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## The Praxis of Horse Riding – An Autoethnographic Study



Darwin (Photo: H.J. Blokhuis)

A good rider can hear his horse speak to him.  
A great rider can hear his horse whisper. - unknown

**May 15, 2016.** My horse Darwin and I are out on a ride together in the early morning. We walk up a hill that leads into the woods, and Darwin lowers his head and pushes forward to produce power. His body feels stiff this morning and so does mine. Darwin's ears are pricked forward as he walks with short steps, a bit hesitant. I feel his back muscles moving beneath me. His coat shines in the sun and his mane moves out from his neck and back again in the rhythm of his walk. Sometimes his ears go back, as if asking me what I have in mind. He makes small sighs, blowing air out of his nostrils with each or every second step, and I interpret this as a sign that he enjoys the ride but at the same time is a bit excited. I just let him carry me along, keeping the reins half stretched. Apart from the birds singing, it is completely still in the woods. The smell is fresh and Darwin chews on the bit and moves in a steady rhythm, gradually beginning to relax his back muscles, and his movements begin to feel more supple.

My body adopts the rhythm of the horse as he takes me along the path. After a while Darwin starts taking larger and more determined steps. My breathing gets slower. The surrounding forest seems to disappear and my consciousness is dimmed as all kinds of

unreflective thoughts circle in my head. We move flesh-to-flesh, our bodies merge and I don't know where Darwin's body starts and mine ends. Through my boots I feel his legs moving and I perceive his contact with the ground. His legs become like an extension of my legs and I can feel what he feels. His breath moves his chest in and out and I adjust my breath to his. I pick up his emotions and mood by watching the position of his ears and by taking up the energy of his movements. Darwin responds to my signs and frame of mind through his sensitive body. Even if feeling relaxed, a core of attention derived from prior experience is still present in my body, since Darwin can easily jump to the side from a sudden sound of a bird or a leaf moving in the wind.

Darwin and I arrive back at the riding hall. With me still sitting atop him, we walk in and I collect the reins. I start riding in a rising trot, rising from the saddle every second stride. I apprehend the direction, listen to the rhythm of Darwin's hoofs hitting the ground, and feel him moving under me. The touch of my legs urges him to go forward, while the squeezing of the reins with my hands asks him not to move too fast. At the same time, I reflect on his current movements and compare them with how he usually feels. How is his rhythm and speed? Are his movements supple or stiff? Does he activate his back muscles? I pick up the feedback that I get from Darwin's body. He increases his speed and trots a bit faster, which leads him to lose his balance, and I try to slow him down using my voice and by moving my hips at a slower pace. I canter two rounds and then change rein, cantering two more rounds. Moving in a nice three-beat rhythm, Darwin's ears are placed forward. I feel the power in his movements but he is still attentive to my signs. I concentrate on being balanced and relaxed. As I watch our direction, I also attend to my body, trying to keep my shoulders upright, my neck relaxed, my elbows close to my sides, and my breath lingering.

My body adapts to Darwin's movements as he moves me back and forth in the rhythm of the canter and I try to disturb his movements as little as possible. When I say "ptroo" he immediately slows down to trot and I continue in a rising trot feeling his back muscles moving me up and down.

I take a break and walk a few rounds on long reins while planning my next actions. Darwin feels cooperative and relaxed now. I feel relaxed too. I decide to work on half-pass<sup>1</sup> and begin by riding on a circle in the left rein in a sitting trot; I notice that I sometimes lose contact with my right seat bone in the saddle when riding to the left, so I quickly adjust my position. I feel Darwin in response activating his right hind leg and placing it further under his body. This correction makes my hips and Darwin's hips parallel on the track. I change my body position to make it possible for us to move

together in a good balance and with our bodies moving in mutual harmony. The contact between my hands and Darwin's mouth is soft and light.



**Riding on a left-hand circle (Photo: H.J. Blokhuis)**

I change rein and feel Darwin increasing his force as he tries to raise his speed, taking longer steps and pushing forward towards the bit. I close my fingers gently around the reins and he slows down again keeping his two-beat rhythm. I concentrate to turn my upper body and use my leading inside rein to make him follow the track of the circle but I lose the nice feeling that I had. During short movements it feels okay, but only when I concentrate really hard. When will I ever learn to control my body?

Deciding to try half-pass in canter, I start with one round in left canter while keeping a good speed and rhythm. Darwin snorts in every step and I feel his heart pounding through my boots. I adjust my weight and legs, placing myself in a position close to Darwin's point of gravity, and Darwin reacts by putting more weight on his hind legs and moving his hindquarters forward and at the same time to the side in a nice half-pass. The contact with his mouth gets lighter and it feels like his front part raises up a bit from the ground. For a short moment, we are part of the same movement and it is a great experience, a feeling of synchronicity. My body feels like it is being carried on a cloud and our bodies move smoothly together without any resistance.

I repeat the half-pass once more, riding straight out saying "good boy," relaxing my hands and giving Darwin longer reins to praise him for good work. Then I slow down to walk on long reins, allowing him to stretch his neck and get his breath down. I feel his whole body relaxing. As Darwin walks I prepare my body for riding half-pass to the

right. When picking up the reins I ask him to bend his neck a little bit and to relax in his inner side; Darwin protests by moving his head a bit up and down. How can this be so difficult? I place myself in a good position for right canter and ask him to canter and try a half-pass to the right. First it does not work at all and I realize that my gaze needs to be directed more towards where we are heading. I also feel that Darwin drifts to the left, not being attentive to my outside leg. I try to be clearer with my leading right rein aid and I need to keep my right leg more steady towards his sides to be able to control the movements of his inner leg. Is this movement too difficult for Darwin? Does he understand what I want from him? I change the position of my body, trying the exercise once again. Suddenly, I feel how Darwin reacts to the changes in my body; he moves a few steps in a nice half-pass. Again we move together as one body and it is a very good feeling. I feel Darwin's energy and the power in his movements as he takes me along and helps me by being an active part in our relation. I repeat the exercise once more and finish our ride in trot asking Darwin to stretch his head and neck forward-downward.

**Introduction.** Horses and horse riding have been a lifelong passion for me. In this article, I will argue that to improve the interaction between rider and horse a constant communication involving both actors is essential. Using my own experience from many years of riding and teaching rider-horse combinations, I will apply *theories of practical knowledge* to explore the *praxis* of horse riding. I aim to describe, interpret, and analyze, what is happening between rider and horse when riding. More specifically, I will address the following questions: What is the goal of riding for me? How do I *interact* with the horse when riding? What is the role of emotions and "equestrian feel" in my riding? How do I *reflect* on the interaction between me and my horse while riding?

My interpretations of the interspecies interaction between my horse and myself are built on personal experiences and reflections, and I will be careful with my interpretations of what my horse thinks or feels. In this paper, I will focus on the discipline of sport dressage, an Olympic discipline, where rider and horse perform certain sets of movements in specific gaits and tempos whilst being evaluated by appointed referees.

*Practical knowledge* is defined as knowledge that is based on practical activity, as for instance driving a car or playing an instrument, and could be described as "knowledge in use" that is demonstrated in the "doing" (Hjertström Lappalainen 7). In practical knowledge, our knowing is situated mainly in the body and is learned by experience (Pröckl 7). However, it includes not only the skill, but also the ethical decision of how to act, and is always related to a particular activity. This means that apart from being able

to master a specific practice, a person should be able to act wisely and responsibly (Svenaesus 22-23).

In this article, I will explore my own practical knowledge of riding my horse Darwin. Darwin and I have known each other for about eight years. When I started riding him he was six years old and basically educated by his former owner. However, he could only be ridden by skilled riders, since he is a sensitive and lively horse. He is generally cooperative, except that he can be a bit irritated when being saddled and groomed.

The praxis of horseback riding has been described in many manuals written by skilled and experienced riders and trainers. I have even written some myself. However, these manuals often focus on technical descriptions of how the rider should sit on the horse, how to use the seat, and how to use signals (aids). Moreover, these manuals often lack self-critical aspects. They are mainly built on the perception that the horse is an object, and that the rider needs to use specific signals to achieve a given outcome. Thus, riding is interpreted as the transmission of orders from rider to the horse. However, I came to believe that emotions and feelings play an important role in riding. When we meet somebody, be it a human or a horse, we see and feel first. Also, the horse has feelings and emotions, and it is important that the similarities, as well as the differences, between human and horse be taken into account during interspecies interaction. I believe this contributes to improved communication between rider and horse and thus to a better welfare for both.

The method used in this article is *Autoethnography*, a qualitative research method in which the researcher seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno) (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 1). It is an analytic approach and form of writing that explicitly connects a researcher's lived experiences and perspectives to the social and cultural world in which they exist. This method has gained increased attention during the last two decades in social research, and has been used for instance in sport studies (Cooper, Grenier, and Macaulay 46) and in health care (Chang 443).

In this paper, autoethnography was used to systematically describe and express relations between rider and horse, focusing on riders' feelings and on how riders' experience their own, as well as the horses,' bodies and minds, making my own experience as a rider into a topic of investigation. My personal experiences are thus used as empirical material. The experiences are investigated and tied to abstract reasoning and theories (Hammarén 17-20). When collecting my material, I recorded my own descriptions of actions, feelings, and reflections during riding using a small



microphone and a Dictaphone, and directly afterwards I wrote down my experiences, supported by the recordings.

**What is horse riding?** Horses have been used by humans throughout history for warfare, in agriculture, and for transport. Nowadays, in developed countries, horses are mainly used for leisure, equestrian sport, companion and human therapy. In this study I focus on riding being an interspecies and embodied activity. It is different from human interaction with, for instance, cats and dogs, since the rider is sitting on the horse's back (Brandt 300).

Riding is an Olympic sport, but is sometimes characterized as "equestrian art." Nuno Oliveira, one of the most famous horse trainers during the 20th Century, stated that:

Equestrian Art is the perfect understanding between the rider and his horse. This harmony allows the horse to work without any contraction in his joints or in his muscles, permitting him to carry out all movements with mental and physical enjoyment as well as with suppleness and rhythm. The horse is then a partner, rather than a slave who is enforced to obey a rigid master by constraint (Oliveira 17).

However, one cannot deny that we humans use horses for our own purposes. Moreover, there is currently a public debate about riding, and particularly about dressage as an Olympic sport, where critical voices describe dressage as one-way control, in which humans dominate the horse in ways that are ethically questionable (Hagström 3; Smith 40-43; McLean and McGreevy 205; Patton 89-91). In the discussion it is sometimes questioned whether horses should even be used for competition purposes, or whether we should ride at all.

The relation between human and horse is an essential part of riding. A rider communicates with the horse through the use of cues and signs, and needs a variety of athletic skills and competences to be able to interact with the horse. During riding, most of the communication is dependent on body-to-body interfaces between the horse's back, sides, and mouth and the rider's seat (seat bones and crotch), legs, and hands. The communication is, however, mediated through equipment like the saddle and the pressure from a bit in the horse's mouth. Since the saddle and bridle are the contact points between rider and horse, it is important for a good communication that they fit the horse and suit the rider. A crucial part for the rider is to be able to combine or "time" her signs in accordance to the feedback that s/he gets from the horse. Even if

unable to speak, a horse uses its body language (for instance mouth, ears and tail) to communicate with the human. The horse can also choose to resist to do what the rider asks it to do, for instance by bolting or rearing or refusing to perform specific movements or jump over fences.



The rider communicates with the horse through the reins (Photo: H.J. Blokhuis)

**Riding as practical knowledge.** For experienced riders, the interaction between rider and horse is based on *practical knowledge* that the rider acquires through experience, meaning that s/he learns how to ride by spending time in the saddle. In *The Tacit Dimension*, Michael Polanyi argues that practical knowledge is built on “tacit knowledge” or “tacit knowing,” indicating that “we know more than we can say,” since we have a lot of knowledge that is embodied and cannot (in most cases) be put in words (4). He suggests that tacit knowing includes both intellectual and practical kinds of knowing, both *knowing what* and *knowing how* (7). However, neither is ever present without the other. An educated horse also has some kind of practical knowledge, since it has learned to respond in specific ways to different signals from the rider and is thus able to know how to perform different skills.

As an experienced rider, I have spent hours and hours together with horses, learning the nature of horses. I have also learned to be attentive to the horse’s, but also to my own, actions while riding, and I use my body feeling to decide how to adjust my body, as well as to read the bodily reaction of my horse. My body reacts immediately and intuitively to the signs and movements of the horse. How to sit on the horse and how to use my body to communicate with him has been internalized in my own body, and I feel “at home” on top of my horse. During all the time that I and my horse have spent together, we have created a relation built on a mutual understanding and a feel for reading each other’s bodies. Maybe one could even say that we have created a shared practical knowledge? Even if I know how to communicate with Darwin, it is very

difficult to explain the embodied and intuitive knowledge that I use while riding. It is situated in my body and is built on subjective and individual experience that is personal and differs between riders. However, the reflected knowledge used in riding, as for example how to manage a half-pass to the right, is easier to describe in words.

What kind of knowledge is needed to become a good rider? Here, I will use my understanding of three of the approaches to knowledge defined by Aristotle in book VI of *Nicomachean Ethics*. The first is *episteme* that concerns theoretical *knowing why*, and is related to scientific knowledge, meaning knowledge that cannot be otherwise (140). The second is *techne*, or art that denotes technical *knowing how* to make things or how to act to achieve a certain goal, and is realized by *poiesis*, meaning making or production (141-142). The third, *phronesis* or practical wisdom, is the moral disposition to act wisely and prudently (with practical common sense) (142-143). *Phronesis* is a combination of intellectual and moral virtue that guides us when we face challenges that need to be dealt with “on the spot” (Dorseth 192). It is intuitive and embodied and guides us when we decide how and also *when* to act in a particular situation with a particular individual. It is practical and learned by experience. Aristotle also defined the form of action distinctive to *phronesis* as *praxis* or “doing” action, involving practical reasoning of what is wise and proper to do in a given situation (146).

As a rider, I have learned, mainly through lectures and reading books and manuals, what cues to use when communicating with the horse and *why*. I know why I need to put myself in a position that is close to Darwin’s point of gravity to make it possible for us to move together in a good balance. By practical experience I have learnt *how* to apply the different aids and how to interpret and predict Darwin’s responses, depending on his personality and daily mood. Moreover, when riding I use a combination of feel and previous experience to decide *when* to apply the different cues or aids, as described in my narrative when trying to ride a half-pass to the right:

First it does not work at all and I realize that my gaze needs to be directed more towards where we are heading. I try to be clearer with my leading rein aid and I need to keep my right leg more steady towards his sides to be able to control the movements of his inner leg.

When Darwin and I run into a problem, I try to feel what I need to do and act immediately “on the spot.” This could be identified as the *praxis of riding*. I interpret that there is always an integration between *how* and *when*. When, for instance, performing a



specific exercise, Darwin's actions and reactions guide how I should adjust my body position and how and when to use my different aids.

Through my doings when riding, I exhibit *phronesis*, since my practical wisdom helps me to act in a certain way in the given situation. I believe that a combination of *episteme*, *techne*, and *phronesis* is needed to become a skilled rider, and that they are hard to distinguish. However, a rider should always act on the basis of what is good for the horse.

I believe that I have a moral responsibility to be attentive to Darwin's reactions and to what he communicates to me through his body, since misuse of a non-human animal could lead to damage and pain that could jeopardize his welfare. However, even if I try to do my best, I can never be sure how Darwin experiences our training session. I can only try to be open to his actions and reactions, and hope that he enjoys the riding as much as I do.

I have been riding most of my life and I am deeply involved in the traditions of riding. My whole social life has been shaped by the life at the stable. In earlier days, competing in sport dressage was part of my identity as a rider, and I focused on making good results. Nowadays I ride for recreation and continue to participate in dressage lessons with Darwin every second week. My goal is to make him balanced, supple, able to move in self-carriage<sup>2</sup>, and to move in what is often called "harmony," which means moving together without tension in an aesthetically pleasing manner. Even if I have been riding all my life, I find new perspectives on my communication with Darwin every day.

**Equestrian feel — highly valued among riders.** "Equestrian feel" (sometimes also called "equestrian tact") is identified as the complicated skill of how (and when) to apply and how to combine the rider's signs in interaction with the horse (Zetterqvist Blokhuis and Lundgren 579). Feel has been emphasized as the invisible quality of every good rider who is communicating with her horse in a stable, sensitive and relaxed manner (Geikie and Morris 26). This feel is strongly connected to the rider's body awareness and to the ability to intuitively and immediately attune to the actions and reactions of the horse. It has thus been recognised that equestrian feel is highly valued among riders (Zetterqvist Blokhuis and Lundgren 573).

In *The Complete Training of Horse and Rider*, the famous trainer Podhajsky compares equestrian feel with the hearing of a musician. Game writes about the importance of the rider being able to feel the horse's movements and suggests that learning to feel this is

as an “inhabitation”: “It is through rhythm that we, horse and rider, come to inhabit riding, as a musician inhabits a piece of music, or a writer a text” (8).

The concept of human feelings has been defined in many different ways. Damasio distinguishes between emotions and feelings, and suggests that emotions and related reactions are aligned with the body, while feeling is when we experience a bodily emotion and is thus connected to our mind (88). Ratcliffe offers a phenomenological view on bodily feeling, suggesting that we are always in a special condition (a feeling of being in-the-world) that can be felt in our body and determines how we experience different events (236). Our feelings are bodily and open up towards the world. Damasio and Ratcliffe agree that feelings are the basis for thoughts and thus important for our thinking and our daily life when, for instance, making decisions.

I believe that the feeling used in riding could be identified as “tacit knowledge,” meaning that it is situated in the rider’s body and feeling. Equestrian feel could also be seen as an expression of *phronesis*, since it guides the rider in how and when to use the different signs.

**Three theories about interaction between rider and horse.** The interaction between rider and horse is complex, and there are many different approaches to look upon that interaction. I will present three that I consider the most relevant today. One is the *behavioristic* approach, which concentrates on what stimuli (signals) the rider gives to the horse and on how the horse responds to these signals. In the last decade, this approach has been identified as “Equitation Science,” building on theories of how animals learn (McGreevy and McLean 104-107). Its focus is mainly on the outcome of the human’s actions, and in this view, in my eyes, the horse is perceived as an “automaton,” and the interaction between rider and horse can be measured objectively, for instance by using a pressure mat placed under the saddle and/or a rein tension meter that registers the contact between the rider’s hand and the horse’s mouth. Darwin has learned to slow down when I squeeze the reins with my hands, as reflected in my narrative.

Another approach builds on *Zoanthropology* (influenced by Posthumanism), which views the interaction between rider and horse as a *cognitive* process. The relationship between rider and horse is seen as a dialogue. In this view, it is recognized that horses have their own minds and social needs, meaning that horses have cognitive abilities that allow them to take initiatives and interact with each other and their environment (de Giorgio and Schoorl 21). Communication between rider and horse takes place when

both partners are consciously involved in the cognitive experience. Recent studies have shown that horses are able to communicate their desires to humans and are, for instance, capable of actively choosing whether they prefer to wear a blanket or not by pointing at a signboard (Mejdell, Buvik, Jørgensen, and Boe 69). Another study showed that horses are able to use “referential communication” by sending visual and tactile signals to their caretakers in a problem-solving situation where a food item was hidden in a bucket that was accessible only by the caretaker (Malavasi and Huber 899). When riding Darwin, I feel that he is actively involved in our riding experience by the way our bodies and minds seem to change each other.

In a third approach the interaction between horse and rider focuses on the corporeality of the two bodies moving together, where the bodies of rider and horse “merge into one.” Bornemark suggests that horse and rider could form a “centaur motion” (referring to the mythological creature of the centaur with the upper body of a human and the lower body of a horse). She writes that “an equipage contains a horse and a rider, we are two different creatures with two different corporeality’s coming from different directions. But in our meeting, when the battle and struggle has calmed down, we can develop a common corporeality containing a common gravity, balance, direction and mood” (205, translated from Swedish). In this view, rider and horse are both embodied subjects in their own right that take part in an active process of “becoming with,” where both parts affect each other and are transformed to an equipage where the border between the two is less distinguishable. This is reflected in my description of riding Darwin: “We move flesh-to-flesh, our bodies merge and I don’t know where Darwin’s body starts and mine ends.”

There are relevant aspects of the interaction between rider and horse brought up in each of these three approaches. On the one hand, I agree that riding is a matter of pressure and pressure release, as suggested in the behavioristic approach. However, the horse is an active part in the riding experience, and the communication between rider and horse cannot be reduced to seeing the horse as an “automaton” responding (or not responding) in the desired way to the rider’s signals. The question is whether it is possible to combine sport dressage, where the horse should be obedient to the rider’s signals to achieve high marks from the judges, with the idea of shared experience between rider and horse. I would certainly welcome training methods that take the mental experiences of the horse more into consideration. The third approach is also relevant for me since the rider’s and horse’s bodies need to be intertwined to become an equipage. This approach also recognizes the emotions and feelings involved in the interspecies interaction.

**How do I look at the interaction with my horse during riding?** I experience the interaction between Darwin and me as a constant communication in which we are both subjects. My whole body is attuned to my horse's body. We move together in the same direction and share a mutual understanding. In rare moments, when we are in the same movement and in the same rhythm, I experience that we move "as one" and it feels as if our bodies are connected, moving in harmony. The interaction feels light and easy and I have the feeling that I just need to think about what movement or exercise to perform, to make it happen. This is the good feeling that I am striving for when riding. It feels like my thoughts go directly through my body to the horse's body and my equestrian feel guides me. I interpret it as if we can read each other's bodies, and it feels like the boundaries between our bodies are indistinct or blurred. This is in line with the description of equestrian feel and also with the suggestion that talented riders even "behave and move like a horse" (Despret 115).

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty stresses that body and mind cannot be separated. He states "I am not in front of my body, I am *in* my body, or rather I *am* my body." And "I am conscious of the world by means of my body" (151). In *The Thinking Hand*, Pallasmaa emphasizes, following the ideas of Merleau-Ponty, that a dancer or soccer player "think" with their body and leg, the craftsman and sculptor with their hands, and composers with their ears (116). Pallasmaa also suggests that a sportsman needs to "embody the task" by making it an ingredient of the athlete's sense of self (83). This is in line with my experience during riding: I "think" and react with my body and my body and mind is thus inseparable. I experience my horse through my body, indwell in his energy and it becomes almost like my "second skin."

However, when I for instance want to bend Darwin's neck a little and relax his inner side, he protests. In this situation, we lose the nice connection and instead we struggle against each other. Darwin and I divide into two different bodies and species and I lose the nice feeling of Darwin being my "sense of self."

If I sit on a chair at home and close my eyes, I can get the feeling of riding a half-pass to the right in my own body. This is in line with Polanyi, who stresses that practical knowledge is situated "in our bodies" and that the body develops a knowledge about how to perform a specific movement (15-16).

Riding also has ethical components, since the actions of the rider may affect the horse's welfare, and thus require moral consideration. Several authors have described the relation between rider and horse as "partnership" (Birke and Hockenhull 94-97; Wipper

67-68; Game 1). In the article *Language, Power, and the Training of Horses*, Patton, however, argues that riders' rhetoric about dialogue and partnership between rider and horse is somewhat misleading as far as horse training is concerned (90). He suggests that each command given from the rider is aimed to achieve an absolute obedience from a trained animal, and furthermore that training and riding involve the exercise of power over the animal. In my opinion, the relation between me and Darwin will inevitably be asymmetric, since I am the one that initiates the goals of our training and the content of our communication. I decide when to ride and what to do while riding, since he is unable to speak for himself.

When sensing Darwin's body language and signs, I need to ask myself: How does he perceive our relationship? Are my interpretations of Darwin's cues correct? How do I act if he does not understand my signs? If I put too high demands on Darwin his welfare may be at stake. On the other hand, without asking my horse for a next step in the training, there will be no progress. My goals guide when to take a next step, rather than Darwin's. I need to act, but I have to decide what is suitable to do in a particular situation. In this case my *phronesis* guides me in what is the right thing to do.

In my view, the relationship between rider and horse should be built on trust and confidence. Darwin and I share a mutual experience and understanding during riding, and as a result of our interaction, we both change.

**Riding as an embodied and mental praxis.** As demonstrated in my narrative, riding involves bodies and minds of both rider and horse. When riding Darwin I absorb his movements and I experience a common corporeality as he carries me along. He communicates his emotions through his body movements and reactions while I express my body feeling of being in-the-world, as suggested by Ratcliffe (107).

When learning a movement, Merleau-Ponty suggests that the body "catches and understands" the movement, and that "a movement is learned when the body has understood it, when it has incorporated it into its world" (139). I have, for example, understood the movement of half-pass, since it has been incorporated in my body. In riding, the knowing does not come from descriptions of movements. Instead, a rider must experience riding for it to make sense to her. My actions during riding are built on a "body schema" of movements (143). I have learned this body schema by spending many hours in the saddle, and the knowledge is thus in my body. My body is the means with which my horse and I communicate a wide range of emotions and desires.



Maurstad, Davis and Cowles use the term “intra-acting” to describe the interaction between rider and horse. They stress that both human and horse change as a result from their meeting and that it is a process of “becoming with.” They write that “as relations grow, horses and humans, respectively, are changing, adapting and attuning to each other in order to communicate well and engage in their activities in meaningful ways” (332). In the interaction with Darwin, he changes me and I change him. Instead of being two bodies directed towards each other, we are two bodies moving in the same direction.

Darwin uses his body to interact with me and I try to be attentive to his body and to “let go” both mentally and with my muscles, allowing my body to follow and trust him. I try to effortlessly flow in harmony with Darwin’s movements while he takes up my movements and body language, as displayed in my narrative. He is a large and strong animal and most of the time I feel confident that I will be able to control his speed and that he will not run faster than I wish or jump to the side. However, Darwin also needs to put his trust in me and to be willing to join me when riding in the woods, and also to let me communicate with him in our training sessions.

When riding Darwin, I try to be present and focus on our interaction. Heidegger (129-131) writes about being in the right “*stimmung*” (mood or attunement) and that our “background emotions” play an important role in how we approach different tasks. In my opinion, rider and horse need to be attentive to each other’s emotions and mood to be able to achieve a fruitful interaction. Horses can differ in mood depending, for instance, on the weather, what kind of work they did the previous day, and how they feel in their bodies. Since Darwin is a very sensitive horse, I need to breathe calmly and mentally prepare for riding. Sometimes when I am stressed or irritated it has a negative effect on our relation. My body gets tense and it is more difficult for me to be attentive to Darwin’s body and to perceive his actions and reactions, and to reach a good interaction. Darwin and I are two bodies that live completely different lives, and we need to find a way to meet. I believe that the rider’s attention to the horse is one of the key factors in riding. Another one is the emotional part, and that one is prepared to “open up” for the other.

**How do I reflect on the interaction between me and my horse while riding?** When riding, I use a combination of equestrian feel and reflection. I often begin by intuitively “feeling” the horse through my body, but then start to reflect on how to interpret the horse, asking myself what I can request from my horse this particular day. I make decisions based on the feeling I have for my own and my horse’s body and reactions as

stated in my narrative: "How is his [Darwin's] rhythm and speed? Are his movements supple or stiff?" I pick up the signs from Darwin's body, and from this I decide what exercises to perform, adjusting to the horse's daily mood and condition. During riding, I alternate between feeling Darwin's and my own common corporeality and movements using my body feel and experience, and consciously reflecting over our performance. My attention moves between the position of my own body (for instance legs or hands) and Darwin's mouth or hindquarters.

After riding, I often reflect on the riding session, analyzing what went well and what I need to improve next time I ride. Dewey writes about the relation between doing and undergoing, and that during practice we alter between activity and passivity. First we do something and then we perceive and experience, followed by a new action, and this relation between *doing* and *undergoing* is what give us the depth and meaning of the experience (45). I need to wait for Darwin's response before I give him the next signal or aid.

During riding, I often remember "snap-shots" of what I heard from trainers or physiotherapists or what I have read in scientific literature or in books. In these moments, I explicitly reflect on my own actions in the light of these thoughts to try to address a current problem. Sometimes I focus on details in my seat or on how I use my body, while other times my thoughts move in various directions and I let my senses and intuitive feeling guide me. This is reflected in my narrative: "The surrounding forest seems to disappear and my consciousness gets dimmed as all kind of unreflective thoughts circle in my head."

This can also happen when I have been riding for a while and both Darwin's and my own body relax. I let my equestrian feel or intuition take over and it is like turning on the "autopilot," and everything feels natural and easy. This is similar to the feeling of "flow" that has been reported by several sportsmen (Csikszentmihalyi 28-29).

When performing an exercise together with Darwin, I have a bodily sense from earlier experience of how it should feel when it works out fine, and I try to find the same sensation once again. My attention alternates between feeling my own and Darwin's body and movements and reflecting on what I need to change in my body position and/or signs.

I adjust my weight and legs, placing myself in a position close to Darwin's point of gravity, and he reacts by putting more weight on his hind legs

and moving his hindquarters forward and at the same time to the side in a nice half-pass.

Sometimes I experience that there is a conflict between thinking and feeling in riding. When I focus on a detail that I need to improve it occasionally has a negative effect on my feel. In these moments I need to “let go” instead of thinking and fighting against my body, making me more stiff and less sensitive to the signs from the horse, and to “melt” into his movements. This is in line with Pallasma, who emphasizes that there is a possible conflict between two kinds of sensibility, *conscious intellect* and *unconscious intuition* (96-97). I believe that riding requires a large proportion of unconscious intuition, due to the fact that riding is strongly embodied. The rider should, however, also use her conscious intellect to pick up signals from the horse and to deepen her learning of praxis in riding.

**Epilogue.** The aim of this paper was to describe, interpret, and analyze what is happening between rider and horse during riding. I have applied theories of practical knowledge to explore the praxis of riding and used my own experience from many years of riding and teaching rider-horse combinations.

The method used in this article was autoethnography where there is a continuous interplay between concrete experiences and abstract reasoning that could be imagined as a spiral or loop. I suggest that autoethnography with narratives that describe and express personal relations between riders and horses and that are emotion-led may be useful to complement general instruction manuals that focus on riding technique. There are, however, risks involved in the use of autoethnography. For example, it could be difficult for researchers applying this method to detect taken-for-granted assumptions and blind spots related to the area studied. I have tried to do my best to be attentive to these risks. I experience the interaction between rider and horse as a constant *communication* involving the bodies and minds of both actors. Rider and horse are both embodied subjects taking part in an active process of “becoming with.” As a result of the interaction, both parts change and adapt to each other resulting in a shared practical knowledge.

Most riding manuals focus on *techne*, describing technically what signals (aids) to give to the horse to receive a certain response and how to perform specific movements. I cannot deny that some parts of the communication taking place between horse and rider are based on stimulus-response, as suggested in the *behavioristic* approach, meaning that riders use their seat and signals as “commands” that horses have been

trained to respond to. It is, for instance, possible for a skilled rider to mount Darwin and make him perform specific exercises, even if the interaction will not be optional. However, to build a trustful relationship during riding, I am convinced that the rider's as well as the horse's emotions and feelings need to be taken into account. Riding should be based on the understanding of the horse as a non-human animal in possession of its own mind. The horse's consciousness, emotion, and intelligence should be taken into account during riding, as suggested in the posthumanistic view. However, we humans should be aware that the relation between rider and horse is always asymmetrical, since exercise of power over the horse is always present. We also have a responsibility for animals in our care.

I suggest that when riding and teaching riding, more emphasis should be placed on how to interpret and attend to the horse's behavior, body language, and reactions. Every rider needs to "take the horse into one's heart." What is the horse trying to say? The question of how to build a good relation based on trust and partnership between human and horse needs to be highlighted. *Techné* always precedes *phronesis*, meaning that the rider first needs to learn how to use his/her body language and signs to communicate with the horse. *Phronesis* requires experience and reflection, and learning how to ride is a life-long journey that demands personal commitment. Every rider has her own unique way of riding and every horse is an individual with its own body motions and mind, and it takes lots of time for a rider-horse combination to find a mutual understanding and to find their own way to relate to the world. This needs to be taken into account in the learning experience.

And what about equestrian feel? I believe that there are two different kinds of equestrian feel. One is connected to the rider's feeling of the horse *through* her body, and it also includes the rider's reflections. An example is when I feel through my body (my hands) that Darwin tries to increase his speed. I evaluate the quality of our bodily communication and react by squeezing the reins to make him slow down. This could be expressed as an "outside" equestrian feel. A second kind of equestrian feel is experienced when I feel Darwin's movements in my body. This feeling appears, for instance, when Darwin moves in a nice half-pass and everything feels natural and easy. I experience my horse as a "second skin" and my body reacts immediate and intuitively. This is a kind of "inner" equestrian feel, like a centaur when rider and horse move as one body. The feeling of the movement is atomized and situated in the "backbone" of the rider. This could be comparable with "flow" or "optimal experience" as described by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (28-29) when referring to the experience of deep enjoyment, creativity, and a total involvement with life that has been expressed by several successful sportsmen. Maybe this "inner" equestrian feel could

also be seen as an expression of phronesis, since it is learned by experience and guided by what is good for the human in itself (and hopefully also for the horse) rather than aiming at a specific outcome.

The knowledge and insight gained in this study could be interesting in relation to other embodied practices involving subjectivity and interaction. This also includes the relationship between corporeal activities and reflection.

I believe that there is a need for new teaching strategies in riding where more emphasis is put on equestrian feel and on how riders' experience their own, as well as the horses', bodies and minds. A riding instructor/trainer needs to be able to recognize both rider and horse as subjects, to take into account the rider's ability to feel her own and the horse's body, and to be able to support each individual rider-horse combination's active process of "becoming with."

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### **Notes**

1. Half-pass is a lateral movement seen in dressage, in which the horse moves forward and sideways at the same time. The horse is bent in the direction of travel.
2. Self-carriage is the horse's ability to properly carry himself on his own. When moving in self-carriage, the horse is responsible for his own body position and does not rely on the rider keeping the horse in a proper position with his/her hands.

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