

7. Companionship or Commodification?

Allison has spent her college years volunteering at a local organization that trains service dogs. As a volunteer, she socializes the dogs she is assigned to care for, provides them basic training, and then teaches more complicated skills that are necessary for service dogs to perform. She has occasionally even brought her service-puppies-in-training to class with her so they could practice certain skills—especially learning to be extremely obedient and well-mannered. When they graduate the program, these dogs (which were all bred to perform years of rigorous service work) are paired with owners who needed their assistance. These dogs go on to become integral parts of their owners' lives, enabling these people to participate in society in ways that would otherwise be incredibly difficult.

Allison recognizes the important role that service animals play in their owners' lives. However, she is not sure what to think about the increased use of so-called Emotional Support Animals (ESAs, for short). As the name suggests, these animals are meant to help people with special needs that arise out of emotional and mental health conditions—such as anxiety, PTSD, depression, or panic attacks. Much like service dogs, when a dog is certified as an ESA, this provides its owner with several public benefits. For example, landlords (including public housing officials) cannot prohibit renters from having ESAs. These animals can also come inside businesses, grocery stores, restaurants, and shops, and can even accompany their owners on flights.

Allison's main complaint is that while ESAs sometimes undergo training, it is more common that their owners purchase certifications online. To her, these animals are primarily pets, rather than service dogs. Given that these dogs rarely have thorough training, they sometimes behave poorly in these situations—barking, defecating, or being destructive. The worry, then, is that these untrained assistance dogs are giving a bad name to well-trained working dogs like the ones Allison has worked with. They also undercut the hard work people like Allison put into training the dogs to be competent, integrated parts of public life. Moreover, it seems to Allison that people are increasingly making use of the ESA certification out of convenience, rather than need. Given this, she is worried that service dog owners with impairments or disabilities are met with more doubt and scrutiny about the legitimacy of their dog and their condition.

On the other hand, Allison recognizes that she might be making snap judgments about ESA owners. Many people have invisible disabilities, and the emotional support these dogs provide can be truly imperative to their owners' wellbeing. The increased presence of ESAs might even help raise awareness of and destigmatize such disabilities. Just because these animals aren't officially trained doesn't mean they can't perform a meaningful service worth recognizing.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Is the distinction between service dogs and ESAs a meaningful distinction to make?
2. What type of training, if any, should dogs be required to have in order to be certified as ESAs? What are the key moral considerations that should shape our answer to this question?
3. What standards should be used to determine whether someone is in need of special accommodation or assistance? What are the key moral considerations that should shape our answer to this question?