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THE *DAO* OF DRESSAGE: MYSTICISM AND AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE IN EQUESTRIAN SPORTS

ABSTRACT

There are many popular treatments of Zen/Chan and Daoist themes related to working with horses; however, these works tend to be fairly superficial treatments of philosophical traditions. For deeper consideration of the philosophy of horse sports such as dressage, I explore themes and imagery in the *Daodejing*, such as noncontention, flow, humility, and mysticism that may help riders to unpack and enhance the experience of working with a nonhuman teammate. Comparative work, such as with Dewey's theory of aesthetic experience and the psychology of "flow," further helps to conceptualize the relationship between athleticism and artistic value in formal equestrian sports.

I. INTRODUCTION

"Ride like you're sitting at the top of a waterfall." A judge once told me this after my horse and I had completed a fairly mediocre dressage test. Dressage, a kind of riding historically rooted in preparing horses for war, is focused on specific movements, and can be unpacked and analyzed technically like a gymnastics or figure skating routine. However, like other sports that have artistic value (and scoring), dressage has an added element of beauty and grace—a certain quality that transcends mechanics and mere physical strength or speed. Though the human-horse partnership is athletic, it is also aesthetic, social, and perhaps even a bit mystical. I am still not sure what the judge meant by telling me to ride like I am sitting at the top of a waterfall, but I think she was trying to provide imagery to describe the dissonant combination of power and softness that characterizes the human-horse relationship in dressage, much, perhaps, like the nature of wild water.

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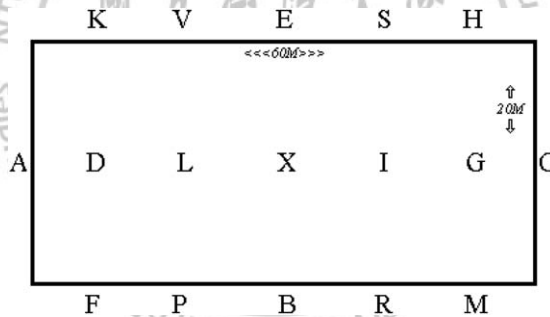
There are many popular books and blogs on Zen/Chan themes related to working with horses, and a few that discuss the *dao* of horseback riding.¹ However, though they may excite riders about thinking more deeply about the equestrian world, these works tend to be fairly superficial treatments of philosophical traditions. For deeper consideration of the philosophy of horse sports such as dressage, we can explore in greater detail the imagery and ideas of Asian traditions such as Daoism that focus, in part, on the connection between the human and more-than-human world and the humility with which we ought to approach nature. Likewise, we can make interesting and useful comparisons with more recent ideas in philosophy and psychology that explore the aesthetic experience of horse sports and of playing in partnership. From these traditions, we also can gain practical advice about being a person always in relation to others, including nonhuman nature, through partnership with horses. Dressage, with its intense concentration on the history and fundamentals of riding and the beauty and mystery of our equine teammates, merits a philosophical exploration that is similarly “deep and again deep.”²

II. THE TRADITION OF DRESSAGE

Most historians of horse sports note that dressage evolved as a method of training horses and riders for war. Xenophon's *The Art of Horsemanship* details the best training techniques of his time (circa 350 BCE) for cavalry movements that required horses to be flexible, steady, and even showy and graceful.³ As recently as the early twentieth century, Olympic equestrian sports (dressage, eventing, and stadium jumping) consisted primarily of cavalymen showing off their mounts' abilities as war horses. After the U.S. cavalry disbanded in 1948, dressage and other components of the Olympic three-day event became civilian sports for U.S. athletes (the first women were included in Olympic equestrian sports in 1952, and they now compete equally with men).⁴ Even during the time of Xenophon, horses were valued for their gracefulness, beauty, and individuality, and riders were encouraged to develop a partnership that transcended an operator-tool relationship. In fact, some of Xenophon's tips for developing the potential of horses would sound familiar to contemporary dressage trainers and even natural horsemanship gurus, such as never to approach a horse in anger, and to offer immediate reinforcement for good behavior (such as dismounting and allowing the horse to relax in the working arena when he has achieved the rider's training goals). Xenophon includes an entire chapter on training a horse for the parade ground, in addition to the field of war, in which riders are encouraged to allow horses to

show off their natural grace and beauty under a rider. Teaching horses to willingly exhibit natural movements on cue on parade as well as in war has been a goal of dressage training at the Spanish Riding School in Vienna since Charles VI built his baroque winter riding arena at the Hofburg Palace in 1735.⁵

Dressage today is sometimes described as “mounted ballet”⁶ and is akin to sports such as gymnastics and figure skating in which technical skills are judged also for artistic value. In competition, horses and riders perform prescribed movements and are scored by judges both on completion and quality. A typical dressage “test” is around five minutes long and is ridden in a rectangular arena in which letter markers guide the specific components of the movements, which are primarily executed to show a horse’s flexibility, power, impulsion, and rhythm, all via connection with the rider. Horse and rider teams move up through training tests of increasing difficulty to professional and Olympic-level movements. Freestyle dressage is often choreographed to music, much in the same way figure skating or gymnastics floor routines are choreographed by athletes and their coaches. A standard dressage arena is 60 meters by 20 meters:



<http://www.equiworld.net/uk/sports/dressage/arenas.htm>

From a training perspective, the relationship between rider and horse is fundamental. Nikki Savvides writes that “dressage embodies the notion of partnership through its focus on developing a connection between horse and rider that allows them to perform the complex movements that characterize the practice.”⁷ This partnership transcends the rider’s ability to merely control the horse, and is perhaps better conceptualized as bilateral communication “which works to forge a lifelong connection between human and animal in which the latter’s strength and agility improves.”⁸ I would argue that fitness and grace are improved in the rider, as well as the horse, when a team participates in regular training.

Beyond the physical mechanics of a dressage test and its complex movements is the concept of the athlete⁹ as artist, blurring the lines

between sport and art. Joseph Kupfer describes this in his chapter on sports in *Experience as Art* as an element of “formal sports whose excellence is equivalent to beauty of movement.”¹⁰ He continues:

we admire the fluid execution of varied, difficult movement: the spring and flip of the gymnast in her floor exercise, the skater’s transition from a leaping double axel to the helix-like spin. Because difficult, we can appreciate the skill needed to perform these sequences. They are aesthetically noteworthy, however, because they display the suppleness and graceful strength of the human body.¹¹

A horse sports enthusiast would add that we similarly appreciate the strength and grace of a 1,200 pound equine body in clearing a five-foot fence or in creating the illusion of timelessness in a *piaffe* or weightlessness in an extended trot. What makes these sports unique is that the athletic partnership is part human, part equine. It is, as fox-hunter Alison Acton suggests, an “experiential fusion” that is a “timeless collaboration” between horse and rider.¹² While we may be drawn aesthetically to the horse’s body, the rider contributes to the experience also as an athlete and artist. It is the rider who is sitting at the top of a waterfall, fluidly and invisibly creating the circumstances for the horse to become like a wave, using his natural power efficiently and gracefully. Because this interaction transcends human play and requires us to consider the natural world (the horse, in this case) as part of the athletic and aesthetic experience of dressage, a philosophical approach such as Daoism that sheds light through its imagery on intense experience, mysticism, movement, and enlightening ways of relating to the natural world may be helpful in exploring the potential of the human-horse partnership.

III. BEST TO BE LIKE WATER¹³

Competitive horseback riding is one of just a few sports that involve nonhuman teammates. While we could debate whether riding is a sport, and whether the horse-human partnership is a team (certainly elements of the relationship are unequal), it may be useful to make these assumptions in order to unpack some interesting aesthetic, moral, and even mystical elements of sports and the relationship of humans to the nonhuman world.

Working with horses allows a sportsperson the opportunity to respond athletically to the precariousness and unpredictability of the nonhuman world. How we relate to horses can be on ecological, moral, and experiential terms. When my dressage judge told me to ride like I’m sitting at the top of a waterfall, I tried to envision the

athleticism and beauty of my horse in light of the powerful potential of water about to cascade. The relationship of human to nature is, of course, central to Daoist philosophy: “It’s best to be like water, which benefits the ten thousand things and does not contend.”¹⁴ Specifically, the water analogy in the *Daodejing* evokes images of depth, flow, strength of purpose, potential, flexibility, and unpredictability.

Like a river carving canyons, both the horse and rider in dressage must be strong and purposeful. Equally, however, they must be soft, light, and yielding, also like water. Laozi tells us that “The softest thing in the world rides roughshod over the strongest.”¹⁵ To help a 1,200 pound animal to be finely balanced, a rider must use her “aids” (a rider’s kinesthetic communication with her horse) effectively and efficiently—brute force won’t work for a rider who is one-tenth the size of her horse. Dressage trainer and rider Carl Hester says of his relationship with horses: “I don’t ever want to be in a position where I have to make a horse do it. For me the end result of dressage is that it has to be elegant, it has to be easy, it has to be a pleasure to watch and it should be in harmony.”¹⁶ Likewise, Laozi reminds us that water does not contend, though it can shape the landscape dramatically: “Nothing in the world is soft and weak as water. But when attacking the hard and strong nothing can conquer so easily.”¹⁷

Daoist values, such as noncontention, openness, and softness, are for some trainers and riders, essential qualities of the horse-human partnership. Natural horsemanship (sometimes called horse whispering) is becoming fairly mainstream in the horse world, and with training techniques that are designed to mimic the instinctive herd behavior of “prey” animals, the ideal is to develop a relationship that is uncontentious and organic, and that will cultivate a deep bond between horse and human. Herman Detering writes, “Basically, horsemen who use [natural horsemanship] strive to minimize fear in the horse and eliminate the use of force by handlers. In place of these, they seek to develop a mutual sense of “feel” that joins them with the horse and makes low-stress handling possible.”¹⁸ “Horses’ Hooves” in the *Zhuangzi*, shows the results of a rider, or ruler, who hobbles his subjects unnecessarily (or, as Detering might say, unnaturally) through the character of Po Lo, a “famous trainer of horses.” Though he thinks he knows horses, Po Lo works against the nature of horses: “He keeps before them the fear of the bit and ropes, behind them the fear of the whip and crop. Now more than half the horses are dead.”¹⁹ The ones who don’t die develop habits that undermine their nature. While horses in the wild are herd animals that largely live in harmony, the *Zhuangzi* suggests, horses bullied into submission find ways of acting discordantly: “they know to look sideways and to arch their necks, to career around and try to spit out the bit and rid themselves of the

reins. The knowledge thus gained by the horse, and its wicked behavior, is in fact the fault of Po Lo.”²⁰ Natural horse trainers claim to work with the natural instincts and gaits of horses.

Though there are many criticisms of any packaged training technique, including natural horsemanship, many contemporary trainers and riders use language and methods that are much softer and less contentious than the old fashioned paradigm of “breaking” horses. In a study of the language of natural horsemanship, Linda Birke reports that participants talked about “partnership, one-ness, and relationship,” and that “like dog owners, people with horses often see them as friends, partners on particular journeys—above all, as individuals. They have to learn to read each other, to be ‘in tune.’”²¹ In fox-hunting, Acton also uses musical language to describe her developing partnership with her hunter: “Certainly, when there is a harmonious synergism, it is a transformative and symbiotic experience. Towards the end of one season it dawned on me that the horse and I were attuned to the point where I simply had to think where I wanted to go and Robby, the little gray hunter, went there.”²²

To be “in tune” with one’s teammate is consistent with the language of many dressage athletes. Riders try to achieve balance, alignment, rhythm, and flexion with their horses, all with aids that are soft and invisible.²³ The Daoist idea of “*wu wei*” expresses the kind of active noninterference that dressage riders try to achieve. About *wu wei*, Roger Ames writes:

the particular achieves its own self-expression through patternings of deference: deferring to its environing conditions to establish an efficacious and fruitful integration while at the same time fully disclosing its own integrity as a particular. . . . In this paradigm, meaningfulness is a function of the coordination of participating diverse elements into relationships which allow the particular to disclose its own significance.²⁴

Non-assertive but fruitful integration of such diverse particulars as horse and human requires a rider’s sensitivity to the movement and personality of the individual horse. Olympic 2012/2016 double gold medal dressage rider Charlotte Dujardin is reported to have a “virtually telepathic”²⁵ relationship with her horse Valegro:

It’s a feeling that he trusts me and we have such a great partnership. When I entered the arena at the Olympics everybody clapped and cheered and he went, ‘Ooh,’” she says, mimicking the horse drawing breath. “And I went, ‘No, no it’s fine’ and I patted him on his neck and felt him go, ‘Ahh.’ It’s like his body just let go and that was incredible to have that feeling and that’s when you know you’ve got a real partner underneath you and he trusts you.”²⁶

Working in partnership with nonhuman animals gives humans a unique view into the more-than-human world. While Dujardin's horse may express something akin to trust in his human teammate, a dressage rider must also have a deep understanding of the horse's psychology and evolution with the consequent precariousness of the nonhuman. The view from horseback is thus a bit wider than our typical, human-centered world. As Acton notes about riding her foxhunter, "A perspective from a horse is different and feels different to that of being on foot . . . you are propelled over ditches and fly across the land . . . riding as part of a hunt engendered a collaborative fusion and an elaborated experience, which molded, amplified, and defined my interaction within the hunting landscape."²⁷ And since foxhunting involves a "fecund, visceral engagement with a living landscape,"²⁸ Acton reports that the trust between horse and rider must be reciprocal and thus, "the best hunters are prized for their sharpness, as this quality is needed to deal with the unpredictability of the terrain . . . the horse has to be able to work things out and react quickly even if you can't—particularly if you can't."²⁹

According to Freya Mathews, domesticated animals of all kinds are influential in our perspective on and comportment toward the nonhuman world in that our "estrangement" from the natural world, resulting in an environmental crisis, is partly due to "the progressive removal of animals from our day-to-day urban reality."³⁰ Therefore, "To engage with the unknowable subjectivities of animals, and to experience their response to us, is perhaps the principle bridge to communication with the unknowable subjectivity of the wider world."³¹ Acknowledging and embracing the precarious and powerful otherness of equine partners affords us a glimpse into the natural world, including the beauty of natural movements, and we can experience the "endless flow of inexhaustible energy"³² as we sit at the top of the waterfall.

IV. VALLEY STREAMS FLOWING INTO RIVERS AND SEAS³³

Interestingly, "flow" is now part of the vernacular in many sports and adventure activities. My colleagues and students in Adventure Education explore themes in positive psychology of the "flow" experience in sports and adventure challenges, such as rock climbing and skiing. Coined by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi,³⁴ "flow is characterized by a present-moment focus and complete absorption in the task at hand, associated with an increase in skill performance."³⁵ Since a flow experience involves a loss of self-consciousness, the transformation of time, and an intense focus on the activity at hand, researchers

are exploring obvious connections between achieving flow and meditation and mindfulness training.³⁶ For dressage riders, the additional focus and care required to manage the challenge of a large animal could enhance the flow experience.

The water metaphor in both the *Daodejing* and in the concept of optimal experience in positive psychology is appropriate to dressage also because it captures the integration of the athletic and the aesthetic. Like Kupfer's idea of the formal element in sports, a dressage test can be conceptualized as a demarcated, singular moment in time in which (ideally), horse and rider are integrated in the movements and compete as a team, perhaps like "valley streams flowing into rivers and seas."³⁷ In *Art as Experience*, John Dewey discusses the aesthetic demarcation of experience as "*an* experience," which is characterized by a sense of completion and consummation: "we have *an* experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment. Then and then only is it integrated with and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences."³⁸ Dewey uses a water analogy to describe this: "In such experiences, every successive part flows freely, without seam and without unfilled blanks, into what ensues. At the same time there is no sacrifice of the self-identity of the parts."³⁹ Likewise, trainer Barbara Burkhardt suggests riding "each dressage movement to its fullest," while being able to visualize the whole test.⁴⁰ Dewey continues, "In an experience, flow is from something to something. As one part leads into another and as one part carries on what went before, each gains distinctness in itself. The enduring whole is diversified by successive phases that are emphases of its varied colors."⁴¹

Sor-Hoon Tan connects Deweyan aesthetics explicitly with Chinese art, noting that the rhythm of experience is, for Dewey, "the cumulative carrying forward in which each successive part emerges from, and temporarily completes, the preceding."⁴² Tan expands on this with the idea of "*qi*," vital energy, which "is not only thought to pervade the entire cosmic process—its circulation bringing about the transformation of the myriad things—but it is central to Chinese art. The artist is able to 'enliven' the materials she works with because she infuses her creations with vital energy and configures it appropriately."⁴³ For the dressage rider, this could mean framing her experience as an artist "enlivening" the movements of the horse in order to create a rhythmic unfolding of the test within the movements. A rider who is able to think of each moment of a dressage test as a consummation of the human-horse team, flowing with vital energy from one movement to the next, may be, in Laozi's terms, experiencing the test as a sage might: "Deep and again deep: The Gateway to all mystery."⁴⁴

V. GRASP AND YOU LOSE IT⁴⁵

Avoiding contention, as water does, ensures a softness and spontaneity in our approach to nature, including horses. While a more domineering approach may get horses to run fast (such as the penchant for the whip in horse racing) or to buck enthusiastically (such as flank straps on rodeo broncs), effective dressage riders must be subtle, quiet, and sensitive, often on horses much larger than racehorses or broncs. Practicing noncontentious riding may also help the rider to avoid striving for particular results (such as a gold medal, or even a personal best score). If dressage is as much artistic as it is athletic, then the rider must be focused on the quality of each individual moment of the test, leaving little mental space or energy to grasp for particular results. This meditative mindset may be especially useful in formal or qualitative sports, since the unpredictability of the judge is also part of the score, and hankering for points may work against the beauty of the ride. Laozi offers advice that might be useful for riding a dressage test like a sage:

Act and you ruin it.
Grasp and you lose it.
Therefore the Sage

Does not act
And so does not ruin
Does not grasp
And so does not lose.

People commonly ruin their work
When they are near success.

Proceed at the end as at the beginning
And your work won't be ruined.⁴⁶

About “proceeding at the end as at the beginning” of a dressage test, Burkhardt says “your pass up the final centerline should be as bold and confident as your entrance. . . .”⁴⁷ In order to build concentration, some dressage trainers focus on explicitly meditative techniques for riding successful dressage tests, such as breathing exercises.⁴⁸ Deep breathing is used not only to relax and focus the rider, but is itself an aid in communication with the horse as it deepens the rider’s seat and relaxes the horse’s back. “Natural” dressage trainer, Jenny Rolfe writes, “core breathing is an extremely potent tool which can help us connect with our horse. . . . Our calm, focused state of mind will help us to communicate with more awareness and perception. The horse is an extremely sensitive herd animal so we can use this trait to gain more subtle communication.”⁴⁹ Likewise, some trainers invite

riders to have “soft eyes,” a term coined by “centered” riding founder Sally Swift to describe widening one’s view to experience a whole environment (including the rider’s and horse’s bodies), rather than sharply focusing on minute locations in the arena or test elements: “When you direct your soft eyes inward, you can start to feel. You can feel your own body and the movements of your horse, and how that energy moves through you.”⁵⁰ Seeing the whole environment, perhaps, causes the rider to feel more a part of it, including in her partnership with the horse, prohibiting an attitude of domination and control. Riding in a meditative manner without grasping for final results allows us instead to work on improving the horse-human partnership through each movement. As Laozi warns, “Those who control, fail. Those who grasp, lose.”⁵¹

Because it is competitive, similar to jumping, reining, and other horse sports, dressage may best satisfy our “aesthetic expectations” when, as Kupfer says “scoring and victory complete excellent play.”⁵² However, if excellent play is impeded by attending overmuch to the score (or the desired win), we may find ourselves in a situation in which “overemphasis on scoring and outcome . . . focuses attention on ends at the expense of their connection with means—how the outcomes are achieved.”⁵³ Dewey similarly suggests that we value means and ends integration as we seek to consummate our experiences,⁵⁴ either everyday (such as in training) or momentous (such as at the amateur weekend show or the Olympics). In his work on Daoism and Dewey, Crispin Sartwell uses both philosophies to critique a teleological account of art (or craft) as primarily resolving problems toward a future end goal. Sartwell’s reading of Dewey includes the idea that “means and ends are constantly oscillating or disintegrating or coalescing and detaching,” and that “in a work of art the means and ends are unified.”⁵⁵ Daoism, according to Sartwell, exemplifies this approach to art as “the collapse of ends and values by a total immersion in means”⁵⁶ which can be seen in his translation of the *Daodejing* 39 with the message that “we should not seize control and transform but rather accept and affirm.”⁵⁷ Affirmation of each moment, not as a means to a future goal but for its own sake, allows us to experience the flow of the present. “Eastern religions,” such as Daoism, writes Sartwell, “counsel surrender, yielding, letting go. They recommend the collapse of ends and values by a total immersion in means.”⁵⁸ For a dressage rider, seeking to control and dominate diminishes the natural beauty of the movement of the horse and is likely to lead to a sour and static partnership. Good riders, all the way back to Xenophon, know when to surrender and yield, to allow the horse to exist and move in the extraordinary way only a horse can. The *Daodejing* gives good

advice to riders, and, perhaps, to any humans wondering about how to best relate to the natural world: “Knowing that enough is enough is always enough.”⁵⁹

VI. KNOW WHAT IS ENOUGH—ABUSE NOTHING⁶⁰

There are obnoxious, abusive, dominating human beings everywhere, and some of them are horseback riders, and even dressage athletes.⁶¹ Ideally, dressage, however, works with the spirit and physicality of the horse in a way that can improve horses’ health and emotional well-being in much the same way that athletic training can do so for humans. While we can’t know that dressage, foxhunting, and other sports are enjoyable for horses (we can’t know absolutely the emotional climate even of other humans), perhaps we can see from their behavior that they often choose these activities.

It is fair, of course, to ask whether riding, training, or even domesticating horses is in their interest. In differentiating “training” from “education,” Dewey creates what may be something of a straw man in using working with horses as an example of humane education:

A clue may be found in the fact that the horse does not really share in the social use to which his action is put. Some one else uses the horse to secure a result which is advantageous by making it advantageous to the horse to perform the act—he gets food, etc. But the horse, presumably, does not get any new interest. He remains interested in food, not in the service he is rendering. He is not a partner in a shared activity. Were he to become a copartner, he would, in engaging in the conjoint activity, have the same interest in its accomplishment which others have. He would share their ideas and emotions.⁶²

It’s worth noting that Dewey didn’t claim any real understanding of horses or equestrian activities, though we might assume that his understanding of human evolution was such that would preclude quite as much of a distinction between human and nonhuman animal behavior and learning. He may simply be wrong that horses can’t be copartners in shared activities. Though the partnership may be at times unequal, certainly there’s evidence that nonhuman animals’ lives can be made better in communion with humans.

Anecdotally, I can say that my horse comports himself in such a way that makes me believe he enjoys my company and feels good during and after physical exercise (for example, coming to the gate when I arrive and responding to my voice and neck-patting with pricked ears). Philosopher and rider Erin McKenna agrees that many horses “seem to enjoy the physical and mental challenges their work presents. Our activities with them maybe a form of play for them and

so provide pleasure . . . they may even take pride in doing their work well.”⁶³

Certainly, there are objectively better and worse ways to treat our equine partners and Mathews argues that it’s ethical to utilize a non-human animal for our own wellbeing (such as to develop a better relationship with the natural world) only if we offer it benefits such as increased life-span and “self-realization appropriate to its particular kind.”⁶⁴ Of the fifty horses who competed with Valegro in dressage at the 2012 Olympics, one quarter of them were fifteen years or older (the equivalent of fifty-three human years). Michael Blanding writes, “When you consider that a human gymnast is generally past her prime at 16 and a basketball player is pushing retirement at 30, these equine athletes are treading on durable superstar territory. It’s all the more remarkable given that just a short time ago, 20 years was considered the limit for a horse’s life span.”⁶⁵ Many dressage trainers claim that the stretching exercises involved in dressage, in addition to good feed and other benefits of domestication, increase the chances that horses will be sound and fit well into their twenties.

The many examples in ancient Chinese and European philosophy of the relevance of the treatment of horses to the treatment of humans suggests that the gap between training and education, at least in horses, may not be as straightforward as Dewey claimed,⁶⁶ and that there is something greater to be learned, with Mathews, from the human-nonhuman relationship. Developing an ethical relationship with the nonhuman world also lends itself to greater opportunities for virtuous character more widely, especially as equestrians are often humbled by our equine partners, yielding humility as well as growth. As the *Zhuangzi* suggests, an age of “perfect Virtue” is one in which “the birds and beasts can be led around without ropes. . . .”⁶⁷

VII. THE FURTHER YOU TRAVEL, THE LESS YOU KNOW⁶⁸

Having a 1,200 pound animal as a teammate offers ample opportunity for learning humility. Like riders, horses have bad days, and a large animal who just isn’t in the zone with the rider can certainly alter the experience from having aesthetic potential to being, as Dewey would say, mere “perturbation and conflict”⁶⁹ without the prospect of harmony. To many riders, the added challenge of the precariousness of a nonhuman teammate is part of the appeal of equestrian endeavors. About her hunter, Acton asserts, “The horse is not simply a vehicle; it is a sentient, powerful, excitable, and often stubborn creature with its own manner of being in the world.” But, she continues, “the height, speed, and the senses of the horse resonate within the rider. You feel

the animal's exertions and heartbeat and you experience its nervousness and excitement."⁷⁰ Though it may sound antithetical to competitive athletes at the elite level, there is no doubt in Daoism, Confucianism, and many other philosophies, that an activity that lends itself to humility and critical self-assessment helps one to learn and grow. To ride like a sage, with quiet subtlety, noncontentious practice, empathetic and aesthetic sensitivity, and the desire to learn and grow, the rider must acknowledge her own weaknesses and accept, with Laozi, that "Conquering others takes force. Conquering yourself is true strength."⁷¹ Confucius's advice regarding human neighbors in the *Analects* 7:22 are also applicable to the Pony Club rider with her first stubborn pony or the dressage rider with a horse of variable temperament: "The Master said, 'When walking with two other people, I will always find a teacher among them. I focus on those who are good and seek to emulate them, and focus on those who are bad in order to be reminded of what needs to be changed in myself.'⁷² Likewise, Laozi tells us that "the good person is the bad person's teacher, and the bad person is the good person's resource."⁷³

Even the best riders with spectacular (and spectacularly expensive) horses, such as Dujardin and her horse Valegro, will have off days (or years) where everything seemingly falls apart in a dressage test and little that is harmonious or beautiful is achieved. Even on the gold medal-winning days, Laozi might advise "Self-display: no way to shine. Self-assertion: no way to succeed. Self-praise: no way to flourish."⁷⁴ Similarly, Confucius says in the *Analects* 4:14, "Do not be concerned that no one has heard of you, but rather strive to become a person worthy of being known."⁷⁵ After team and individual gold at the 2012 Olympics, Dujardin experienced what many elite athletes do after big wins—deflation and the stress of suddenly becoming a public figure at the top of her game. She had to return to the fundamentals of dressage in order to regain her confidence and the quality of her partnership with Valegro.⁷⁶ According to Dewey, a world that was "finished" and stable rather than sometimes precarious would not afford aesthetic experience: "The moment of passage from disturbance into harmony is that of intensest life."⁷⁷

The Confucian idea of having to strive to be worthy of being known and the Deweyan notion of the rhythm of stable and precarious experience may be especially relevant when teaming up with horses, who, though often generous with their attention, may require that their riders constantly work to earn it. Laozi says "Look at plain silk; hold uncarved wood. The self dwindles; desires fade."⁷⁸ When desires fade and grasping ceases, perhaps we are more able to experience the flow, consummation, and joy of a well-ridden movement or a particularly harmonious moment with a horse. After returning to the

fundamentals post-Olympic victory, Dujardin notes that “Riding a horse like Valegro gives you confidence anyway. I just go out there and have fun, I don’t really think about the pressure.”⁷⁹ This openness to experience comes only when we recognize that, like our equine partners, we also are uncarved wood. Though Dujardin is an Olympic, European, and world champion,⁸⁰ a single bad test at a major event might have her considering the admonition of the sage: “The further you travel, the less you know.”⁸¹ Even the most knowledgeable and accomplished riders will have training sessions or even tests which cause them to go humbly back to fundamental movements to begin rebuilding a partnership more effectively. After all, “Tao endures without a name. Though simple and slight, No one under heaven can master it.”⁸²

VIII. LIKE THIS!⁸³

The namelessness of the *dao* is a good metaphor for the humility and beauty of the rider’s experience of a human-horse team. The dissonant necessity of a noncontentious approach to training a large animal, the aesthetic experience of well ridden movements, and the consequent humility caused both by the precariousness of nature and the inevitability of losing in competition, are all part of the mystery of the human-horse partnership. Laozi tells us that the “*Tao* in action” is “intangible and vague, But within it are images.”⁸⁴ In his Zhuangzian and Heideggerian critique (for privileging humans) of contemporary animal ethics, Mario Wenning argues that allegories and anecdotes in Daoist philosophy allow us to understand intuitively the human-nonhuman relationship in nature, while the propositional language of ethics, on the other hand, tends to privilege humans: “Daoism . . . provides us not only with theories but with invitations to practically engage in various practices of unlearning rather than perfecting discursive reasoning.”⁸⁵ Working with horses offers the opportunity to practically engage with nonhuman nature, often in the practice of “unlearning,” as we constantly must reevaluate our ways of relating to an “irreducibly complex and transient reality”⁸⁶ through working with living, growing, aging, changing equine partners.

Looking more deeply at the essence of an irreducibly complex world is a continuing theme in Daoism. The *Liezi* tells a story along these lines about a famous judge of horseflesh, Kao, who reports on a “yellow mare” to a duke. When the duke saw the horse for himself, it was a black stallion. The displeased duke admonishes the judge to Po-Lo, who replies that the judge is “worth a thousand, ten thousand, any number of people like me. What such a man as Kao

observes is the innermost native impulse behind a horse's movements. He grasps the essence and forgets the dross, goes right inside and forgets the outside."⁸⁷ The kind of insight Kao has is what the dressage rider tries to achieve as she attempts to create a fluid work of art in a five-minute test—one that shows, more than anything, the essence of the horse.

Even the practical experience of riding may not be enough to fully actualize a dressage partnership, since the intricacies of the movements require both thinking and acting. Perhaps, then, a useful way to think about formal horse sports such as dressage is in metaphor, such as water. Dressage trainer Candy Allen writes, "A horse 'coming over his back' is much like a wave forming. The energy of the water is pushing from behind, causing the wave to come up and around, much like a horse's energy pushes from behind up over his back and down his neck."⁸⁸ Confucius uses musical imagery in the *Analects* 3:23 to explore the cultivation of the human self in relation to others, which may also be relevant to the mutual cultivation of talents of a human-horse team:

What can be known about music is this: when it first begins, it resounds with a confusing variety of notes, but as it unfolds, these notes are reconciled by means of harmony, brought into tension by means of counterpoint, and finally woven together into a seamless whole. It is in this way that music reaches its perfection.⁸⁹

In my own striving for harmony with my horse, I am constantly surprised when my instructors call out very subtle suggestions for my riding, even as seemingly inconsequential as "exhale before you ask for a downward transition," and, when I listen, the minute shift in my body is followed by the exact response by my equine partner that previously had been eluding me. "Yes! Like that! Did you feel that?" my instructor yells. Those moments keep me in training, even when I know that my day job as a college professor, my bank account, my own weakness as an athlete, and my attachment to a horse who will never be a Valegro, all keep me happily plodding away down in the weekend, amateur ranks. Such experiences, whether I think of them as flow, *an* experience, moments of vital energy, or *dao* in action, are as mystical and mysterious as an Olympic dreamer turned logic professor can get. Comfort with the unknowable and often the undoable are part of the wonderful and intense experience of having an equine athlete for a teammate. Because of the aesthetic richness of many horse sports, even when all things are flowing well, sometimes the only way you know that the physical and mental training is leading to optimal performance is the same way you know you have achieved sagehood: "Like this!"

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ENDNOTES

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3. Morris H. Morgan, trans., *On Horsemanship (Xenophon)* (New York: Dover, 2010).
4. "History of Dressage, United State Dressage Federation," accessed August 11, 2014 (<http://www.usdf.org/about/about-dressage/history.asp>).
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11. *Ibid.*, 116–17.
12. Alison Acton, "Getting By with a Little Help from My Hunter: Riding to Hounds in English Foxhound Packs," in *Hunting Philosophy for Everyone: In Search of the Wild Life*, ed. David Petersen (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 81.
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17. *Ibid.*, 78.
18. Herman Detering, "Willing Cooperation," *The Cattleman* 93 (2007): 10.
19. Martin Palmer, trans., *The Book of Chuang Tzu* (London: Penguin, 1996), 72.
20. *Ibid.*, 73–74.
21. Lynda Birke, "Talking about Horses: Control and Freedom in the World of 'Natural Horsemanship,'" *Society and Animals* 16 (2008): 115.
22. Acton, "Getting By with a Little Help from My Hunter," 88.
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24. Roger T. Ames, "Putting the *Te* Back into Taoism," in *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought*, ed. J. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 135.

25. Lisa Davies, "Charlotte Dujardin: Gold for the Woman Who Could Make a Donkey Dance," *The Guardian*, August 9, 2012, Sports section.
26. Anna Kessel, "Olympic Pair Charlotte Dujardin and Valegro a Going Concern for Now," *The Guardian*, December 14, 2013, Sports section.
27. Acton, "Getting By with a Little Help from My Hunter," 88.
28. Note that the landscape of foxhunting, in Acton's pack and most other contemporary "hunts" in the United States, actually killing foxes is no longer part of the experience. Most hunts are "drag" hunts, which allows the human-equine-canine pack to focus on the process of the hunt, and the landscape, rather than the end result.
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30. Freya Mathews, "Living with Animals," in *The Animal Ethics Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Susan Armstrong and Richard G. Botzler (London: Routledge, 2010), 557.
31. *Ibid.*, 559.
32. Addiss and Lombardo, *Tao Te Ching*, 6.
33. *Ibid.*, 32.
34. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990).
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36. *Ibid.*, 119.
37. Addiss and Lombardo, *Tao Te Ching*, 32.
38. John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, in *John Dewey: The Later Works 1925–1953*, Vol. 10, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989/1934), 42.
39. *Ibid.*, 43.
40. Barbara Burkhardt, *Dressage from A to X: The Definitive Guide to Riding and Competing* (North Pomfret: Trafalgar Square Publishing, 1999), 226.
41. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 43.
42. Sor-hoon Tan, "Experience as Art," *Asian Philosophy* 9, no. 2 (1999): 111.
43. *Ibid.*, 111.
44. Addiss and Lombardo, *Tao Te Ching*, 1.
45. *Ibid.*, 64.
46. *Ibid.*, 64.
47. Burkhardt, *Dressage from A to X*, 228.
48. *Ibid.*, 206.
49. Jenny Rolfe, "Core Breathing to Enhance Connection," *Horses for Life Magazine* 55 (<http://horsesforlife.com/corebreathing>).
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52. Kupfer, *Experience as Art*, 123.
53. *Ibid.*, 122.
54. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 278.
55. Crispin Sartwell, "Dewey and Taoism: Teleology and Art," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 43, no. 1 (2009): 39.
56. *Ibid.*, 35.
57. *Ibid.*, 35.
58. *Ibid.*, 37.
59. Addiss and Lombardo, *Tao Te Ching*, 46.
60. *Ibid.*, 44.
61. It is worth noting the current controversy in the professional dressage world of the use of *rollkur*, which is the excessive flexion of the neck and head of the horse in aggressive training for dressage. Governing agencies such as the Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI) have banned its use at events. See <http://www.fei.org/news/fei-round-table-conference-resolves-rollkur-controversy>.
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63. Erin McKenna, *Pets, People, and Pragmatism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 55.
64. Mathews, "Living with Animals," 558.
65. Michael Blanding, "The Old Gray Mare," *Tufts Now*, accessed June 1, 2016 (<http://now.tufts.edu/articles/old-gray-mare>).
66. For a much deeper discussion of Dewey's ethics and philosophy of education in light of Daoism, please see James Behuniak Jr., "John Dewey and the Virtue of Cook Ding's Dao," *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 9 (2010): 161–74.
67. Palmer, *The Book of Chuang Tzu*, 73.
68. Addiss and Lombardo, *Tao Te Ching*, 47.
69. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 23.
70. Acton, "Getting By with a Little Help from My Hunter," 88.
71. Addiss and Lombardo, *Tao Te Ching*, 33.
72. Edward Slingerland, *The Analects of Confucius* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003), 71.
73. Addiss and Lombardo, *Tao Te Ching*, 27.
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