

## Human-horse becomings: shared learning processes

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My research journey originally started with an engagement with Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue and the question whether it could be applied to human-animal encounters. His concept of I-thou relationships intrigued me as I have - and I daresay we all have - experienced such a tuning into and confirmation of the animal other in our relationships with our horses. However, I also felt like saying: „Yes, but wait a minute, this is not so easy.“

With this skepticism I wanted to start an ethnographic research project on the following ...

- whether and how such I-thou encounters or relationships are lived at all,
- what learning processes they presuppose and trigger,
- and with what consequences for the horses.

There are, however, some theoretical and methodological difficulties and I must admit that I have not progressed far beyond these initial questions.

For my research purpose, I was toying with the posthumanist discourse following Cary Wolfe's view that posthumanism deals with "the problem of anthropocentrism and speciesism". However, two of the major contributors to this discourse with respect to animals are not so easily applicable for me. Deleuze and Guattari are rather abstract, closer to deep ecological thinking than to actual, lived human-animal relationships, although I do appreciate their notions of the schizophrenic and deconstructions-reconstructions as metaphors for learning processes. Haraway, although explicitly addressing human-dog relationships and interactions, does not – in my eyes – go far enough in the deconstruction of cultural practices. Breeding and training dogs for a sport is a deeply anthropocentric project and the fact that some dogs seem to or actually enjoy it should not gloss over the physical and psychological damage that many suffer as their humans indulge in their zest and ambitions. Is the "fluidity and the interchangeability of humans and animals in friendships, companionships and love" (A. Franklin, 1999) enough to establish non-anthropocentric, non-speciesist relationships? What are/should/could be the real consequences of non-anthropocentrism, non-speciesism for the animals? What's in it for the horses, to paraphrase Lynda Birke? What is the measure of improvement? And what would a posthuman education or learning process look like?

On the conceptual level I looked at approaches that address ethical and epistemological questions in human-animal relations in more concrete ways. They can generally be characterized as a praxis of attentiveness. The notion of attentiveness has arisen in contemporary Western environmental and animal ethics in the work of Thomas Birch (1993) and Josephine Donovan (1996), and has more recently been formulated as "interspecies etiquette" (Warkentin, 2010), "dialogical interspecies ethics" (Plumwood, 1993, 2002), or "ethics-based epistemology" (1999) by Jim Cheney and Anthony Weston. or practical phenomenology, such as Kenneth Shapiro's "phenomenological method of kinesthetic empathy" (1985, 1990, 1997), Thomas Csordas' "somatic modes of attention" (1993), and Elizabeth Behnke's "interkinaesthetic comportment" (1997). Together, they strongly suggest that

embodiment enables the expression of ethical comportment toward others, while also providing a kind of empathic approximation of the experience of others in our midst, which can (and should) inform our responsive interactions with them.

I would see this praxis of attentiveness as not so different from Martin Buber's I-Thou. But I go on to ask, how this possibility is actually lived in human-horse relationships, embedded in cultural practices as well as people's biographies. I am afraid attention does not necessarily lead to non-anthropocentric, non-speciesist practices. What do people attend to? How do they interpret what they perceive? Do they and how do they translate this into their behavior towards the animal other and what does that mean for the animal other? Above all, what would I be looking for in my ethnography that might be termed an ethical practice? So what would be my frame of reference for my own posthuman learning process and my research?

### **Philosophical and scientific frame**

On the one hand, I propose that the work of Martin Buber and Zhuangzi offer some clues what a posthuman learning process might encompass; on the other hand, I think I have found a corresponding paradigm in cognitive ethology which gives me an understanding what I would be attending to in a human-horse relationship.

In order to set the scene, I would like to read a quote to you. It comes from the Chinese Philosopher Zhuangzi who lived from about 365 to 290 B.C. Together with Laotzu he is the most famous early Daoist. Martin Buber was very much influenced by Daoism as he translated Zhuangzi's speeches and allegories more than a decade before he wrote his own „I and Thou“. The Daoist critique of Confucian humanism which is comparable to a Kantian humanism, the Daoist concept of non-duality and the Daoist emphasis on self-undoing which is similar to Derrida's deconstruction of the subject, makes this quote a nice entry into my posthumanist experiments. For both, Buber and Zhuangzi, the radical pedagogic and political implications of their stance were obvious.

So this is from Zhuangzi, chapter on "Horses Hoofs" (Outer chapters):

Horses can with their hoofs tread on the hoarfrost and snow, and with their hair withstand the wind and cold; they feed on the grass and drink water; they prance with their legs and leap: this is the true nature of horses.

Though there were made for them grand towers and large dormitories, they would prefer not to use them. But when Bo-le (arose and) said, 'I know well how to manage horses,' (men proceeded) to singe and mark them, to clip their hair, to pare their hoofs, to halter their heads, to bridle them and hobble them, and to confine them in stables and corrals. (When subjected to this treatment), two or three in every ten of them died.

(Men proceeded further) to subject them to hunger and thirst, to gallop them and race them, and to make them go together in regular order. In front were the evils of the bit and ornamented breastbands, and behind were the terrors of the whip and switch. (When so treated), more than half of them died.

And yet age after age men have praised Bo-le, saying, 'He knew well how to manage horses.' This is just the error committed by the governors of the world.

Instead of teaching to manage humans or animals, Buber's educational aim is the capacity to enter I-Thou relationships, that is, to have a holistic response to the challenge of a situation. A person who

can act “respons-ably” in this way is “a great character” (Friedman, 2002, p. 214). Thus, the primary aspiration does not lie in knowledge but in an attitude of love and dependability towards people and the world. Buber’s philosophy challenges pedagogy. His emphasis on the confirmation of the student’s specific capabilities and 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. A number of humanistic elements in education find their anti-theses in Buber’s concept of I-Thou (Kühn, 2003).

For example, the thesis that the human being is an egocentrically enclosed personality and the centre of all pedagogic consideration and effort. Education is understood as an intrasubjective monologue based on the appropriation, ownership, disposition and domination of a body of knowledge. The posthumanist anti-thesis claims that humanity is constituted by relationship, in which the human being recognizes her ex-centric existence and her inter-subjective responsibility.

Further, humanism is based on the subject-object dualism and suggests that all being and all beings serve the human formation and self-development as content, matter, material and means of education. But the inclusion of the Other in this cycle of means and use leads to alienation because nobody experiences the Other as herself any more, but only the fulfillment of a task, be it an exam, a certificate, a position or status. The existence of the Other is no longer feasible. The posthumanist anti-thesis argues for the Others’ liberation from relations of uses and aims; for their liberation of their selves, their particularities and intrinsic value. To liberate the Other means that the Other can adequately, i.e. in its relation to the whole, to which it belongs, in an undistorted and unconcealed way be present and make itself felt (Kühn, 2003).

Humanism often presupposes that learning processes can be planned. Only those methods can be introduced in educational processes which are applicable to all and everything in the same way. Method degenerates to training, drill and operationalisation with the aim of total control, guarantee of success and repeatability. In this frame of mind, students are seen as containers in which knowledge can be deposited (Freire, 1970) so that they may be usable in the labor market and as adjusted citizens within the given power structures. Similarly, training methods for nonhuman animals are too often reduced to producing standardized service providers. This approach eliminates dialogue and that which constitutes the processes of life and learning themselves. The posthumanist anti-thesis, by contrast, stresses the event and the process as educating, which cannot be planned and controlled.

For Buber, deconstruction or self-deconstruction takes place as we move away from an I-it relationship, i.e. from treating the other as an object. Similarly, for the early Daoists, self-cultivation means self-deconstruction, an ongoing questioning, interrogating and renewing of the subject. In the early Daoist view, ‘selfcultivation is an unforced turning toward the unfolding naturalness of the world and of oneself as a responsive, unforced, spontaneous attunement with it’, prominently expressed through non-action, deferring desire, unprincipled knowledge and non-I. The subject could never be one who accomplishes, satisfies or stagnates. Thus it is a ‘subject to come’ who opens and empties his or her mind to others and creates the ‘possibility of agency outside and beyond the fixed essence and meanings ...’

## Cognitive ethology

I propose that these elements find their correspondence in the affiliative-cognitive paradigm of zooanthropology (De Giorgio/Schoorl, 2013). Here, the focus is on the horse's abilities and possibilities to build (latent) learning experiences himself within a rich socio-cognitive context and living environment, both in his relationship with other horses as in his relationship with humans.

### Relationship and inter-subjective responsibility

- "every sound relationship is a unique interaction in continuous evolution"; "co-learning" for the Others' liberation from relations of uses and aims
- "Provide room for his/her cognitive abilities, allow him to experience and express his/her own emotions, attention, curiosity and inner motivation; this reciprocity is considered a foundation for mutual development and well-being. "
- "Cognition can only be preserved in a context where there is respect for the specific ethological needs. ... the horse isn't pushed towards his/her boundaries and towards the accumulation of tension. This kind of exploring gives them time, their time, to understand a situation. It means avoiding elements that could cause reactive experiences, such as: social isolation, living in a non-familiar group or experiencing frequent changes (even with known horses), living under pressure or with performance expectations, behaviouristic training, no room for explorative moments in interactions with humans, result driven human-horse monologue with no room for equine self-expression"

### Education/learning cannot be planned and controlled

- "A relationship that preserves and is based on cognition ... cannot be developed when it is based on a behavioural outcome that has to be controlled ... and therefore cannot be put in a manual as if it were a machine or a mathematical equation. Dialogue and learning can happen as long as both horse and human are consciously involved in the cognitive experience (without reactive behavior) and the relationship dynamic is calm and fluid."

### (Self-)deconstruction

- "It changes our perception of experiencing the horse as well: we stop projecting our need for a certain activity of the horse, assuming that a horse should be trained and conditioned"

## Autoethnography

My journey to this point and at this point (open ended). As probably most of us here I was already crazy for horses when I was a school girl. I made valuable experiences with the English tradition of the Pony Clubs when staying with friends in England over summer, I experienced the military style of an old riding instructor who seemed left over from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, I took riding lessons in conventional riding schools and took the most basic riding exam. But eventually I stopped because I was very frustrated with the way horses were kept and handled in the riding schools. 6 years ago I started taking care a German warmblood mare, Freja, who had been bought from a horse market and was extremely hysterical. I turned to natural horsemanship for help and later started taking riding lessons with an instructor for working equitation on a very basic level. However, I never felt completely comfortable with any of these horse cultures and started to search beyond. I now participate in a study program for cognitive ethology with Jose and Francesco De Giorgio and am experimenting with Freja.

Here is short vignette of a ride with Freja. I put a saddle pad and a simple halter on her and get on behind the fence of our paddocks. We start walking up a winding dirt road across an alpine pasture where in summer the cattle of the neighboring farmers and our horses can roam freely. I just sit on her quietly, observing her and giving her space to explore. Every now and then she stops, cocks her hind leg, looks around and listens. I look back at the stable. We hear the other horses we left behind neighing. Freja pricks her ears but does not answer. Seemingly, a whole lot of time passes. Although I had left with the intention of following her decisions I feel impatience coming up. I realize how much my normal activities with Freja are framed and organized by my own aims, meanings, energy, rhythm and time, my ideas. Freja moves on, stops, moves on again. Thoughts rush into my head. I hear a voice saying, *"You should not let the horse decide what to do. You should be in charge."* I shake off these thoughts and redirect my attention to our bodies. Freja picks up some speed. Further up the road she stops dead, her head high. Something is rustling in the trees. Her body feels attentive, but not in the tense way that my own body has learned to recognize as alarm signal before she bolts. Both our bodies have come a long way learning to handle these situations in calm way. Eventually, a jay bird emerges and noisily flies off. Freja resumes her walk. She catches up with my dog who has been running ahead of us. She comes to a halt behind him as he stops to sniff the ground. Her head is level with his body and she intently watches him as he examines a plant. After a long moment she takes a step forward to move on and gently nudges the dog with her nose. We amble further up the road until we have arrived above the tree line, where another vast pasture opens up. Freja stops and looks. I see pictures of horses cantering across the plateau in front of my eyes. But Freja turns round and starts to make her way back home. I slide off so that I can walk with her. As we get further down, Freja deliberately leaves the road and walks over to some thistles. Very carefully she curls back her lips to take them with her teeth and chew them. I experimentally touch the prickly plants and observe how Freja deliberately chooses some thistles and leaves others. I am completely immersed in this experience with Freja and only after a while I sort of surface and feel that it is getting cold. I ask Freja to come with me and we briskly walk back toward the stable. Now lots of thoughts and feelings surge back: delight with these shared moments, doubts about the riding lessons and questions about their meaning for Freja and our relationship, questions what kind of new praxis might evolve out of these experiences and where that would take us; worries about what my friends would say if I stopped participating in our equestrian activities; and futile attempts to foresee and even plan my new future with Freja.

## Conclusion

With respect to our learning processes it is still a bit early to say anything about Freja, but I have the feeling that she has become more curious and courageous to explore and she seeks more contact with me. For myself I feel that this learning process is a wonderfully rich and rewarding experience for me. However, it also confirms my intuition, that it is not easy: it is not easy to actually be in the moment, to share the moment with somebody else, rather than thinking about the past or the future; it is not so easy let go the beliefs of the equine cultures; and it is not so easy to be in an open-ended learning process.

In Deleuze and Guattari's (1983) terms, this moment is one of deterritorialization, when previously "solid" aspects of the world become fluid and things blurr together; everything gets mixed up and moved around. If I rush to control the form it takes when it is over, i.e. I attempt to plan it, I automatically repeat the gesture that, in the end, will have been humanism's greatest repetition

compulsion: the desire to plan. Reterritorializations will no doubt occur, but for the moment I have to endure the openness that is implied in these drifts.

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