in this story, can, through its taut catharses, cleanse our authority, for varying stretches of time, of Nietzschean *ressentiment*. Without

²³ The clicker reference refers to a training method founded by behavioral biologist Karen Pryor based on her work with marine mammals and dogs. (Cf., Pryor 1984).

²⁴ For an account of Hearne's philosophy of training written five years after *Adam's Task* was published, see *Bandit: Dossier of a Dangerous Dog*. Chapter Four is particularly helpful in describing Hearne's adherence to training methods that could be called "negative reinforcement" and her disdain for behaviorism. As we will see later in the article, Hearne is most interested in training animals when the activity has deep meaning for them. While Hearne does use physical force with Bandit, she explains that "it was his [Bandit's] capacity to recognize the Stay command as part of our work, part of what we were in together," creating the possibility of a shared language (90). One can actually witness this encounter in an Oscar-nominated American short documentary film called *A Little Vicious* (*A Little Vicious* 1991). A short clip from the film that captures just this scene is available on YouTube.

²⁵ (Clothier 2002). Relationship-centered dog training prioritizes the health of the relationship between an individual human and dog through empathy, compassion, and commitment. Behaviors such as hitting, head-dunking, or yelling at a dog are strictly forbidden.

²⁶ (Hearne 1986, p. 43). As mentioned in the introduction to this article, the term "relational redemption" is my own.

²⁷ Ibid., *Adam's Task*, p. 43.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 47–48. Thanks to my colleagues in the Martin Marty seminar at the University of Chicago for pointing out that Hearne conflates Genesis 1 and 2, and also places an emphasis on human-animal relationality that is not present in the original text. In this way, Hearne recasts the creation story to fit her own theology of training.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 48.

that catharsis, dogs very properly withhold full obedience.”³⁰ Read against the background of the story of the Fall, training animals is not a practice solely rooted in the material world, but offers an opportunity to restore humankind’s damaged authority over animals.

This awareness of the conditional quality of human–canine relationships is precisely why Hearne continually returns to the creation story in Genesis, in which Adam names the animals. For Hearne, the act of naming is essential to a theology of dog training because it makes the human–canine relationship possible in the first place. Hearne thus uses the creation story in Genesis to explain the importance of naming for her theology of training:

I believe that the disciplines come to us in the form they do because deep in human beings is the impulse to perform Adam’s task, to name animals and people as well, and to name them in such a way that the grammar is flexible enough to do at least two things. One is to make names that give the soul room for expansion. My talk of the change from utterances such as ‘Belle, Sit!’ to ‘Belle, Go find!’ is an example of names projecting the creature named into more glorious contexts... But I think our impulse is also conservative, an impulse to return to Adam’s divine condition. I can’t imagine how we would do that, or what it would be like, but linguistic anthropology has found out some things about illiterate peoples that suggest at least names that really call, language that is genuinely invocative and uncontaminated by writing and thus by the concept of names as labels rather than genuine invocations (170).

In this passage, Hearne wants both to celebrate the act of naming an animal and to caution against the potential for abusing the power that comes with it. While the act of naming a dog necessarily involves an unequal power dynamic between the person doing the naming and the creature being named, naming becomes a problem for Hearne only when it is done in the service of labeling a dog, thereby treating it as a passive object or abstract category (“the dog”).³¹ In contrast to an understanding of naming as a form of labeling, Hearne’s primary reason for highlighting naming is because it gives “the soul room for expansion” by opening up the possibility of an animal being recognized as an individual subject who enters into a relationship with a human through training.³² When a dog is given a name, the possibilities for an interspecies language between the human and animal deepen, moving from simple commands like “Belle, sit” to opportunities for

³⁰ Ibid. Hearne explains that “the tiger, the wolf and the field mouse as well as, of course, the grasshopper refuse to come when called, to recognize our naming. One may say that before the Fall, all animals were domestic, that nature was domestic. After the Fall, wildness was possible, and most creatures chose it, but a few did not. The dog, the horse, the burro, the elephant, the ox and a few others agreed to go along with humanity anyway...” (48). In Hearne’s retelling of the creation story, domesticated animals like the dog and the horse chose to have the capacity to respond to human commands—but as I will describe in greater detail, this capacity to respond, to restore what was lost in the Fall, can only happen through training.

³¹ Cf., Derrida’s “animot” in *The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)*. In this lecture, later translated into English and published in *Critical Inquiry*, Derrida speaks about the tension between “the animals” as a concept versus animals as individuals. He emphasizes this point by creating a neologism, “animot,” a term that combines the plural of animals (*animaux*) with the French word for word (“mot”), which sounds indistinguishable when pronounced aloud, but sounds grammatically incorrect when used in the singular. The purpose of such a word emphasizes how the individual animal is often erased in the way we speak about them, and how the line between the words about and the presence of animals is unstable. For more, see (Derrida 2002). For the specific discussion of l’animot, see pages 409ff.

³² The importance of naming as invocative as opposed to a label recalls an anecdote in *Adam’s Task* about Hearne’s shelter manager friend. In this scene, Hearne describes how the shelter manager instituted a mandatory training program that required potential adopters to complete at least some rudimentary dog training in order to “name” the dogs, thereby entering into a relationship with them. Training therefore has life or death stakes for shelter dogs. Hearne reiterates this point throughout the passage, describing how the shelter manager “gestured at the dogs, most of them doomed, in the runs at the shelter and said, ‘Goddamit! [sic] Most of them wouldn’t be here if only they knew their names!’” (168). When a dog doesn’t have a name that binds them to a human being, but instead has a label, the dogs living in the shelter are destined to die.

greater canine creativity and independence, reflected in the command “Belle, go find!,” which would be given in the context of canine sports like tracking.³³ In each of these instances, the command is part of a larger grammatical structure linking the act of naming to an imperative command: through human utterance, the dog learns to recognize his or her name. In this process, the dog’s world expands, and a covenantal relationship between dog and handler materializes.

The fact that Hearne uses the language of “invocation” is also important for understanding her theology of training, in which she describes naming as a grammar, characterized by a subject, verb, and object. Once a dog is given a name, she or he enters into a relationship with a human being where command and response are possible. By using the language of invocation to describe the process of naming, Hearne draws on the religious associations of calling upon a god in prayer or supplication. In Hearne’s formulation, a dog moves from an object to a subject through being named by a human. The possibilities for the dog expand as the dog becomes a participant in a relationship bound by a name and marked by a covenant of shared trust and responsibility. As a type of language, training should always be two-sided, according to Hearne—but again, with the human handler in ultimate control.

In Hearne’s account, therefore, the redemptive possibility of training is covenantal in nature: it is characterized by a sacred contract formed between a human handler and a dog, a contract that holds the possibility to restore interspecies communication. Put differently, the covenant between the dog and the human is what relational redemption makes possible. Through training, Hearne argues, “dog and handler, having learned to talk, are now in the presence of and are commanded by love...The dog’s apparent command of human language may be limited, but his respect for language commands him now, with his handler, as deeply as only a few poets are commanded. In this sense, command of and by language and respect for language are one.”³⁴ Dog training thus creates an interspecies language, solidified through mutual respect and responsibility. However, this interspecies language does not mean that the human–canine relationship is equal. This language of “command” recalls the language of covenant used in the Hebrew Bible: it involves two parties who agree to mutually bind themselves together through an oath, but the stronger partner expects the weaker one unilaterally to obey commands in exchange for protection.³⁵ The covenant implied in Hearne’s retelling is not between God and the people of Israel, but between the human and the dog. As is the case with the Israelite covenant with God, relationality between dogs and humans in Hearne’s terms does not amount to equality; but the dogs must hold up their end of the contract in order for an interspecies language—and in turn, for redemption—to be possible.

Hearne’s vision of human redemption is therefore dependent on her sense that dogs are intelligent, spiritual creatures with whom humans can create an interspecies language—that their ability to answer and respond to human commands is what makes relational redemption achievable. In this account, human beings can find redemption through a mutual process that unfolds in the material space between human and animal, in the physical work of training. Hearne again uses language from the Hebrew Bible to help elaborate her understanding of training’s redemptive potential:

³³ In the canine sport of tracking, a dog is taught not only to follow a scent but also to retrieve objects dropped by the person who laid the track (Hearne, p. 13).

³⁴ Hearne, 30. The language of covenant is mine, not Hearne’s, but I use it because it best characterizes how she talks about the redemptive potential of dog training.

³⁵ Cf. Exodus 24:1–11 and Deut. 5:4–20. The translation of the Hebrew word for covenant (בְּרִית *b’rit*) comes from its Latin rendering as *foedus/pactum* in Hieronymus’s *Vulgata*. The term “covenant” has a meaning that depends on the particular context in which it is used: either two partners with equal rights mutually bind themselves (1 Kings 5:26; 15:19) or a stronger partner imposes unilateral claims upon a weaker one or the stronger partner voluntarily binds himself without any claims towards someone else (1 Kings 20:34; Hos. 12:2; Ezek. 17:13). While Hearne herself does not use the term “covenant,” I believe this concept captures the religious dimensions of her theology of dog training, which draws from the Hebrew Bible. For more on the idea of covenant, see (Otto 2005).

So, the imperative ‘Joe, Fetch!’ commands the dog (and the handler), not as Newton’s laws were understood to command the behavior of falling bodies, but as God’s laws command some. ‘Fetch!’ cannot be said meaningfully unless it is said with reverence. Its coherence requires that retrieving be sacred for both members of the community. But here is the paradox: the trainer must speak as if the sacred spoke through him or her, as though training were prophecy, even while knowing that it is mostly impossible, that the gap between the sacred and our knowledge of it is ineluctable. This recognition is part of the responsibility taken on, and so a trainer seldom says, ‘Fetch!’ and often tells (true) stories about the dog’s being the ultimate authority as the rightness of our methods. And if retrieving training becomes profane for a trainer, then that is that, and retrieving training either stops or becomes incoherent (65–60).

By opening up the possibility that dogs have an interior life with their own thoughts, desires, and motivations, Hearne argues that dogs are endowed with the ability to respond to human beings. In Hearne’s understanding of dog training, which must become sacred for both the human being and the dog in order to be successful, redemption is relational, creating a covenant-like bond between the dog and human that involves mutual attention, responsibility, and respect. As implied by the conditional premise of covenants, a covenantal relationship endows the human handler with divine capacity vis-à-vis the dog.³⁶ While the dog can refuse to comply if the trainer’s methods are “profane,” in Hearne’s account, the human is still divinely authorized by God.

There is a particularly vivid episode in *Adam’s Task* that provides a clearer picture of what Hearne’s training methods look like in practice. In this scene, Hearne uses the experience of curing an irascible Pointer named Salty of her predilection for digging holes in the yard as an example of what she calls the “theology” of dog training.³⁷ To discourage Salty from digging holes, Hearne must move past her own initial angry reaction at the sight of her destroyed lawn. As with most people, a yard riddled with holes violates Hearne’s sense of what a well-tended domestic space should look like. However, in Hearne’s reading, hole digging for Salty is much more than an irritating habit, but a canine religious ritual: “Salty has taken to digging holes, partly in order to occupy herself in the yard while I am at my typewriter, but also because hole digging is sacred; in the activity the secret significance of everything reveals itself.”³⁸ While recognizing that Salty partially digs holes out of boredom, Hearne believes that Salty’s primary motivation for this behavior is religious, that it connects her to a transcendent realm inaccessible to humans. Hearne never goes so far as to tell the reader what “the secret significance of everything” might be, likely out of the recognition of her limited ability to inhabit Salty’s mind. But fully understanding the act’s sacred significance for Salty is not what it is important for Hearne; what matters is the *recognition* that this act has religious meaning for Salty in the first place, which requires Hearne to try to experience hole digging as a religious ritual in her own limited human terms.

This identification of Salty’s hole digging as a religious act is central to how Hearne decides to go about training Salty out of this practice. She finds that her initial impulse to “yell, scream, deliver ‘Out!’ corrections” and to “wallo[p]” Salty have no effect.³⁹ As Hearne describes it, “any corrections and punishments are just part of the fun, accepted like a dedicated athlete accepts aches and injuries. I don’t mean [Salty] *likes* being walloped, but she is not deterred by walloping as she was

³⁶ While I am not supporting the use of aversive training methods, I am also not advocating for absolute equality between humans and dogs. This is a phenomenon that I believe would be untenable and irresponsible. Such a vision also does not take into account how humans and dogs coevolved together. For more on the subject, see (Coppinger and Coppinger 2016).

³⁷ Hearne, 43. Hearne here uses the term “theology” to describe her mentor Bill Koehler’s attitude towards dog training, but I would argue that Koehler is so influential in Hearne’s thought, and Hearne’s own writing is so filled with religious language, that the term “theology” can be extended to her own religious understanding of training.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 67.

³⁹ Hearne, 67.

deterred when the matter of puddling on the rug came up: puddling on the rug wasn't sacred."⁴⁰ While using verbal and physical corrections when Salty was urinating in the house might have been effective training tools for that type of behavior, which is rooted in a misrecognition of human domestic norms, not all negative corrections are the same for Hearne. Salty's hole digging is an activity of a different order for Salty: it is a form of work, a religious ritual with the possibility of opening up a shared religious life between Hearne and Salty. Therefore, the first step in training Salty out of this behavior involves Hearne learning to understanding hole digging as sacred:

So I submit my myself to the holy discipline of hole digging. Dressed in gardening clothes, I go into the backyard and discover the Hole. I rejoice. I dance a jig around the Hole in celebration of the Mystery. I congratulate Salty on the Hole and, still dancing, get out a spade and shovel with a view to make this perfect thing even more perfect. Salty is delighted and helps me dig the Hole. We perfect its Form, making it diamond- or heart-shaped (67).

Turning hole digging into a sacred act for Hearne means to participate in the creation of the hole alongside Salty with the same religious devotion and fervor displayed by the dog. However, Hearne's behavior that marks hole digging as sacred differs from Salty's ritual, in that it is consecrated by the behavior and language reserved for human religious rituals: Hearne therefore "rejoices," "dances," and "celebrates" all that is the Mystery made manifest in the Hole. In doing so, Hearne must leave behind her anthropocentric judgment that holes should not exist in backyards and instead try to experience this activity on Salty's terms, even if she cannot fully understand its "secret significance" outside of her own human framework. As this scene makes clear, power relations are not quite as clear-cut as a secular understanding of dog training would suggest.

After becoming a devotee to Salty's sacred practice of hole digging, Hearne reasserts her authoritative status as a trainer and moves toward creating a covenantal relationship between the two. This training method involves becoming a fervent religious believer alongside Salty, but according to Hearne, it also requires that she assert her power over Salty through physical force and fear. After jointly finishing their hole-digging ritual for the first time, Hearne describes how she fills the hole with water, and then, "still rejoicing... put[s] Salty's head in the Hole."⁴¹ In response to this undesired and unexpected baptism, which solidifies this moment as a religious rite of passage for Salty, "Salty emerges quite quickly (she's a very strong, agile dog), gasping in astonishment and outrage," decidedly unconverted by Hearne's first training attempt. In response to Salty's shock and discomfort, Hearne says, "I am surprised and say, 'But I thought you loved hole digging!,'" displaying an even greater devotion to the Hole than Salty, and feigning incomprehension as to why Salty would have a such a negative response to being forcefully submerged in water.⁴² Hearne goes on to describe how she and Salty participate in this religious ritual every day for two weeks until Salty begins to hang back upon hearing Hearne humming her "hole-digging hymn" as she gets ready to create a new one to fill with water.⁴³ In order to support her interpretation of this moment as a success, Hearne gives human language to Salty's affective experience of this moment: "Her face begins to say something like 'Christ! She's crazy! Hole digging is not fun!'"⁴⁴ In Hearne's narrative account of Salty's experience, the process of establishing a human-canine covenantal relationship can be confusing and scary for the dog. In Salty's case, Hearne believes that this

⁴⁰ Ibid. Italics in the original. Hearne doesn't elaborate as to why urinating in the house is not a sacred act for Salty, whereas hole digging is religious for Salty. My hypothesis is that the distinction for Hearne has to do with the ritualistic, compulsive force of Salty's hole digging, as opposed to the casual way she "puddles" on the rug—something she might be doing for a variety of reasons (she is still learning where it is and is not appropriate to eliminate, she might be territorially marking the house, and so on).

⁴¹ Hearne, 67.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 68. Traditionally a baptism is an occurrence that only happens once, but because the creature Hearne is initiating is canine rather than human, this ritual requires repeated attempts.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

unpleasant ritual was necessary until she understood Hearne's message, thus opening the door for communication of a higher order between the two of them. While physical punishment may not be Hearne's goal, it is a necessary step in training that is geared toward a larger purpose: a covenantal relationship and an interspecies language between the human and dog.

Anticipating criticisms of this practice, Hearne emphasizes that this training ritual is a matter of understanding what is sacred for Salty and then adjusting her anthropocentric belief system accordingly. She reiterates that *"this has nothing to do with either punishment or authority, and if it is corrupted by either then it becomes cruel..."*⁴⁵ If I get the idea that this is a battle of ego and stamina, I'm doing punishment, not dog training."⁴⁵ According to this logic, dog training becomes a form of punishment—rather than a sacred practice—when actions like submerging a dog's head in water are motivated by the belief that the dog willfully desires to subvert human authority. Hearne reiterates that "merely going through the motions won't compel the dog's belief. Holes must become sacred for me."⁴⁶ In order for her training methods to work, Hearne cannot fake her devotion to hole digging, but must truly believe that this is a sacred act. She expands on her theology of training as follows:

Trainers tend to talk about the importance of connections being impersonal, especially the out-corrections I discussed above. That's right, though the term is a bit misleading; it would also capture something to say that corrections should be as personal as possible, that they should be expressions, not of opinions, but of the trainer's nature. You simply become the sort of animal who, as it were, helplessly gives certain corrections in the face of certain crimes. This is something like the impersonality of the law, having to do with our sense that the law ought to be sacred to judges, but it also has to do with our sense that a good judge, or a good teacher, is not so much someone who is good at slipping into the imperative mode as someone who can do it without expecting that with obedience can or ought to come obeisance as well" (68–9).

Hearne thus bestows the lesson on Salty like the impersonal god in order to create a shared language. Training in Hearne's formulation is not about exercising her totalizing authority over Salty, but about inhabiting Salty's sense of the sacred, and then teaching her to devote herself to more appropriate religious practices. As Hearne insists, obedience and obeisance are not the same thing—obedience can be compelled, but obeisance cannot because it involves respect, which is a more complex concept that is also internal. Although Hearne's training methods were initially frightening, Salty ultimately responds to Hearne's commands because she has made them coherent to her, not because she fears what will happen if she digs another hole. Salty's religiosity in Hearne's account happens through their shared language, which makes it possible for them to participate in new activities together. In such instances where humans take undesirable canine behaviors personally rather than administering an impersonal correction, Hearne acknowledges that dogs have been drowned. But despite these concerns, she maintains the appropriateness and efficacy of her methods.⁴⁷

Hearne follows up the initial Salty anecdote with a new training story, recounting a time when she and Salty encountered a hole made by a burrowing animal while on a walk. Upon seeing the hole, Hearne describes Salty as "reach[ing] out a nervous paw and scoop[ing] some dirt and leaves over the hole. Then she frisks off, inviting [Hearne] to play elsewhere."⁴⁸ Hearne not only attributes intention to Salty's decision to cover up the hole, but she interprets it as a sign of her own successful training methods. When met with an opportunity to dig another hole, Salty both decides against it, and also encourages Hearne to play with her somewhere else, thus replacing what was a sacred and solitary act for Salty with a new relational religious ritual that involves Hearne. While the head-dunking ritual appears to be punitive, for Hearne, it is an impersonal correction that is an aspect of

⁴⁵ Hearne, 68. Italics in the original.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

her broader theology of dog training. Because Hearne believes that these actions are part of their shared religious ritual that opens up the possibility of a deeper relationship between herself and Salty, she interprets this form of training not as an act of punishment, but one of love. The Salty hole-digging story is an example of the rigorous training required to even begin to embark upon the process of creating a covenantal relationship that restores a shared language between handler and dog; the capacious vision of relational redemption that Hearne has in mind is not yet realized in the case of her and Salty. This can only be made possible through the form of “work” that Hearne describes as “animal happiness”—training must become a shared activity that opens up new possibilities and languages for the human and dog alike.⁴⁹ At this point in Hearne’s telling, a relationship and language between Salty and herself is just beginning to emerge.

After ridding Salty of the hole digging habit, Hearne describes the process of teaching Salty to participate in the elite canine sport of retrieving, which exemplifies what relational redemption looks like once a dog and handler are both ready for it.⁵⁰ The important training distinction here is that instead of teaching Salty to *refrain* from participating in an activity that is destructive, Hearne is training her to *participate* in a sport that harnesses the same kind of tendencies that Salty poured into hole digging and redirect them toward a human–canine sport. In order to teach Salty to retrieve, Hearne must first create a ritual with Salty much as she did with the hole digging activity, consisting of Hearne commanding Salty to sit and stay, and then gently placing a dumbbell in her mouth while saying, “Salty, Fetch!”⁵¹ Hearne then removes the dumbbell and praises Salty, repeating this practice a dozen times a day.⁵² While this activity is not initially religious for Hearne or Salty, through repetition and time, it becomes so: “There is now an object in our language, the dumbbell...when she does accept the dumbbell, I must respond with the awe that consists in honoring the details.”⁵³ This awe-inspiring ritual is part of the covenantal nature of the human–canine relationship that is solidified through language: by Salty accepting the Hearne’s command to hold the dumbbell, Hearne must respond with respect. While retrieving in Hearne’s account “makes possible a new sort of truth between Salty and [herself],” it also “makes new sorts of deception possible.”⁵⁴ Because Hearne believes that human-animal relationality was damaged in Eden, disobedience and communication breakdowns are always a risk in Hearne’s theology of training. For instance, Hearne describes how Salty started sitting on top of the dumbbell she was supposed to retrieve and pretending that she did not know where it was. In response to that act of dishonesty, Hearne “get[s] on [Salty’s] ear and correct[s] her, and she screeches with the sting and the indignation of it. Suddenly she ‘remembers’ that it’s under her chest and picks it up.”⁵⁵ Again, physical force and pain are part and parcel of Hearne’s theology of training: if Salty is dishonest, she is breaking a sacred contract, requiring Hearne to correct her. As she elaborates, when she says “Salty, Fetch!,” she is saying “‘I promise that something is going on here that is worth doing right, and I am deeply committed to getting it right, and I know it is appropriate for you to pick up the dumbbell when I command you to.’”⁵⁶ As the language of promise and command indicate, Hearne has a responsibility to Salty: she is asking Salty to trust that she knows what is best for her and to reward or punish her as the situation dictates.

Through this theology of training, which entails both pain and persistence, relational redemption eventually occurs between Hearne and Salty:

⁴⁹ Cf., (Hearne 1994).

⁵⁰ In contrast to the image of a person throwing a ball and having a dog retrieve it, the kind of retrieving Hearne is teaching Salty is a rigorous dog field sport sponsored by different kennel clubs that allows dogs bred or predisposed to retrieving game to exercise this skill in partnership with a human handler.

⁵¹ Dumbbells, which are made of wood or plastic and resemble the small dumbbells used for human weightlifting, are used in American Kennel Club and United Kennel Club dog sport trials.

⁵² (Hearne 1986, pp. 69–70).

⁵³ Ibid., p. 70.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 72.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

One day I notice that the nature of her retrieving has changed. I can tell, by the knowing way she sails out, the purposefulness of her movements, the wholly gay seriousness with which she scoops up the dumbbell, the addition to her performance of a degree of precision and fire I hadn't asked for since no one can ask for *this*, that it's Happened. She has walked, or galloped, into real retrieving. She is transformed, I am transformed and the world is transformed, for now I am able to mean all of *this* when I say, "Salty, Fetch!" Now there are all sorts of new ways our language can be projected... I can, that is, use "Fetch" to name things, in somewhat the way we use "this" and "that" to name things" (74).

In Hearne's account, this is what relational redemption looks like: the creation of a new language between an individual human and dog that radically changes the two of them, as well as the world around them. This redemption is linguistic in nature: as Hearne explains, the command "Fetch!" has new meanings and possibilities, making room for Salty to innovate and expand the meaning of "Fetch!" by expanding the range of objects and situations in which the command can be used, leading Hearne to experience surprise and joy at Salty's creativity.

In a 1991 article published in *Harper's Magazine*, Hearne further expands on the redemptive possibilities of training for dogs and humans.⁵⁷ For Hearne, dog training is not only about creating a shared language between a human and an animal, but is about finding happiness together through the mutual work of training.⁵⁸ As Hearne explains, this is a form of contentment that "like the artist's, must come from something within the animal, something trainers call 'talent.' Hence it cannot be imposed on the animal. But it is also not something that does not come *ex nihilo*."⁵⁹ Training is therefore the process of the trainer recognizing an individual dog's particular talents—be that for obedience, agility, tracking, therapy work, and so on—and then working together with the dog to transform that raw talent into skills that can be actualized through human command and canine response. This process takes concerted effort on both parts, cannot be coerced, and should bring joy to both the human and the dog. "I bring up this idea of happiness as a form of work," Hearne states, "because I am an animal trainer, and work is the foundation of the happiness a trainer and an animal discover together."⁶⁰ Again, Hearne's notion of training here is of a different order than training dogs to adhere to domestic rules—it is about seeing the dog's individual abilities and finding the best way to channel them into a shared activity with a human being. As Donna Haraway characterizes Hearne's philosophy of training, "this kind of happiness is about yearning for excellence and having the chance to try to reach it in terms recognizable to concrete beings, not to categorical abstractions. Not all animals are alike; their specificity—of kind and of individual—matters."⁶¹ The kind of relational redemption that dog training makes possible for

⁵⁷ (Hearne 1991b). For more on Hearne's writings about animals and joy, see: (Hearne 1994).

⁵⁸ For an extended analysis of the role of Wittgenstein, Stanley Cavell, and the philosophy of language in Hearne's thought, see Chapter Two in (Wolfe 2003, pp. 44–96) and Chapter One in (Kuzniar 2006, pp. 25–36).

⁵⁹ (Hearne 1986, p. 60).

⁶⁰ Ibid. In her 1994 book, *Animal Happiness*, Vicki Hearne says: "The great animal trainer who has dealings with the profane world, the world created in, say the Fall or the Tower of Babel, when the animals and our words were torn from each other so that we actually have to teach a dog to come when called, must occasionally learn Job's lesson. The significance of domestic animals...is that through respect for them, through a discipline of admiration, one of whose names is training, we can come, momentarily, perhaps in spiritual danger or perhaps not, to a higher happiness than that allotted to our species. Acceptance of that knowledge entails acceptance of one's own limitations...The hawk trainer does not complain at how God has made the hawk but learns to fly her...And then and only then do the sacred and the ordinary transcend the artificial boundaries given to them by the idea—the very idea!—Of the profane and the secular. Then and only then does happiness as a creature sharing the planet with other creatures becoming knowing her own business and uttering it with the promptness that such a knowledge gives" (Hearne 1994, p. 236).

⁶¹ (Haraway 2003, pp. 52–53).

Hearne is therefore highly individualized, process-based, and goal-oriented; it also takes creativity, patience, and hard work. As the Salty examples show, however, the process of relational redemption can be scary and painful for the dog, and deeply frustrating for the human. But in the end, Hearne believes that the rewards for both the human and the dog are well worth the effort.

3. Conclusions: Transformation through Training

This article brings to light the previously unrecognized religious claims in the writings of Vicki Hearne. It does so by analyzing Hearne's theology of relational redemption, in which both the dog and the human being are transformed together through the work of training. Hearne writes about dog training in theoretical terms, as well as drawing on her practical experiences participating in elite canine sports such as tracking. By approaching the study of dog training from a feminist perspective that rejects the denigration of animals—and by extension, the condescending association of animals with women and emotion—Hearne insists on dogs as legitimate subjects of academic study who can both enrich our understanding of what it means to be human and make us more open to the experiences of non-human animals. Hearne's theology of training is primarily linguistic, inspired by the story of the Fall in the Hebrew Bible, an event that Hearne believes damaged the ability of humans and animals to speak the same language. As a result, training for Hearne is an attempt to restore the human authority that was lost after the Fall and to repair human–canine communication. As the Salty story attests, this process in Hearne's account can be painful and scary for the dog. But as argued above, Hearne's theology of redemption is imbricated with such training methods. This is not to suggest, however, that all prelapsarian theologies produce anthropocentrism or aversive training methods.⁶²

Although Hearne's relational redemption is grounded in a feminist tradition of “situated knowledge” that emphasizes the importance of a particular dog and human, her theology of training relies on a human–canine hierarchy that is absolute. In Hearne's methods, the human is always the master over the dog, thus upholding a patriarchal model of power that Hearne wants to avoid. Even when Hearne learns to see hole digging as a religious ritual for Salty, she would never be persuaded that hole digging is so sacred that she should abandon her ultimate aim of stopping it. On the one hand, Hearne is trying to theorize an interspecies model of intimacy and communication within a power structure in which the dog's interior life—Salty's sense of what is sacred—is always subordinated to the human understanding of redemptive work. On the other hand, Hearne's conception of relational redemption as the reclamation of an interspecies language, her reading of *Genesis* produces a form of human–canine communication that can be scary for the dog at best, and violent at worst. Although it seems intuitive to imagine interspecies communication as an absolute good, *Adam's Task* reveals the dangers of a theology that relies on a structure in which the dog is always—and only—integrated into a human model of the sacred.

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⁶² As biblical and literary scholar Hannah M. Strømme argues, “the Bible is neither a pure origin for anthropocentrism nor a straightforward source for anthropocentric thinking. Indeed, the case can be made that individual texts in the biblical archive can be interpreted as fostering current understandings of human dominance, centrality, and superiority. At the same time, however, these same texts frequently radically problematize such an anthropocentric understanding in the relationality that conditions life with and as animals” (Strømme 2018, p. 18). As Strømme shows, critiques of “the Bible” as inherently anthropocentric do not do justice to the text's complex range of attitudes towards non-human animals.

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