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Learning in Horse-Human Relationships: Challenges to Anthropocentric Philosophies of Education.

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I start with the proposition that the human-animal studies suggest a very fundamental and critical way in which the issue of nonhuman animals is meaningful in educational theory, in that socialization and learning processes as well as educational institutions and dominant teaching/learning concepts influence the ways in which humans treat nonhuman animals and, more generally, see humanity's role in and relationship with the (natural) world.

Martin Buber (1878-1965) was a philosopher of religion and society. In his philosophy, a pedagogic attitude became visible that has not only educational but also social and political implications. Martin Buber saw deep experience of faith, responsibility, dialogue and relationship as inextricably interwoven. In this spirit he committed himself to the dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians. However, Buber was also worried about humanity's relationship with the cosmos. Writing in the early 1920s he felt that we live at the beginning of the hitherto biggest crisis of the human species: "This is not simply a crisis of the economic and social system [...] What is being questioned is nothing short of the being of humanity in the world generally."

Buber's texts on dialogue as well as his collection of Hassidic tales document friendship with the creature. Buber himself relates the following formative childhood episode. In the summer holidays he used to creep into the barn to caress his grandfather's horse. This was not just a casual enjoyment but a deeply moving event.

"What I experienced with the animal was the Other, the enormous Otherness of the Other, that, however, did not remain alien [...] that rather let me approach, touch her. When I stroke the mighty, sometimes amazingly smooth, at other times astonishingly wild mane and felt the life beneath my hand, it was as though the element of vitality itself bordered on my skin, something that was not I, not at all me, not at all familiar, just palpably the Other, not just another, really the Other itself, who let me touch her, confided itself to me, took sides with me. The gray [...] mildly lifted her massive head, then snorted softly like a conspirator gives his co-conspirator a signal that shall be perceptible only to him, and I was confirmed."

This is a fine description of Buber's I-Thou relationship which is one of two basic approaches to relating to the Other: I-It and I-Thou.

The I-It relationship is goal-directed; characterized by instrumental reasoning, causal thinking, the intent to control and dominate in order to gain more security and certainty. The It is treated as object.

The I-Thou relationship, by contrast, does not have anything as its object: "Whoever says Thou does not have something; he has nothing. But he stands in relation." It implies an existential, practical and acting approach to the uniqueness of the Other. I-Thou does not succeed through observation, but tuning into the Other. This process presupposes authenticity on the part of both participants as well as the confirmation of the respective Other, his/her essence and higher purpose in life. Meeting Thou cannot be planned, sought or produced, it "meets one through grace".

Buber does recognize a positive role of I-It relationships. However, he maintains that there is too much emphasis on the I-It relationship in society. The expansion of the world of objects decreases man's ability to relate: "[...] without It a human being cannot live. But whoever lives only with that is not human." In fact, it is through the I-Thou relationship that we become I.

Buber explicitly mentions the possibility of being educated by nonhuman animals. It is through an ecstatic moment of unification between I and Thou and the fusion of the I-Thou and the Eternal Thou, i.e. God, that a process of becoming takes place.

Learning from such a spiritual perspective is based on nonconceptual awareness, compassion, awe and wonder and it involves an appreciation of "radical interconnectedness" (Selby, 2002). Although experiences of these magical moments are generally excluded from scientific and educational discourse this demarcation is increasingly breached by scientists who relate their stories in a language that is more common among mystics than scientists. The biologist Antoinette Lilly, for example, recounts of a meeting with a whale which afforded her an insight into the "unity of all living beings".

Buber restricts encounters with nonhuman animals to these spiritual moments. Learning in human-animal relationships, however, is not restricted to short encounters that allow for a glimpse of the Eternal Thou. Here, I suggest that we need to move beyond Buber's concept of non-human animals and acknowledge the nonhuman animal as a subjective Other with whom humans can communicate and interact. Taking a broader view of the capacities of nonhuman animals than Buber enables us to appreciate all dimensions of an integral learning processes in I-Thou relationships with them, i.e. processes in which body, mind, spirit and emotions are integrated.

Primatologist Barbara Smuts, who spent two years with wild baboons in Africa, gives an impressive and touching testimony of the role of mindfulness, openness for completely new experiences, embodiment, integration in relationship and community as significant elements of her learning processes with and from the primates. She reports that her first big challenge was to convince the baboons that she was no danger. While scientists speak of habituation, through which wild animals get used to the presence of the researcher, Barbara Smuts reports on the learning process that she herself underwent: „I [...] changed almost everything about me, including the way I walked and sat, the way I held my body, and the way I used my eyes and voice. I was learning a whole new way of being in the world ...“. She learned to understand and to use the baboons' signals to express emotions, motivations and intentions and thus became a subject with whom the primates could interact. As a social being integrated in relationships with the nonhuman animals she sometimes had to overrule her own desire to collect data and give priority to their demands, e.g. to „get lost“ (ibid).

Having spent a lot of time with the troop of baboons Smuts started to feel as if she „was turning into a baboon“. Thus, she was able to sense without external clues when it was time to move from the feeding place back to the sheltering cliffs before the rain set in. “To me, this was a small but significant triumph. I had gone from thinking about the world analytically to experiencing the world directly and intuitively“. The researcher’s immersion in the world of the primates and their acceptance of her touched her identity very deeply: “I had never before felt a part of something larger [...] with great satisfaction I relinquished my separate self and slid into the ancient experience of belonging to a mobile community of fellow primates.”

From the point of view of theorizing learning Barbara Smut’s account gives a stark counter-example to the prevalent Western concepts of learning that center learning on individual achievement, rationality, the separation of subject and object, and the fragmentation of learning matter. Instead it stresses the relational and embodied character of the learning process, the subjective, personally acting dimension of knowing and the importance of compassion not only for entering a learning relationship but also for the ethics of the learning outcome. Here, learning is not a process that can be predetermined or prestructured. It arises spontaneously, whenever the human learner answers to the situation. This kind of learning can be transformative in that it allows human beings to see themselves and the world in new ways (Miller, 2002).

There is yet another theme in Buber’s writing that provides useful insights into human-animal relationships as pedagogic space, i.e. the educational relationship. The possibility to educate hinges on the teacher’s ability to recognize the student’s individual uniqueness and to respond to it; and the ability to build real mutuality between himself and the student. The authentic teacher simply communicates what he is to his/her student in the way he/she acts and expresses his/her attitudes. As in I-Thou relationships more generally, the student’s Thou cannot be pinned down and handled in a routine way. It always calls for a fresh encounter in the situation. The ‘otherness’ of the student provokes the teacher to recognize his/her own limits as well as “the forces of the world which the child needs to grow”. It is through developing answers to these limits and needs that the teacher educates himself.

Buber’s educational aim is the capacity to enter I-Thou relationships. The aim is not knowledge but in an attitude of love and dependability towards people, the world and God.

Buber’s vision of education challenges pedagogy. His emphasis on the confirmation of the student’s specific possibilities and his/her essence questions the dominance of a ‘pedagogy of requirements’ and suggests a ‘pedagogy of confirmation’ that speaks to a dimension of self-becoming and transcends curricular and methodological measures. Here, the student does not become himself because of the content of the instruction but because of the existential relationship to the teacher. Thus, the stress on objective knowledge in school is shifted to lived humanity; from verbal messages to acting and the bodily experience of meaning; and from the bureaucracy and technologies of schools to their humanization. Buber’s observation of a loss of Thou-relationship can be applied to the school system’s exaggerated concern with the control and comparison of students’ achievements and their future utility for the labor market, which fosters ego-centeredness and competition-orientation at the expense of relationship and solidarity.

The difference between education (training) in an I-Thou relationship and an I-It relationship is obvious in equestrian sports. In the I-It relationship the human being plays out his power and dominance against the horse, sacrifices her physical and mental health, in order to satisfy his desire

for status and pleasure. The abuse of horses as sports utility vehicles is a tolerated feature of modern society.

Authority is a problematic, because easily misguided, quality in educational relationships. Buber's warning of the dangers that lie in the failure to put aside the 'will to dominate and enjoy the pupil' is expressed by horseman Klaus-Ferdinand Hempfling: "We want and we must lead horses. If we don't any handling of the horse not only becomes impossible but also dangerous. The seduction then lies in the shallowness of the desire to lead and steer. That which is given to a human being that is conscious of herself, is enforced with scary roughness". Many more elements of I-It relationships can be routinely found in educational relationships, such as the overreliance on educational technology and methods, the blaming of the student's lack of motivation or capability and the use of pressure on the student when learning achievements are found insufficient. Horseman Bill Dorrence points to similar patterns. In his experience, people have the idea, that the horse "ought to be the one doing all the adjusting and figuring out of things that a person wants him to do for them" and that "instead of helping the horse understand, they have to make him do things". Most riders "aren't comfortable around a horse unless they are trying to operate him through some equipment they put on him" and fail to understand that "[t]o bring out the best in the horse [...] nothing is presented in a fixed way". When people are not able to make their horses understand, they are quick to "blame their horse's poor response to them on a deficiency in his makeup, or on a previous owner, or trainer or farrier or vet" and "way before [the horse]'s got any understanding about what they want, they go right to kicking him, sometimes as hard as they can".

The key to an educational relationship with a horse that has I-Thou qualities is learning. As horseman Ray Hunt (1978) emphasizes: "You will be working on yourself to accomplish this, not on your horse. You will work to recognize how you feel toward your horse and how your horse answers back; how he understands you, and how he takes it. [...] We are the teachers and have to cope with situations as they come up [...] If the rider is alert and aware and in a learning frame of mind the horse can be the same. [...] what I'm talking about is a way of life."

This self-education of the teacher is an essential feature of Buber's educational relationship. It involves the teacher's discovery of the 'otherness' of the pupil, the 'forces of the world' which the pupil needs and the integration of these forces within himself. A successful educational relationship is thus characterized by the fact that the teacher may be a teacher-student and the student a student-teacher. They support each other and teach one another.

Learning to be in harmony with one's horse implies the development of feeling, timing and balance, i.e. the development of what Buber calls the "great character", who can act according to the demands of the particular situation. It is not by being a man of spirit but by being a complete person in his full being, body, mind and emotions harmoniously integrated, that teachers and horsemen prove themselves, like the Zaddik in his relationship to the Chassidim. The Zaddik does not teach. It is his being, his acting that takes effect. According to Buber leadership emerges from dialogic and shared being and responsibility.

Horseman Klaus-Ferdinand Hempfling describes this leadership in the following way: „When I am with horses, every wanting, every planning, every inflation of the self simply stops. When there is to be harmony between me and the horse, that can only happen, if I surrender to the primordial rhythm and lead in the moment of being led, whereby the distinction between the two is blurred."

Horseman Mark Rashid (2004) calls it passive leadership when the human being does not coerce the horse through violence and dominance, but when the horse follows the human being because he is reliable, trustworthy, clear and focused. For Klaus-Ferdinand Hempfling such a relationship is the starting point, the path and goal at the same time. It is the essence, the reason and gratification rolled into one and is visible in the horse's wellbeing, the energy, aesthetic, and eagerness to cooperate.

Learning in I-Thou relationships with nonhuman animals imply dialogic, integral educational processes which are characterized by non-conceptual awareness, mindfulness, connectedness and solidarity. They constitute an alternative to the cognitive-rationalist, individualistic and functionalist models of learning that predominate in Western societies. They further highlight the potential of these relationships for the human partner to become I and to develop a great character, but also the responsibility to confirm the animal Thou, help her become I and thrive in terms of her physical, mental, emotional and social well-being.

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