

## Avoid the Trap of Anthropomorphism

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“Anthropomorphism” – ouch – sounds rather serious, doesn’t it? Well, this is not a disease you can catch, but it is something you must be careful to avoid. So what is it? Anthropomorphism is the attribution of human motivation, characteristics or behavior to inanimate objects, animals or natural phenomena. Our anthropomorphic perceptions and ideas influence how we interact with animals. If we are anthropomorphic in our riding, we become certain that our horses enjoy doing the same things we enjoy and sometimes force our horse to do something it really does not enjoy and for which our horse is not well-suited.



The ability to “read” your horse and understand his motivations will help you achieve joyful cooperation and avoid anthropomorphizing. It is important to understand the nature of the horse and to keep in mind the horse’s instinctive characteristics. Horses possess a natural and powerful herd instinct. They are not loners. Yet so often, a horse’s work causes him to live and work alone. You can both use and fulfill your horse’s herding desire by developing a close and trusting relationship with him or her. Your horse’s herd instinct becomes a source of motivation, and you can, in some ways, replace the members of the herd for him using the Centered Riding approach.

In my book “Centered Riding 2: Further Explorations,” I make a comparison of a horse approaching a jump with ears back and body stiff to another horse coming to the same fence with ears pricked, his body balanced, and the strides flowing. The difference between these performances comes down to joyful cooperation versus dull obedience. All too often, we see horses doing their work because they must know that it will be worse for them if they don’t. This is essentially the premise of training through reward and punishment. The result is a horse that is doing what you want but doing it without joy. Though the horse is being obedient, it is not true cooperation and you do not have control. This is “anthropomorphizing” or projecting your motives onto your horse. The ability to more accurately “read” your horse and understand his motivations will help you achieve this joyful cooperation.

We must be careful that we take an honest look at ourselves in relation to a specific horse and make sure that we are not falling into the trap of anthropomorphizing. Is the horse really suited to you and you to him? Do you love him from a sentimental point of view because he is your first horse or because he is so beautiful? Does your horse really enjoy the work or type of riding you give him? If your rides with a particular horse are often alarming or frustrating, you must evaluate whether this is a horse with problems that can be overcome with time and improved riding, or if you are perhaps anthropomorphizing his desires and abilities with your own. Be honest with yourself. Do you love your horse because you have so much fun working with him, or because you cannot resist a challenge? If your horse is not suitable for you, perhaps he would be much happier with someone else or doing a different job.

By being determined not to fall into the trap of anthropomorphizing, you will be sure that your horse is suited to you. Assuming that you are satisfied with your equine partner and he is well-suited for you and the type of riding he will be doing with you, Centered Riding can help you achieve a greater harmony with him, improve his movement, and help you to ride correctly through body control and improved awareness.