



What We Mean By 'Type'

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From time to time it is useful for us to reflect upon the subject of what precisely we mean when we use the word 'type', as it pertains to our understanding of the distinctive morphologies of the recognized breeds of pedigreed dogs. Our preoccupation with the morph, or external form of dogs, as well as with their varying anatomical structure and movement peculiarities, is naturally an integral part of our connoisseurship but yet, oftentimes, opinions as to what constitutes 'type' in a given breed have, oddly enough, to be frequently defended with argument. Even though one might explain in careful and even elaborate detail exactly what one means by the totality which we know by this term there will always, seemingly, be individuals who hold somewhat differing positions. In other words, not everyone necessarily agrees with each other on this subject. Why should this be, one often wonders? Part of this undoubtedly arises from the fact that we use the word or term 'type' in different, sometimes rather loose, imprecise senses and then it becomes a matter of semantics, of connotative, if not real, meaning. Added to this, appropriate definition of a widely used concept is often lacking.

Unless and until we are all on the same page concerning what precisely we mean by this word, answers to such a somewhat rhetorical question as whether or not a breed can have more than one 'type' become essentially meaningless. Quite obviously, if we are indeed using this word in different senses, and this certainly appears to be often the case, there is a reasoning breakdown occurring when we try to intelligently discuss the matter of what typifies a particular breed. Then we end up having these silly and rather ridiculous arguments about the subject. So when several persons are asked if a breed has but a single 'type' you get responses which are all over the place. The main reason for this is

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that not everyone has the same opinion as to what constitutes 'type'. Surely a bad reflection upon the state of our collective thinking and understanding. A commonly-used word, which should have consistent, substantive meaning, gets carelessly bandied around and thereby becomes devalued. Not at all a good thing!

In the world of classical taxonomy and systematics of living organisms, where I have spent most of my professional life, the

discovery, recognition, characterization and typification of separate species plays a central, pivotal role. The characteristics and qualities that are common to a number of individuals,

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and which distinguish them from all others as an identifiable entity, form the foundation upon which classification is built. Each species has a type specimen and this serves as the final, defining criterion of the characteristics by which the taxon, or entity, is recognized. Each genus has a type species which is the taxonomic unit with which the generic name is permanently associated and validated. So a 'type' is essentially a category deliberately selected as a standard of reference. It is an anchoring instrument, if you will. It is that which embodies inherent characteristics as opposed to superficial likenesses, it is that which comprises the features which are peculiarly unique to a given entity and provide the parameters, the constant and intrinsic peculiarities, by which taxa, those man-made classificatory units, are conceived and characterized. It is, in a sense, a composite but within that totality, given that we are dealing with biological reality, there is the phenomenon of variation. The quality or state of being variable is where some of the problems arise when we attempt to typify. Where does one entity end and the other begin is often one of those challenging intangibles which taxonomists have to constantly contend with. There are, in addition, certain other factors which come into play. The condition which we refer to as phenotypic plasticity, for example, where the visible properties of an organism may be modified by interaction between its genotype, its actual genetic constitution or makeup, and its environment is often something which those who study morphology have to understand and accommodate.

So where does this leave us when we try to apply the term 'type' to the recognized breeds of the pure-bred dog? The context in which we do so is, of course, somewhat different from that discussed above. Hence we use the word differently and give it an additional dimension and even alter its meaning, at least to some degree. Nevertheless, some of the same philosophy must dictate our thinking when it comes to the matter of definition. While we define breeds as populations of pure-bred dogs having strong and clearly marked identities, when it comes to the matter of both inheritance and typification we have to allow for a certain latitude. The breeds as we know them are wide-ranging groups of dogs, related

by common descent, all of which breed more or less true for certain defining and distinguishing characteristics. There are distinctive likenesses peculiar to each type and an inherent, essential resemblance among the progeny of successive generations. When they do not conform to certain typifying characteristics they cannot be recognized as belong to a given entity. That said, we surely have to also recognize that their condition and stability varies depending upon a number of factors, the particulars of progenitors included. Breeds having mixed ancestries, for instance, particular those of more recent origin, are generally less uniform and stable in their morphology and this is something that we should consider when we discuss what constitutes 'type' and how narrow or broad, as the case may be, we

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should define it. The peculiarities or features which make breeds different are controlled by multiple genes, and a multitude of interactions between same. Thereby there exists a certain complexity when it comes to maintaining intrinsic characteristics, particularly if these are very too narrowly prescribed. The presence of variability is of common occurrence and this has to be taken into account.

As breeders, we know perfectly well that there exists within all breeds a certain degree of morphological form diversity and we also know that breeds change so that there is a certain dynamic involved. As a result, most, if not all, breeds evolve in their morphology considerably over time. This is in the very nature of things.

So is the phenomenon of diversification. Nothing in this regard is permanently static so this is the context in which we have to try and consider what 'type' really means. How we go about attempting to designate the subgroups that may exist is where some of the confusion and the undisciplined, inconsistent use of words come in. Given that the characteristics by which a breed is recognized are sufficiently distinctive, the question then becomes: whilst still possessing the intrinsic features can there be some deviation of form while still remaining essentially true to 'type'? If so how are we, in our terminology, to avoid being unintentionally contradictory and at cross-purposes by using this word in differing senses? If we use the word type when we really mean form, or kind, or sort, or style of dog, then there is surely a danger of not only

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misunderstanding each other but of arguing about something over which there should be no argument whatsoever.

What's the point of basing a discussion on a misunderstanding? We need to adequately define our terms and how we use them. We need to discipline ourselves in this regard. The characteristic features distinguishing a breed, the embodiment of a standard's essentials; that is what 'type' really is. So why don't we all stick with this definition? So when someone asks an ill-conceived question, illustrative of a lack of sufficient deliberation, like the one about whether or not there can be more than one type within a breed we should treat it for what it is worth. A cursory and superfluous misuse of the term as it is generally understood and traditionally employed in a biological context. If, by type, you mean varying form or style the answer would be yes; if, on the other hand, by type you strictly mean the fundamental characteristics which define a breed the answer would surely be no.

There is another complication or problem, whatever way you choose to look at it, with our usage of the term 'type' and it stems from a practice of giving it a meaning well beyond its strict application in the typifying sense discussed above. By this I mean our sometime use of the word in relation to the superior quality of a specimen. By being 'typey' or 'typy', whichever spelling of the adjective you prefer, we are referring to an exhibit which not only exemplifies characteristics that are in strict conformance with those which typify a breed but which also possesses a certain superiority of conformational and morphological peculiarities, as we idealize them. Let me try to elaborate on this. When we refer to a given dog as being typey we are essentially attempting to particularize a specific form which we individually conceptualize as being ideal within the range of variation known to exist. So we considerably narrow the usage. Nothing essentially wrong with this so long as we recognize that we are altering the sense and that this does not lead to misunderstanding

and confusion of meaning. So what precisely do we usually mean by type in this more restricted sense? We think of a certain indefinable quality, of a certain refinement, of a certain subtle fineness, of a certain perfection. The concept of 'type' in both its broad, as well as its more restricted, meanings is an useful and valid part of our connoisseurship provided that we are clear about how we are applying the term. When it is cursorily and thoughtlessly employed it surely loses its usefulness. Careless use of language is never in our best interest. As with anything else, if there is no collective understanding of what is exactly meant, communication essentially breaks down. So we use the word 'type', perhaps surprisingly, in at least three different senses. Is this a satisfactory state of affairs? In what sense or senses do YOU normally use the term 'type'?