

King, B. (2024). Existential etymologies: Redefining our linguistic approach to our animal companions. Paper presented at The Realities and the Consequences of the Human-Companion Animal Bond conference, Michigan State University Law School, Lansing, MI.

Abstract

This presentation extends the application of 18th-century theologian Martin Buber's "I-Thou" philosophy to companion animals, animal-assisted therapy and support animal practices through an examination of three interconnected topics: 1. Existential-humanistic animal-assisted psychotherapy, an approach that elevates therapy animals from tools to co-therapists, fostering authentic therapeutic relationships in alignment with Buber's concept of genuine dialogue and encounter. 2. Relational anthroponymy, the legal and social implications of naming, as evidenced by the visceral distinction between "I-It" relationships often seen with 'pets' and the deeper "I-Thou" connection possible with animal companions, and 3. A respectful critique of the Emotional Support Animal framework and how it fails to consider the animals' needs and well-being. By weaving these themes together, current perceptions of animal-human relationships in therapeutic and support contexts are reconsidered, moving from objectification towards genuine mutual recognition. This exploration has profound implications for mental health practices, animal welfare, and our broader understanding of interspecies connections, potentially reshaping our approach to animal-assisted interventions and companionship.