

Man's Best Friend

According to the American Veterinary Medical Association, more than 48 million American households owned a dog, totaling more than 76 million dogs in homes across the United States in 2017.¹ Research indicates that dog ownership makes Americans happier, healthier, and more social, perhaps explaining dogs' popularity as pets.² However, is "man's best friend" getting the short end of the stick? Out of 192 registered dog breeds in the U.S., many suffer from a higher risk of inherited diseases and health issues.³ For example, the Labrador Retriever—in 2020, America's most popular dog breed from the 29th year in a row—is genetically predisposed to ear infections, skin diseases, hip dysplasia, obesity, and other ailments.⁴

For thousands of years, *Canis lupus familiaris* has been humanity's closest animal companion. Working dogs have been—and, in some industries and regions—continue to be indispensable as herders, soldiers, guides, guards, detectors, and more. However, with people today more reliant on technology than canine companionship, most dogs in developed regions have been relegated to auxiliary roles such as pets or show dogs. With this in mind, some argue that dog breeding may no longer be necessary, or for that matter, ethical. After all, purebred dogs come at a cost. The selective breeding required to produce canines with desirable instincts or physical traits also generates inherited diseases and unhealthy exaggerated features.⁵ Critics of dog breeding say that these consequences outweigh the benefits of purebred dogs, arguing that their suffering exceeds their utility.

At the same time, supporters of dog breeding argue that purebred dogs are important to human society and to various cultures therein. Purebred dogs may no longer be strictly "necessary" in places like the U.S., but they still play an integral role in popular pastimes such as hunting and birding. Furthermore, there is a strong argument to be made that some dog breeds do remain necessary. For instance, despite modern innovations, the Labrador Retriever and similar mid-sized breeds are irreplaceable as guide dogs for the visually impaired.

Additionally, some might question the ramifications of deeming dog breeding unethical. After all, not every purebred dog will fall victim to faulty genetics—many will live full lives with loving families, never developing the diseases or health issues to which they are genetically predisposed. Even purebred dogs that do develop these ailments will likely enjoy years—perhaps a decade or more—before their health becomes a severe detriment to their happiness. Demonizing dog breeding, some argue, would prevent people who wish to adopt a purebred dog from doing so, and the dogs whom they would have adopted from ever existing at all. Furthermore, some question whether dog breeding might be unethical in the first place, due to the suffering it can inflict on the animals themselves.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is dog breeding a morally acceptable practice? Why or why not?
2. What moral considerations should prospective dog owners take into account before adopting?
3. Is there a morally relevant distinction between breeding purebred and mixed-breed dogs? Why or why not?

¹ <https://www.avma.org/resources-tools/reports-statistics/us-pet-ownership-statistics>

² <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-social-self/20107/friends-benefits-pets-make-us-happier-healthier>

³ <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/although-purebred-dogs-can-be-best-in-show-are-they-worst-in-health/>

⁴ <https://www.akc.org/expert-advice/dog-breeds/2020-popular-breeds-2019/>

⁵ <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/although-purebred-dogs-can-be-best-in-show-are-they-worst-in-health/>

