

Whips in horse-human relations

Most people, and some animals, are familiar with the whip's properties. As a material object, it is a little thin stick. In the hands of a human, it can inflict fear and pain. Knowledge about pain qualities is deeply embedded in most human cultures. Its bare presence is often enough to scare and raise concerns about abuse. As such, the whip has tremendous powers – human use through thousands of years have given it a sort of agency – it performs, tells of properties and powers, even lying still in a human hand.

In this article, I will discuss whip powers in more detail. I will argue that apart from the obvious, causing pain and scaring, the whip has more subtle agencies. There are whip properties that are lesser known, properties that becomes visible to the user only through relational engagement with it. To shed light on these properties I will refer to practices among horse riders. Most cultures do not longer whip people. Horse riders however, often have a whip in their hand while riding. The kind of whip, its length and shape, can vary with the various exercises that horse and rider perform. Accordingly, many riders have several types. They all work the same, however, both in obvious and more subtle ways.

Data for my discussion comes from many years of own practice as a horse rider. I have witnessed the whip's function among companion riders over decades, and I have experienced its agencies myself. Like other amateur riders, I also visit well-known Norwegian Internet-sites, like hest.no, hestemarked.no and dyrenett.no. I will refer to some blog statements from these sites that express the many functions of the whip with reference to riders' own lived experiences. The blogs were accessed in 2011, presented in more detail in a Norwegian article on the subject (Maurstad 2013). Unfortunately, they are no longer accessible on the Internet.

The theoretical perspectives that underpin my analysis are museological and performative explorations of materiality. Museological scholars like Miller (2005) and Pearce (2010) have focused humans as material bodies, engaging in material environments, producing social and individual habits on those grounds. We grow up in social groups with clear expectations of how to use everyday facilities and objects, and what the relations between these objects are. And as actor-network scholar Law (1999) holds, it is the relations that objects engage in that form and shape them. Along the same scholarly perspectives, speaks Mol (1999) to 'ontological politics'. Talk and practice shape what we otherwise would think of as substance, as ontological, and things then, come in many versions. The fact that entities are becoming; growing through relational engagements between intra-acting parties, inspires philosopher Barad's perspectives on agency: "Agency is not an attribute, but the ongoing reconfigurations of the world" (Barad 2007: 141).

These perspectives are highly relevant for understanding the whip as a material engagement. The whip is familiar to our culture. Its agency is developed in relations between humans and horses. Here it inspires and guide human actions. It gains an identity to which there are human

and horse counterparts. One particular relational identity is assigned in modern riding theory. Here, the whip is talked of and seen as an extension of the human body.

The extended arm

Horses and humans that work together do so by a particular language – signals and cues that humans have invented and trained horses to understand and comply to. In riding, these signals ingrain as bodily expertise; cues sensed and signaled from human bodies to horse bodies. For instance, to move the horse's hind leg, the human uses her own leg to put pressure to the hind part of the horse body. The rider also positions and signals her wish through weight, reins, gaze, posture and mind. In essence, the whole body is engaged in the exercise. When the horse responds correctly, pressure is released. Working through pressure and release is called negative reinforcement, and is the most common training practice. In contrast, positive reinforcement aims at having the horse do exercises for rewards. When she chooses the work that the rider wants for her, she gets some benefits that she likes, be it a rub of the neck or a carrot.

The pressure exerted in riding should be gentle. Horses sense a small fly sitting on their skin. This fact is often used to explain to novice riders that pressure should not be physically exhausting. Horse responsiveness is treasured by humans, and being able to move body parts with elasticity and strength is also regarded as sound for the horse. Horses need proper training in order to gain and maintain the physiological strength to carry their riders. A skilled horse has more than strength though. She has learned a range of movements, can differentiate between gaits and speeds, is attentive and does everything with high precision and perfectly timed to the rider's command. The skilled rider exerts body movements that are miniscule. Being embodied knowledge, the work that lies behind various leg use, as well as use of seat, hands, arms and postures, are hardly visible. High level dressage riders, like Nathorst (2002) stresses that the whip should never be used for punishment. In her sport, it is forbidden to carry a whip while competing. One can be used in the practice area, though, plus at prize-giving ceremonies.

In summary, invisibility and gentleness should ideally characterize the bodily work that horse and rider engage in. When using the whip, it too should adhere to these principles. The whip is assigned the task of assisting the bodily cues that are already used by the rider, and known by the horse. It is seen as an integrated part of the body, also often referred to as an 'extended arm'.

The bloggers' whip

Statements and reflections presented by bloggers reveal that riders are familiar with, not only using the whip, but also various whip properties. Many start their riding careers in riding schools, and instructors are said to insist on whip use. This insistence relates to another

quality of the horse-human relationship. Horses are performing at humans' command, and although some are eager to move with an unskilled human, others figure quite soon that with a novice on top, the job need not be very strenuous. Having 600 kilos of unwilling flesh underneath a 60 kilo human body, the whip comes in handy. For instruction, horse and human have to move in the arena, and movements are secured once the whip is brought into the relationship.

Reflecting and speaking from a rich whip experience base, bloggers' statements provide a nuanced understanding of whip properties. Some state they use it in specific situations. The horse is told what to do, and if the rider perceives that she 'does not listen', the rider will smack her. Another person explains whip use for situations where the rider senses that the horse loses her concentration. A 'quick smack' then will usually keep the horse more concentrated for a while.

These wanted effects, a willing and attentive horse, can come however, with whip use that does not involve hitting the horse. Riders say that in situations where the horse becomes somewhat uninterested, they can smack their own boots. The sound of the whip is often enough to awaken the horse.

Pain is also discussed. One blogger was smacked by a friend, in a jokingly manner, and realized then how painful it was. Identifying with the whipped horse, the person became skeptical to whip use thereafter. Another blogger questions how the horse can work well if it hurts the place the whip struck.

Other respondents have quit using their whips. 'Having thought things through' one blogger says, the person has found that using it was not fair to the horse. Today the person is proud to solve situations without this instrument. Another person speaks of regret and guilt. When handling the horse this regret is sought dealt with by giving the horse an 'extra praise, or a hug'.

Summing up, bloggers do have experience with hitting horses with the whip. The gentle extended arm, as defined in riding theory, is advocated as useful for dressage exercises by some, while others deals with the fearful qualities of the whip. Although these blogs represent a small glimpse into riders' whip use, the points that are made indicate that there are many riders that use the whip as a means to reprimand or punish the horse. Others regret this kind of former use and no longer hit their horses.

Whip relational properties

The whip then comes in many versions – and to each version there is a relational pair, a horse and a human. Together they make up a triad. As I have shown, these triads differ. In some triads, whipping is frequent. In others the whip lies on the ground, leaving only two parties to partake in the actual ride. I include the whip in this triad though, as it is often a committed

choice, perhaps negotiated between horse and rider, that has rendered it to this position in the triad. And while the first group is frustrated by an unwilling horse, the latter group is frustrated by a too willing whip. As one respondent stated it: ‘The whip was supposed to be an extended arm. Suddenly it became a means for punishing!’

The rider’s reflection is illustrative for what I call whip subtle agency. Bearing Barad’s definition of agency in mind, agency is a relational quality. Having learned about the whip’s scaring qualities in culture, through films, exhibitions, and other places where material culture is taught, riders embark on their horse journeys with the same knowledge as other people. It is quite a stretch to expect it to be easy to re-learn and re-define material object properties in order to change the relational agency of the whip.

Such work does take place though. There are negotiations over use, both between singular triads, and in one and same triad over its life-time. Riders are taught that signals to horses should be gentle and tender, and that a whip is a useful extension of a human body. They are also taught that the whip can be a good aid to create an attentive horse, but that the ideal is the gentle version. They negotiate the ideal through hard work – through talk and practice. But habits are hard to change. No wonder this material object claims its known position in what is experienced as sudden moments. Riders try to follow the new prescription of what is a whip, but the whip itself provides resistance. It offers something, a quicker solution to problems. It offers more though. It enables human materialities that hit horses, and horses that taste the whip.

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