

Article

Religion, Animals, and Contemplation [†]

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[†] In memory of Noir, Kara, Katahdin and Opal.

Abstract: Animals teach each other. For humans open to trans-species and inter-species dialogue and interaction, animal-others offer important insights into, invocations of and models for diverse and alternative modes of perceiving, experiencing, relating, and being. They in turn challenge anthropocentric conceptions of consciousness and offer glimpses of and perhaps inspiration for increased awareness and presence. Might the current academic vogue of “equity, diversity, and inclusion” (EDI; or whichever order you prefer) even extend to “non-human” animals? Might this also represent one essential key to the human aspiration for freedom, wellness, and justice? The present article explores the topic of “religion and animals” through the complementary dimension of “contemplation”. Developing a fusion of Animal Studies, Contemplative Studies, Daoist Studies, and Religious Studies, I explore the topic with particular consideration of the indigenous Chinese religion of Daoism with a comparative and cross-cultural sensibility. I draw specific attention to the varieties of Daoist animal engagement, including animal companionship and becoming/being animal. Theologically speaking, this involves recognition of the reality of the Dao (sacred) manifesting through each and every being, and the possibility of inter/trans-species communication, relationality, and even identification. In the process, I suggest that “animal contemplation”, a form of contemplative practice and contemplative experience that places “the animal question” at the center and explores the possibility (actuality) of “shared animality”, not only offers important opportunities for becoming fully human (animal), but also represents one viable contribution to resolving impending (ongoing) ecological collapse, or at least the all-too-real possibility of a world without butterflies, bees, and birdsong.

Keywords: animal liberation; animal welfare; animals; blood; compassion; contemplation; contemplative practice; contemplative psychology; Contemplative Studies; Daoism (Taoism); Daoist Studies; immortals; insight; meditation; prayer; religion; Religious Studies; sages; saints; theology; wisdom



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*O dieses ist das Tier, das es nicht gibt.
Sie wußtens nicht und habens jeden Falls . . .
Sie nährten es mit keinem Korn,
Nur immer mit der Möglichkeit, es sei.*

*This is the animal that has never been.
They never knew it, but [loved] it nonetheless . . .
They fed it not with corn,
But only with the possibility of being.*

—Die Sonette an Orpheus (Sonnets to Orpheus), Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926)

Human beings, as *animal mythicum*, *animal religiösum* and *animal theologicum*, apparently are the only animal who engages in religious activities and thinks about divinity, although reverence may be a trans-human and even inter-species state. As such, humans also reflect on their/our place in the larger cosmos, world, and “animal kingdom”, including the creation of accompanying mythic narratives. This involves types of engagements (and disengagements) with other-animals and animal-others, animals who have (or should have) lives of their own. In addition to considering the place of animals in/as human religion, we may explore religion and animals in relation to various other “Xs”. In the

present article, I focus on “religion, animals, and contemplation”, specifically the additional pairing (actually triad) of contemplative practice and contemplative experience via Contemplative Studies. I begin with a discussion of “religion, animals, and contemplation”, including the potential challenges and contributions of a “contemplative approach” to Animal Studies and Religious Studies, or perhaps “Animal/Religious Studies”. Here and throughout I draw upon my specialist knowledge of Daoism (Taoism) to provide specific examples, with attentiveness to the “language question”, for deeper reflection and understanding of “the question of the animal”. In Section 2, I explore Daoist views about and relationships with animals, especially as informed by contemplative practice. This includes “animal-observation” and “animal-companionship”. As Daoism tends to have high anthropology and high zoology, in which animality is generally positive and shared animality is a defining characteristic, or at least a Daoist contemplative aspiration, this indigenous Chinese and now-global religion raises various questions about assumed anthropocentrism, zoocentrism, speciesism, and humanism. Specifically, classical and foundational Daoist cosmological, soteriological and theological views point toward closer intersectionality among an assumed (imagined?) animality/humanity/divinity divide. I will conclude by considering “the possibility of being” as one in which we embrace, cultivate, and actualize “becoming/being animal”.

1. On Religion, Animals, and Contemplation

To think about contemplation in relation to religion and animals, it is helpful to briefly consider the notable contributions of Lévi-Strauss and Heidegger to Animal Studies, as well as potential omissions that attentiveness to the category of “the contemplative” might make visible. The emergence of Animal Studies (abbrev. AS), the interdisciplinary field dedicated to research and education on “animals” and the accompanying “question of the animal”, is often (mis)traced to the French anthropologist and ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss’ (1908–2009) *Le Totémisme aujourd’hui* (Lévi-Strauss 1962); *Totemism* (Lévi-Strauss 1963) (see, e.g., Wolfe 2003; Calarco 2008; Gross and Valley 2012; Weil 2012). There Lévi-Strauss tells us:

The animals [*les animaux*] in totemism cease to be solely or principally creatures which are feared, admired, or envied: their perceptible reality permits the embodiment of ideas and relations conceived by speculative thought on the basis of empirical observations. We can understand, too, that natural species [*les espèces naturelles*] are chosen not because they are “good to eat” [*bonnes à manger*] but because they are “good to think” [*bonnes à penser*]. (Lévi-Strauss 1963, p. 89; French supplied by Louis Komjathy)

The latter phrase is often rendered as “good to think about/with/through” with *les animaux* supplied, thus resulting in “animals are good to think with” and reverse translated as “*les animaux sont bons à penser*”. Here, in addition to noting the connection with totemism and structuralist analysis, the (dis)appearance of animals with/in/as food and eating is important (see, e.g., Foer 2009; Garber 2008). Just as (human) animals “eat (other) animals”, they (we?) also “think (other) animals”, and, one might say, become thinking-eating animals in the process.

A slight counterpoint to this intellectual genealogy centers on the German philosopher Martin Heidegger’s (1889–1976) 1929–1930 seminar titled “Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik: Welt, Endlichkeit, Einsamkeit” (Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude; see Heidegger 1995), wherein Heidegger challenges the dominant modern Western European construction of human beings as *animal rationale* (see *animal technicum*, *animal linguarum*, and *animal religiosum*). For Heidegger, a pivotal dimension of human-being/being-human is as/in/through Dasein (lit., “being-there”), specifically as “world-forming” (*weltbildend*). We are individual beings participating in a larger context of being-and-time with awareness of suchness and the accompanying “facticity of death”. We are “thrown” into the world and towards “death as our ownmost possibility”. That is, our presence here, among other animals whom Heidegger defines as “poor-in-world” (*weltarm*) and who apparently do not have the same degree of freedom, self-determination,

and being-towards-death, is what makes us human (see, e.g., [Calarco and Atterton 2004](#); [Lindberg 2004](#); [Eldon 2006](#)).¹ Heidegger's apparent failure to adequately address "the question of the animal" led to the now-AS-canonical "The Animal That Therefore I Am" (2002; also [Derrida 2008](#)),² in which the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) explores the near-systemic neglect of "the animal" and the animality of humans by extension in Western philosophy (see, e.g., [Calarco and Atterton 2004](#); [Calarco 2008](#)). Beyond this Eurocentric trajectory, we might add the importance of considering indigenous ontologies and participatory modes (see, e.g., [Ingold \[1988\] 1994, 2000](#); [Smith 2012](#); [Freeman 1998](#)).

Let us pause briefly and apply these insights to a seminal article in Lévi-Strauss' own social scientific milieu, namely, the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz's (1926–2006) "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" (1972). In this deservedly influential piece, Geertz discusses the central importance of the cockfight as a Balinese cultural "symbol system": "It is a Balinese reading of Balinese experience; a story they tell themselves about themselves" (p. 82). Specifically, this social event is a mythic enactment of kinship ties, male virility ("cocks"), and symbolic capital. What Geertz does not describe adequately, at least from an AS perspective, is the actual "blood-sport" involved, a human spectacle in which "fighting roosters" are trained and forced to dismember each other for human entertainment and social (in)coherence. One might, in turn, rewrite this story from that perspective, perhaps even including the views of the roosters and the other members of their associated communities. I am thinking specifically of the "wives, children, and friends" (see [Stoppard 1967](#); [Rhys \[1966\] 1982](#); [Coetzee 1999](#); [Foster 2016](#))³. In the words of Rosencranz or Guildenstern, "There must have been a moment, at the beginning, where we could have said—no".

As we will return to these issues momentarily, specifically the erasure of animality and of "non-human" animal-lives both individually and collectively, I would like to begin this "contemplative inquiry into/about animals (ourselves)" by asking a more radical question. Beyond the utilitarian and exploitative relationality of "good to eat" and "good to think", are animals "good to be"? I mean this in at least four senses, namely, philosophical, theological, existential, and social. First, how is animality constructed and understood philosophically, including in the discipline of (Western) Philosophy? Are humans distinguished, *à la* Derrida's critique, as "more than animal" or even "not-animal"? This might be a place where the interdisciplinary field of Animal Studies, especially as informed by conservation biology and ecology, is more helpful: humans and chimpanzees share 99% of their/our DNA ([CSAC 2005](#)).⁴ What is the basis of the human/"non-human" animal (NHA) distinction? This also relates to ethics (and rights) as framed in terms of "reason" and something "beyond animals". Second, on a theological level, by which I mean views related to the more-than-human or beyond-the-merely-human, what is the relationship between humanity and divinity? Do humans have a privileged position in the cosmic order, and perhaps "divine capacities" that other animals supposedly do not? In the language of theism, does one have to become "less human", and perhaps "not animal" at all in order to become closer to god(s) ("God")? This relates to what might be thought of as the "immanence/transcendence scale", specifically the relationship of embodiment and world to some projected sacred beyond. These first two points inspire deeper inquiry on the animal/human/divinity relationship, including the "theology of animals/animality". Third, on an existential level, that is, a phenomenological, embodied, experiential and lived level related to meaning and purpose, where does animality fit? Is it possible that animality is the basis of our humanity, and that the (apparent) separation of the two is the end of both? Here I am specifically thinking of other capacities, such as awareness, intuition, and presence that may lead to deeper experiences of trans-human and inter-animal relationality, communication, and connection. Are there also forms of "alternative consciousness" and even "diverse intelligences" (e.g., bats, dolphins, elephants, elk, finches, lizards, mycelium, wolves)? Perhaps it is biomagnetism or sonar, not reason, that is the "pinnacle" of consciousness. This further relates to "contemplative psychology" (see [de Wit 1991](#); [Komjathy 2018](#)), which I will explore below. Finally, by "social", I do not mean human primatology

(yes, humans are primates), and all of the questions that come along with human society and social participation. Rather, I mean the social construction and function of animality, specifically the use of the category “animal”. Perhaps, along the lines of the distinction between “contemplative silence” and “political silencing” (see [Komjathy 2018](#)), we need to make a distinction between “being-animal” (existential given) and “being-made-animal” (socio-political act). The latter might be understood as “animalization”, and relates to other animals that humans identify with and disassociate from (e.g., monkeys, sharks, sheep, snakes) as well as their corresponding living conditions (e.g., mountains, “shelters”, zoos). This might be thought of as the “geography of animality” or the “animality of place”. One of the clearest examples appears in black empowerment and liberation movements targeting “dehumanization” and aspirations to be recognized “as human”. In the case of contemporary American society, one also thinks of (avoids thinking about) migrants on the southern border, new immigrant others, prisoners, slaves, as well as slaughterhouse and field workers, among other “invisible people” and “dirty jobs”. While I am sympathetic and in fact committed to such liberational possibilities, it may be that the rejection of “the animal” is not the means to realize “the human”. What does it say about “humanity” that being kept in cages, allowed to die by exposure, dehydration or drowning, or murdered in the streets is comparable to being “treated like an animal”? Furthermore, it may be that for authentic liberation and transformation, we, as a human-animal collective, must overcome “hierarchies of suffering and oppression”, and recognize (work to actualize) collective freedom beyond even speciesism. Such considerations open up various other “religion, animals, and Xs”, including able-bodiedness, ecology, gender, immigration, indigeneity, politics, race, and sexuality (see, e.g., [Haraway 1991](#); [Patterson 2002](#); [Adams 2003](#), [1990] 2010; [Grandin and Johnson 2005](#); [Gray 2013](#)). To conclude these opening reflections, and simply stated, is human-animality positive? Additionally, should we aspire to become more or less “animalic”? Riffing on Lévi-Strauss further, is it “good to live as/with/through animals”?

While the field of Animal Studies has grown considerably in recent years, the topic of “animals and religion” remains relatively under-researched (see, e.g., [Waldau and Patton 2006](#); [Kemmerer 2011](#); [Gross and Valley 2012](#); [Deane-Drummond and Clough 2013](#); [Gross 2014](#)). The important work of the Animals and Religion program unit in the American Academy of Religion notwithstanding, this is especially the case with respect to Religious Studies (abbrev. RS) as such, that is, an approach that is comparative, cross-cultural, interdisciplinary, as well as theoretically and methodologically sophisticated. Applying Derrida in his important *The Question of the Animal and Religion* ([Gross 2014](#)), Aaron Gross helpfully identifies three “species” of animals deserving consideration, with specific attention to religiosity: actual animals (individual living beings), the animal (other-construct), and symbolic animals. The animal-as-other relates to what is referred to as the “human/animal binary” (HAB), in which humans are defined in opposition to “the animal”. This in turn connects to various “other-constructions”. In the case of the United States, “blackness” is the strongest parallel, but the erasure of Native Americans/Amerindians is equally remarkable (disturbing). Here we should note that, from a human primatological and sociological perspective, every group, even “minority ones”, have their dominant “others” through which they/we create group identity and solidarity. This in-group/out-group or us/them tendency and mode may be one area where a contemplative approach has much to offer, especially with respect to transformation and transcendence. “Symbolic animals” in turn refer to the symbolic use of animals by humans in a variety of cultural expressions and for various purposes. It might be thought of as the human “cognitive menagerie” or “cognitive bestiary”.

Here, drawing upon Jean [Baudrillard \(1994\)](#), I would add a fourth (non)species, or perhaps a subspecies of symbolic animals, namely, “substitute animals”. In my way of thinking, these are *simulacra*, or copies without an original. Some of the clearest examples are mascots. One can be a lion or tiger or bear as an American athlete or fan without ever thinking about, let alone encountering or caring about the corresponding biological

animals. As consequentially, the latter animals do not need to inhabit the associated landscapes and social spaces, to be given space and voice. While these substitute animals may still have a residual connection to actual animals, other related examples, like Amazon (rainforest/online retailer) and Apple (fruit/computer), do not. One does not need to worry about deforestation or heritage apples while “living” (shopping) virtually online, and the latter may, in fact, be based on and the cause of the former. Thus, the redefinition of “friendship” (and reconfiguration of consciousness and society) via Facebook is no coincidence. From this RS and social critical perspective, we may and ideally should investigate the representations of particular animals, the qualities and characteristics of specific animals, as well as the culture-specific and tradition-specific associations. These are usually rooted in particular “animal/human” interactions. They also have consequences for actual “human/animal” relationships and consequences for real animals, both individually and collectively. I would, in turn, suggest that there is an accompanying ethics and politics of categorization and representation. For my part and herein, I am particularly interested in actual/living animals and symbolic animals, especially forms of engagement with a stronger connection between the two “species”.

While the cross-pollination of Animal Studies and Religious Studies is in its nascent phases of development, the additional pairing of Contemplative Studies (abbrev. CS) is almost non-existent (see Komjathy 2017, 2018). Contemplative Studies is an emerging interdisciplinary field dedicated to research and education on contemplative practice and contemplative experience. As articulated in my earlier work (Komjathy 2015, 2018), “contemplative practice” is a larger umbrella category that encompasses approaches and methods more commonly identified as “meditation” and “prayer”. Potential connective strands and family resemblances include attentiveness, awareness, interiority, presence, silence, transformation, and a deepened sense of meaning and purpose. “Contemplative experience” refers to experiences that occur within the parameters of contemplative practice, are associated with particular contemplative practices, and/or are deemed significant by contemplatives and their associated communities. In terms of our present topic and as will be explored momentarily, “religion, animals, and contemplation” raises a variety of challenges and opportunities. Here we may simply note the possibility of alternations of consciousness that lead to alterior ways of engaging and relating to animal-others/other-animals. Specifically, I view contemplative communities and contemplative traditions, with their accompanying “contemplative approaches”, as providing unique contributions to and potential resolutions of “the animal question”.

Finally, for the purposes of this article, I will use Daoism as the primary tradition and “exemplar”. While a variety of articles have been published on animals in the anonymous and multi-vocal fourth-second century BCE, classical Daoist *Zhuāngzi* 莊子 (*Chuang-tzu*; Book of Master Zhuang; abbrev. ZZ; see further information in bibliography in Appendix A), especially from conventional philosophical perspectives with accompanying appropriative, domesticating and careerist agendas,⁵ I am, unfortunately, the only specialist to have published on the topic of “animals and Daoism” (see Komjathy 2011a, 2011b, 2017). Here I will assume working knowledge of Daoism (see Komjathy 2013, 2014) (Appendix A), specifically that Daoism is an indigenous Chinese *religious* tradition in which the Dao 道 (Tao; Way) is considered sacred and ultimately real. Historically speaking, Daoism began in germinal form around the fourth century BCE and became a more organized religion in the second century CE. It is characterized by complexity and diversity, especially as articulated and represented in its various historical movements (e.g., *Tiānshī* 天師 [Celestial Masters], *Quánzhēn* 全真 [Complete Perfection]). There are, in turn, many misconceptions and misrepresentations, including the inaccurate and outdated colonialist, missionary, and Orientalist construction of so-called “philosophical Daoism” [*sic*] and so-called “religious Daoism” [*sic*], or absurd popular constructions like “Tao” whatever. In terms of the “animal question”, it is important to understand that the Dao has four primary characteristics from a Daoist perspective: (1) Source of everything (*yuán* 元/原); (2) unnamable mystery (*xuán* 玄); (3) all-pervading sacred presence (*líng* 靈/*qì* 氣); and (4) universe as transformative

process (*huà* 化). Thus, the primary Daoist theology (discourse on the sacred) is apophatic (beyond the known/knowable), monistic (one impersonal reality), pantheistic (sacred in and beyond the world), and panenhenic (Nature as sacred). Daoism tends to be more theocentric (Daocentric), cosmocentric, and perhaps even ecocentric and biocentric, and less anthropocentric. This means that Daoism is one of the more body-affirming and world-affirming religious traditions, and it is no surprise that Daoists tend to have high anthropology and high zoology. Animality is often seen as positive, even sacred, and Daoists have had a variety of important responses to NHA experiences and circumstances.

As Daoism is an indigenous Chinese religion, Chinese (*Hànyǔ* 漢語; *zhōngwén* 中文) is the primary language. Chinese is a character-based language, with characters consisting of “radicals” and many characters being pictographs and ideograms. This raises yet another question about the animal, namely, the language question. The English “animal” derives from the Latin *animālis* (“having breath”).⁶ This term in turn becomes associated with a larger modern classification and taxonomy, including amphibians, birds, fish, invertebrates, mammals, and reptiles. One interesting question is the relative standing of insects. In Chinese, the parallel character is *shòu* 獸 (“animal”), which contains the *quǎn* 犬/𤝵 (“dog”) radical, and *wù* 物 (“being/thing”), which has the *niú* 牛/𠂇 (“ox”) radical. *Wù* appears in the classical Chinese Daoist phrase *wànwù* 萬物 (lit., “10,000 beings/things”), which refers to everything in existence (both “animate” and “inanimate”), and the modern Chinese *dòngwù* 動物 (lit., “moving being/thing”), which translates “animals” (see *zōngjiào* 宗教 [lit., “teachings of the ancestors”] for “religion”). There also is some connection to the classical and foundational Daoist concept of *zìrán* 自然 (lit., “self-so”), which sometimes refers to “Nature” as a whole. Given the linguistic characteristics of Chinese, and in contrast to alphabetic languages, a “dog” cannot be a “horse” (see Figure 1).

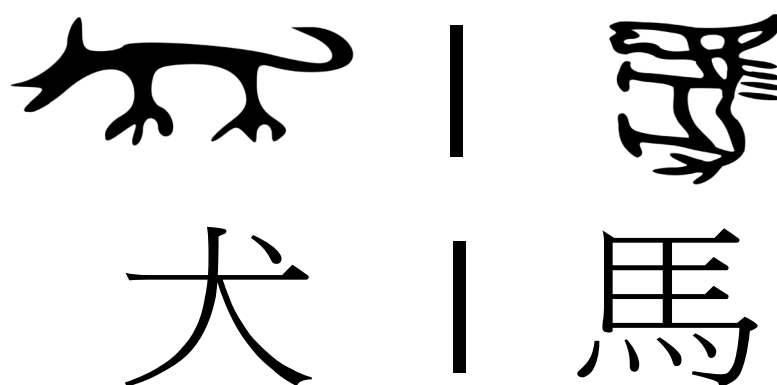


Figure 1. The Oracle Bone (**above**) and Standard Chinese (**below**) Script for the Characters for “Dog” (**left**) and “Horse” (**right**) (source: Louis Komjathy).

Thus, there is a stronger connection between signifier/signified, and potentially a greater sense of language/reality disjuncture, or, alternatively, conjuncture. For example, according to chapter one of the previously-mentioned *Zhuāngzi*, “Names are the guest of reality” (*míngzhě shí zhī bīn yě* 名者實之賓也). We may in turn identify sixteen “animal radicals” in the standardized 214 Kāngxī 康熙 system (see Table 1).

Table 1. “Animal Radicals” Utilized in Chinese Characters.

93 niú 牛/𠂇 (“ox”)	187 mǎ 馬 (“horse”)
94 quǎn 犬/𤝵 (“dog”)	195 yú 魚 (“fish”)
123 yáng 羊 (“sheep”)	196 niǎo 鳥 (“bird”)
141 hū 虎 (“tiger”)	198 lù 鹿 (“deer”)
142 chóng 虫 (“insect”)	205 měng 鼃 (“frog”)
152 shī 豕 (“pig”)	208 shǔ 鼠 (“rat”)
153 zhī 豸 (“badger”)	212 lóng 龍 (“dragon”)
172 zhuī 隹 (“sparrow”)	213 guī 龜 (“turtle”)

These points bring our attention to the fact that “translation” (via *translatio* [“carrying across”]) is always involved, including with respect to inter-/trans-species communication and interaction as translational acts (see, e.g., [Grandin and Johnson 2005](#)). It also inspires one to consider place-specific animals and culture-specific views.

2. The Question of the Animal: A Contemplative View and Approach

As mentioned, “the question of the animal” refers, first and foremost, to human-animality and our relationships with other (“non-human”) animals. In terms of a “contemplative approach”, that is, a way of being, perceiving, and experiencing rooted in contemplative practice, it involves exploring the place of animals in contemplative communities and contemplative traditions, and perhaps religion more broadly. Following Contemplative Studies, we may explore the place of animals in our own life and the broader human condition, especially through the cultivation and application of the previously-mentioned commitments, principles, and qualities. Here we should note that there are secular forms of contemplative practice, so we probably need to make a distinction centering on religiously-committed, tradition-based and perhaps even theologically-infused contemplative practice (see [Komjathy 2015, 2018](#)). In addition, while one may research this question using more conventional (and acceptable) third-person approaches (e.g., historical and textual), Contemplative Studies tends to recognize first-person and more occasionally second-person (inter-species?) approaches. This relates to what may be referred to as “scholar-practitioner approaches” (SPA), “inter-contemplative dialogue” (ICD), and “critical adherent discourse” (CAD), including in the form of auto-ethnography. For present purposes, this means that exploration of “religion, animals, and contemplation” requires that at least some researchers (you?) have direct experience with meditation, prayer, or the like, and ideally with animals and religion as well. In my own case, I self-identify as a Daoist scholar-practitioner, and I have formal religious affiliation with the Daoist tradition. In addition, I have engaged in Daoist contemplative practice, especially quiet sitting (*jìngzuò* 靜坐), for over thirty years, and I have a life-long interest in animals. The former is a form of Daoist apophatic and quietistic (emptiness-/stillness-based) meditation that is primarily contentless, non-conceptual, and non-dualistic. It involves simply sitting-in-silence, with the informing view of innate nature-as-stillness being the Dao-as-Stillness. In terms of animals, I have spent much of my life in the mountains and wilderness, especially through solo backpacking and mountaineering, and I have had a wide range of animal encounters. As indicated in the opening dedication, the latter includes lifelong dog friendships. More recently, this has resulted in the publication *Taming the Wild Horse: An Annotated Translation and Study of the Daoist Horse Taming Pictures* (2017), which is the first book to fuse Animal Studies, Contemplative Studies, Daoist Studies, and Religious Studies. For that project, I also conducted ethnographic fieldwork, including participant-observation, of contemporary American horse training. Given these biographical details and social location, I will occasionally speak from a critical subjective perspective herein.

In terms of Religious Studies, we are in need of more research on “animals and contemplation”. It seems clear that many contemplatives and contemplative communities have more “enlightened views” about animals/animality. However, it is currently unclear what kinds of relationships the given individuals had with actual animals and the specific animals involved. I am especially interested in animal-centered contemplative practices. In the case of Daoism, a key dimension centers on the practice of meditation, variously referred to as *shǒuyī* 守一 (“guarding the One”), *zuòwàng* 坐忘 (“sitting-in-forgetfulness”), and the like (see, e.g., [Komjathy 2013, 2015, 2017](#)), and the ways in which it informs and is perhaps informed by NHA engagement. One of the most influential passages appears in chapter four of the above-mentioned *Zhuāngzi*, which is part of the oldest layer of the text, the so-called Inner Chapters (chps. 1–7), and probably dates to around the late fourth century BCE (see [Klein 2010](#)).

“You must fast! I will tell you what that means. Do you think that it is easy to do anything while you have a heart-mind? If you do, the luminous heavens will

not support you . . . Unify your aspirations (*yīzhì* 一志)! Don't listen with your ears; listen with your heart-mind (*xīn* 心). No, don't listen with your heart-mind; listen with *qì* 氣. Listening stops with the ears, the heart-mind stops with joining (*fú* 符), but *qì* is empty and waits on all things. The Dao gathers in emptiness alone. Emptiness (*xū* 虛) is the fasting of the heart-mind (*xīnzhāi* 心齋)." (Watson 1968, pp. 57–58; see also ZZ 19 and 22; Watson 1968, pp. 205–6, 238)⁷

As described here and in other related passages, Daoist “heart-fasting”, which might also be understood as “mind-retreat”, involves disengagement of sensory and cognitive processes. In the language of classical Daoism, it involves emptying, forgetting, and stilling to the point that one enters the associated contemplative and perhaps mystical state of emptiness, forgetfulness, and stillness. This is the essential and perhaps normative trophotropic state. For present purposes, a number of other elements need to be emphasized. First, the practice begins by centering on the “heart-mind” (*xīn* 心), which is psychosomatic in nature and considered the psychospiritual center of human personhood from a traditional Chinese and thus Daoist perspective. In the context of Daoist contemplative practice, it further relates to innate nature (*xìng* 性), inner power/virtue (*dé* 德), and spirit (*shén* 神). These quasi-divine aspects are one's original and inherent connection to the Dao and the Dao manifesting as embodied (human) activity in the world. Thus, we must make a distinction between habituated nature/ordinary mind and original nature/realized mind. The former relates to “knowing” (*zhī* 知), with Daoists often aspiring to the (non)state of “non-knowing” (*wúzhī* 無知). This may be understood as “Daoist contemplative psychology”, that is, psychology (lit., “discourse on *psyche*”) informed by and informing contemplative practice (see de Wit 1991; Komjathy 2015, 2017, 2018), and may be profitably compared to the critiques issued by Heidegger and Derrida, albeit from within the constraints of intellectualism and analytical thought. In contrast, the original and realized heart-mind relates to both human animality and theological attunement from a Daoist perspective. Second and related to the first, there is a deeper dimension of human being and (non)identity. This is *qì* (*ch'í*), which is best left untranslated, but also rendered as “vital breath”, “energy”, and even “pneuma”. The Chinese character consists of *qì* 气 (“steam”) over *mǐ* 米 (“rice”), so *qì*-energy is comparable to a subtle vapor. The alternative Daoist character 炁 consists of *jì* 氺 (“amass”) over *huǒ* 火 (“fire”). Daoists sometimes read the former as *wú* 无 (“non-being”) infused with *yī* 一 (“oneness”). *Qì*-energy is analogous to a subtle heat in the body, perhaps paralleling *tapas* in Indian renunciant, Tantric and Yogic traditions. Through contemplative practice, one awakens, gathers, and strengthens this subtle, animating cosmic current and sacred presence. It is an all-pervading energy and numinous presence that circulates through the universe, self, and all beings. This is the previously-mentioned Daoist emanationist and immanence cosmology and theology. Thus and third, listening, especially “energetic listening” beyond ordinary audition, is the primary mode of perceiving. This stands in contrast to other religious traditions, in which seeing receives priority. Comparatively speaking, we might, in turn, investigate which senses are privileged in which religious tradition, including the possibility of the “mystical senses” and/or “numinous abilities” (Skt.: *siddhi*). In any case, the Daoist emphasis on listening also relates to the Daoist spiritual ideal of *shèngrén* 聖人 (“sage”). The character *shèng* consists of *ěr* 耳 (“ear”) and *kǒu* 口 (“mouth”) over *rén* 壬 (“great”). As the latter also corresponds the ninth celestial stem (*tiāngān* 天干), which is associated with the Water phase and the northern direction, it might further point to the Dao-as-Mystery. Understood poetically, a sage is a person listening to the sonorous patterns of the cosmos. This might be thought of as related to “Daoist acoustics” and “Daoist musicology”. A sage also is an elder whose spiritual insight is listened to by others. Therefore, following this contemplative map, the ability to encounter self, others, and reality as such depends on contemplative listening, an acoustic openness rooted in immediacy and presence.

Interestingly, in terms of our current topic, Daoists, especially the anonymous or pseudonymous elders and teachers documented in the texts of classical Daoism (4th–2nd c. BCE), often describe contemplative transformations of consciousness by invoking

“symbolic animals”. Some of the most important and influential include the great Páng 鵬 bird (ZZ 1), an infinitely large bird who also lives inside the infinitely small Kūn 鯤 fish and flies beyond the limited perception of cicadas (*tiáo* 蜩), doves (*jiū* 鳩), and quail (*yàn* 鴉); the giant sea turtle (*biē* 黿) (ZZ 17), who has explored and understands the ocean beyond the narrow confines of well-frogs (*wā* 蛙/鼃); and, perhaps somewhat subversively for “Animal Studies”, the old oak tree (*lǐ* 櫟), who lives beyond the discrimination and utilitarian evaluations of carpenters (*jiàng* 匠) and visits the latter in a dream (!) wherein he explains the “value of uselessness” (*wúyòng* 無用). The latter might connect to Lévi-Strauss’ discussion of totemism and further extend to an earlier Chinese shamanic and animistic substrate. Returning to the previous points about Chinese language, the characters contain the following radicals (listed alphabetically): *chóng* 虫 (“insect”), *guī* 龜 (“turtle”), *jīn* 斤 (“axe”), *měng* 黽 (“frog”), *mù* 木 (“tree/wood”), *niǎo* 鳥 (“bird”), and *yú* 魚 (“fish”). To embrace this Daoist animalic imaginarium, spiritual freedom is analogous to, and perhaps nourished by, the flight of birds, the swimming of fish, and the wildness of unhewn trees. As mentioned, I am especially fascinated by the category/categorization of “insect” in terms of the human “hierarchy of being-cognition”. Along these lines, this “Daoist zoology” is noteworthy for its attentiveness to and inclusion of small, often-overlooked animals (see Table 2). In fact, and as explored below, two of the most famous ZZ stories, which became part of Daoist oral tradition and folklore as well as larger Chinese creative and artistic expressions (e.g., painting and poetry), center on butterflies and fish.

Table 2. Classical Daoist Zoology.

Birds 鳥/禽	Frogs 蛙
Butterflies 蝶/蝴	Horses 馬
Cicada 蜩	Mice 鼠
Deer 鹿	Monkeys 猿
Doves 鳩	Oxen 牛
Elk 麋	Quail 鴉
Fish 魚	Turtles 龜

This stands in contrast to the larger human social and religious tendency to privilege “charismatic megafauna”, that is, large, powerful animals especially identified with in traditional and indigenous cultures and often highlighted in modern conservation biology. Of course, elk, horses and oxen fall into the latter category, and classical Daoist texts also refer to rhinoceros/water buffalos (*sì* 兕), butchers (*páo* 庖), hunters (*lièfū* 獵夫), soldiers (*bīng* 兵), tigers (*hǔ* 虎), and wolves (*láng* 狼). The latter usually relate to “animals-as-threat”, which I will discuss shortly. For the moment, the degree of attentiveness to, awareness of, and even invocation of small beings is significant, especially with respect to the “contemplative question”.

Jiān Wú 肩吾 went to see the madman Jiē Yú 接輿. Jiē Yú said, “What was Zhōng Shǐ 中始 telling you the other day?”

Jiān Wú said, “He told me that the ruler of humans should devise his own principles, standards, ceremonies, and regulations, and then there will be no one who will fail to obey him and be transformed by them”.

The madman Jiē Yú said, “This is deceptive virtue (*qīdé* 欺)! To try to govern the world like this is like trying to walk on the ocean, to drill through a river, or to make a mosquito (*wén* 蚊) shoulder a mountain! When sages govern, do they govern what is on the outside? They align (*zhèng* 正) first, and then act. They make absolutely certain that they are able to tend to what is occurring, and that is all. The bird (*niǎo* 鳥) flies high in the sky where she can escape the danger of stringed arrows. The field mouse (*xīshǔ* 鼯鼠) burrows deep down under the sacred hill where he won’t have to worry about people digging and smoking

him out. Have you got less sense than these two little creatures (*chóng* 蟲)?” (Zhuāngzi, chp. 7; adapted from Watson 1968, pp. 92–93)⁸

Here we find small animals as teachers and models, especially with respect to human socio-political survival. This is so much the case that the *Zhuāngzi* has been and can be read as a “survival manual”. On a contemplative level, one focuses on interiority, silence, and presence as a path to deeper relationality and harmonious responsiveness infused with a sense of place.

3. Listening to Animals

Our ability to listen to, to truly hear, animals, perhaps even as companions and teachers, is connected to anthropology and zoology, which I employ herein as comparative categories related to discourse on human-being and animals, respectively, including animality. In terms of animals and religion, this relates to the ways in which the animal/human/divinity triad is understood, constructed, and thus experienced by specific religious adherents and religious communities. As mentioned, Daoists tend to have high anthropology and high zoology. On the most basic level, human nature and the nature of other-animals are originally and inherently connected to the Dao (sacred). This is so much the case that such “nature” may be transpersonal and collective. From a Daoist perspective, this organic capacity and characteristic is infused with the Dao’s numinous presence as well as expresses and participates in a larger cosmic order, a network characterized by interconnection, interdependence, and symbiosis. Daoists in turn sometimes point to animals as more connected to the Dao and thus as models for human-being.

“The celestial (*tiān* 天) is on the inside; the human (*rén* 人) is on the outside. Inner power (*dé*) resides in the celestial. Understand the actions of the heavens and humanity, base yourself upon the heavens, take your stand in inner power, and then, although you hasten or hold back, bend or stretch, you may return to the essential (*fānyào* 反要) and speak of the ultimate (*yǔjí* 語極) . . . ”

“Horses (*mǎ* 馬) and oxen (*niú* 牛) have four feet—this is what I mean by the celestial. Putting a halter on the horse’s head, piercing the ox’s nose—this is what I mean by the human. So I say: do not let what is human wipe out what is celestial; do not let what is purposeful (*gù* 故) wipe out what is fated (*mìng* 命); do not let [desire for] gain lead you after fame. Be cautious, guard (*shǒu* 守) it, and do not lose it—this is what I mean by returning to the real (*fǎnzhēn* 反真).”

(Zhuāngzi, chp. 17; adapted from Watson 1968, pp. 182–83; see also chps. 9, 20, 23, and 29; Watson 1968, pp. 104–6, 214, 259–60, 327; Komjathy 2017)

On an interpretive level, a few framing remarks are needed. To begin, from a Daoist perspective, *tiān* refers to the universe as an impersonal, amoral transformative process, and Daoists are encouraged to follow the Way of Heaven (*tiāndào* 天道). This refers to larger cosmological cycles based on yin-yang interaction, including as manifesting through solar and lunar cycles and seasonal shifts. Second, the character *dé*, variously translated as “inner power”, “integrity”, “potency”, and “virtue”, consists of *chì* 止 (“step”) and *zhí* 直 (“direct”) over *xīn* 心 (“heart-mind”): *dé* is an aligned heart-mind manifesting as embodied (human) activity in the world.⁹ Rooted in and expressing a connection with the Dao, such activity exerts a beneficial and transformative influence, and thus may be considered “good” from a conventional human moralistic perspective. In certain Daoist discussions, *dé*-inner power also seems almost synonymous with innate nature and *qi*, so much so as to be the animating force/presence of the universe. As we shall see, although most often appearing to be a human capacity and power, there are indications that NHA also have and may even cultivate *dé*. As radically, if *dé* is connected to ethics on some level, human virtue, including in relationship to animal-others, may be an essential harmonizing and unifying influence. This relates to Daoist views about resonance (*gǎnyīng* 感應). Finally, the use of *shǒu* 守 and *fǎn* 反 is noteworthy here. As mentioned, *shǒu*, as in the classical Daoist phrases *shǒujìng* 守靜 (“guarding stillness”), *shouyi* 守一 (“guarding the One”), and

shǒuzhōng 守中 (“guarding the Center”), is a Daoist technical term for meditation. Similarly and connected to other “return” characters, including *fù* 復, *guī* 歸, and *huán* 還, *fǎn* relates to contemplative practices and associated contemplative states. It is especially associated with “returning to the Root” (*guīgēn* 歸根) and “returning to the Source” (*fùyuán* 復元/復原), in the sense of innate nature/Dao. Both of these are associated with stillness.

For our present purposes, specifically our concern for animals, it is noteworthy that cosmological alignment and connection are associated with the organic intactness and wildness of animals, while human misalignment and disconnection are associated with the domestication and exploitation of animals. Human engagement with and treatment of animals reveal their/our degree of organic and sacred connection. In a more radically applied perspective, the passage seems to support animal welfare and perhaps even animal liberation. At the very least, one must become more aware of the relationship and ideally develop a commitment to overcoming harmful human behavior patterns. This relates to the classical and foundational Daoist emphasis on “non-action” (*wúwéi* 無為), perhaps the most well-known (and appropriated) Daoist principle, practice, value, and quality appearing in the anonymous fourth-second century BCE *Dàodé jīng* 道經 (*Tào-té chīng*; Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power; abbrev. DDJ) and closely connected to “suchness” (*zìrán* 自然). *Wúwéi*, also understood as effortlessness, non-interference, and non-intervention, is the practice that leads to (returns to) the state of *zìrán*. Here it relates to “making space” for the unharnessed freedom, expression, and flourishing of animals. One issue, especially relevant for the larger topic of animals and religion in comparative perspective, is the apparent distinction between “humans” (*rén* 人) and “animals” (*shòu* 獸/*wù* 物) (see above) as well as the apparent Daoist “inverted anthropocentrism”. The latter refers to the apparently unique capacity of human beings to be misaligned from the Dao (sacred), which at times seems to invoke something like Daoist misanthropy. Human beings, contra modern scientific, technocratic and alien hybridity views, seem to be among the “lowest” life-forms in the sense of awareness, connection, presence, and so forth. Again, simply consider the “mass casualty events” (MSE) involved in the current accelerated deforestation, desertification, and extinction. Does this not require individual and collective mass delusion, ignore-ance, and even amnesia (dementia?)? This might be thought of, along the lines of spiritual bypassing, as “animal bypassing”.¹⁰ It also appears that humans, with the possible minor exception of some ants and other insects, are the only earth-inhabitant (“species”) that not only enslaves other beings, but also creates contexts of mass captivity and incarceration (e.g., factory farms, prisons; see collage in Figure 2). This is not to mention wanton and mass violence and destruction, specifically as a form of domination and at times entertainment.

A number of responses are possible. First, comparatively speaking, all religions have what I refer to as “seams”. These are the places in the neatly woven tapestry of worldview and tradition where, when pressed, light begins to shine through, and the accompanying pressure may lead to fraying and even unravelling. One thinks, for example, of *dukkha* (“suffering/unsatisfactoriness”) in Buddhism or theological chosenness in Judaism. If one rejects these premises or discovers that they are unsupported experientially, the larger cognitive coherence begins to break down. In the case of Daoism, one unanswered (unanswerable?) question involves how human beings became (become) separated from the Dao. If innate nature is originally and inherently connected to the sacred, how is it possible to be/become disconnected? We might use this as a guiding question for a larger “contemplative inquiry”. The primary, perhaps unsatisfying, Daoist answer is due to more complex socio-political organization, in which individuals become distanced from place and fellow inhabitants. The more radical Daoist theological answer is that it is only apparent, even if there are major destructive consequences to such spiritual disorientation and misattunement. In the words of the Daoist oral saying, “Humans may be distant from the Dao, but the Dao is never distant from human beings”. Still, such human beings create suffering, chaos, and destruction, and it is no wonder that some view humans as “cancer”, “virus”, and the like. “This cannot be considered the Dao!” Another response involves contemplative practice, specifically stillness-based meditation, as the remedy for any and every condition,

regardless of the complexity. Such views further relate to a larger Daoist cosmological framework that developed in the early and early medieval periods centering on the Three Bureaus/Offices (*sānguān* 三官) and Three Powers (*sāncái* 三才). Originally, these referred to the heavens, earth, and water, but eventually humanity replaced the latter in some discussions. The latter recalls the Chinese character for “shaman” (*wū* 巫). As received, it consists of two human beings (人) connecting (丨) the heavens (upper 一) and earth (lower 一). In my way of thinking (and practicing), this, in turn, relates to various other “alignment” characters, including *tōng* 通 (“connected/pervaded”), *zhèng* 正 (“aligned”), and *zhōng* 中 (“centered”). There are esoteric and applied Daoist readings of these characters, but suffice it to say that they relate to an empty heart-mind and energetic connection. Thus, while we, as human-animals, may lose ourselves in anthropocentric concerns and modes, we also have the potential to be something else and something more, or, perhaps in keeping with foundational Daoist views, what we simply are. Such is perhaps the fulfillment of our simultaneous animality and humanity, perhaps even our sacrality and divinity. Here animals are indeed “good to be”.

There also are other examples, at least textually speaking, of additional Daoist engagements with actual animals. One of the most interesting, especially given the “inner power/virtue question” and our earlier consideration of the “Balinese cockfight” and “Geertz’s cock(s)”, centers on the story of Jixingzi 紀惺子 (Jishengzi 紀涇子; Master Regulated Birdcry).

Jixingzi was training gamecocks (*yǎng dòuji* 養鬥雞) for the king. After ten days, the king asked if they were ready.

“Not yet. They’re too haughty and rely on their nerve (*shìqì* 恃氣)”.

Another ten days and the king asked again.

“Not yet. They still respond to noises and movements (*xiàngjǐng* 嚮景)”.

Another ten days and the king asked again.

“Not yet. They still look around fiercely and are full of vigor (*shèngqì* 盛氣)”.

Another ten days and the king asked again.

“They’re close enough. Another rooster can crow and they remain unaltered (*wúbiàn* 無變). Look at them from a distance and you’d think they were made of wood (*mù* 木). Their inner power is complete (*déquán* 全). Other roosters won’t dare face them, but will turn and run”. (Zhuāngzi, chp. 19; adapted from [Watson 1968](#), p. 204; see also ZZ 30; [Watson 1968](#), p. 343)

Again, without the “contemplative context”, this passage may be easily misinterpreted. To begin, a “training session”, here forty days in duration, is involved. This recalls other, parallel passages in the *Zhuāngzi*, including that of Bǔliáng Yǐ 卜梁倚 (Divining Beam-Support; chp. 6) and Liè Yùkòu 列御寇 (Lièzi 列子 [Master Lie]; chp. 7), which involve 19+ days and 3 years, respectively. Interestingly, during the latter seclusion, Lièzi is said to have “fed the pigs as though feeding people” (*shíshǐ rú shí rén* 食豕如食人). This, in turn, parallels a dialogic exchange between the Invocator of the Ancestors (*zhù zōng rén* 祝宗人), a ritual officiant, who is preparing pigs for a sacrifice. Here the former peers into the pigpen and imagines (?) the event from the pig’s viewpoint, concluding, “If I were planning things from the point of view of a pig (*zhì móu* 臆謀), I’d say it would be better to eat chaff and bran and stay right there in the pen ... I wonder why I look at things differently from a pig?” (Zhuāngzi, chp. 19; [Watson 1968](#), p. 202; see also ZZ 7; [Watson 1968](#), p. 94).¹¹ And what if not being in a pen were the offering? In any case, over the course of Jixingzi’s rooster training, deeper cultivation, refinement, and realization occur. This centers on *qì*, with the first phrase more literally meaning “relying on *qì*” and corresponding to “haughtiness”, and the second more literally meaning “containing *qì*” and corresponding to “pomposity”. The invocation of “wood” here connects to other descriptions of Daoist meditative absorption, with the corresponding decrease in vital functions, as having “a body like withered wood”

(*xíng rú gǎomù* 形如槁木) and “a heart-mind like dead ashes” (*xīn rú sǐhuī* 心如死灰) (see ZZ 2, 21, 22, 23, and 24; Watson 1968, pp. 36, 224–25, 237, 254, 271). The rooster in question becomes unaffected, with “inner power complete”. As this is the culmination, though not completion, of “Daoist animal training” overseen by the Daoist sage (see above), the rooster returns to his inner power as energetic presence that functions like an extended force-field, not only protecting him from harm, but also perhaps neutralizing even the possibility of harm. Perhaps most radically, this deconditioning appears to result in “rewilding”, with the rooster returning to his original nature. The Daoist training of “fighting roosters” has led to the end of “cockfights” in the world.

Beyond meditation, we also find actual Daoist animal-identification practices. One of the most well-known sets is the *Wǔqín xì* 五禽戲 (Five Animal Frolics), which has a complex history and survives into the modern world (see, e.g., Despeux 1989; Wang and Barrett 2006; Kohn 2008, pp. 163–69). Although there are connections to ZZ 15 and the so-called *Dǎoyǐn tú* 導引圖 (Illustrations of Daoyin; dat ca. 168 BCE; dis. 1973) from the *Mǎwángduī* 馬王堆 (lit., “Tomb of King Ma”; Chángshā, Húnán) archaeological discoveries, the practice is most often associated with the Chinese physician and possible lay Daoist Huá Tuó 華佗 (ca. 140–208 CE). In traditional Chinese and Daoist terms, the practice falls under the category of *Yǎngshēng* 養生 (Nourishing Life), or health and longevity techniques, and more specifically *Dǎoyǐn* 導引 (Guided Stretching), with the latter also referred to as “calisthenics”, “gymnastics”, and most problematically and inaccurately as “Chinese Yoga”. In a contemporary context, it is part of the Chinese and now-international *Qigōng* 氣功 (Energy Work/Qi Exercise) movement, only some of which is Daoist. As the name suggests, the set involves taking postures and imitating the movements of five animals, namely, crane (*hè* 鶴), bear (*xióng* 熊), monkey (*yuán* 猿), deer (*lù* 鹿), and tiger (*hǔ* 虎). In at least one modern systematization, they have the following correspondences (see Kohn 2008, p. 164; Table 3).

Table 3. Five Animal Frolics Correspondences.

Animal	Cosmos	Organ	Body Area	Quality	Healing Effect
Crane	Heaven	Heart	Muscles	Lightness	Breathing
Bear	Earth	Kidneys	Lower back	Rootedness	Inner focus
Monkey	Humanity	Spleen	Joints	Agility	Openness
Deer	Spirit	Liver	Mind	Patience	Subtlety
Tiger	Body	Lungs	Body	Strength	Awareness

For individuals engaging in the practice as about not only symbolic animals, but also actual animals, this may involve invoking the associated animal presences and perhaps even engaging living representatives. Of course, the issue of habitat and locale again comes to the fore. There also may be an earlier and potentially lost totemic and shamanic substrate (see above; also Eliade 1964), and this further opens up deeper opportunities for engaging animals as models and teachers.

Another dimension of “religion, animals, and contemplation” centers on the transformative effects of contemplative practice with respect to animal-others/other-animals, specifically inter-species engagements and relationality. One of the more interesting Daoist claims is that dedicated and prolonged Daoist cultivation results in immunity, invincibility, and/or invisibility.

Holding an abundance of inner power is like being an infant.

Poisonous insects (*fēngchài* 蜂螫) and venomous snakes (*huǐshé* 虺蛇) will not sting;

Fierce and menacing animals (*měngshòu* 猛兽) will not gorge;

Birds of prey (*juéniǎo* 攫鳥) will not attack or seize.

(*Dàodé jīng*, chp. 55)

And

“Those who understand the Dao are certain to have penetrated principles (*dálǐ* 達理). Having penetrated principles, they are certain to illuminate circumstances (*míngquán* 明權). Having illuminated circumstances, they will not allow things to harm the self (*hàijǐ* 害己). With utmost inner power (*zhìdé* 至), fire cannot burn, water cannot drown, cold and heat cannot afflict, and birds and animals (*qínshòu* 禽獸) cannot injure. It is not that such a person makes light of these things. I mean that one distinguishes between safety and danger, contents oneself with fortune and misfortune, and is cautious in coming and going. Therefore, nothing can harm one.” (Zhuāngzi, chp. 17; adapted from Watson 1968, p. 182)

Read more straightforwardly, these passages point to the potential power of animals-as-threat, while simultaneously suggesting that advanced contemplatives do not encounter harm. Interestingly, the original Chinese uses the verb *néng* 能 (“be able”), so it appears that one’s practice neutralizes potential harm. It is not that other beings do not injure, but rather that they *cannot* injure. Somehow they no longer have the ability or power to harm. This may be viewed as quasi-magical and/or along the lines of *siddhi*, numinous or “supernatural” abilities. However, is this because one has disappeared into formlessness, into the Dao’s energetic field, and hence has become invisible? Or is it because other beings no longer see one as a threat? This relates to the question of spiritual hiddenness, immunity, invincibility, invisibility, pervasion, and so forth, including protection versus disappearance. Connecting this to the larger classical Daoist textual corpus, chapter eighteen of the anonymous mid-fourth century BCE *Nèiyè* 業 (Inward Training; abbrev. NY) describes the infusion of numinous *qi* leading to resonant response: “If you encounter others with exceptional *qi* (*shànqì* 善氣)/They will be kinder to you than your brothers . . . The reverberation of the wordless/Is more rapid than the drumming of thunder”.¹² Significantly, this numinous *qi* is said to permeate one’s hair, pores, and skin (NY 18 and 26). This might be framed as the “philosophy of skin”, with the accompanying porousness, exposure, and vulnerability. Again, placed in “contemplative context”, the Daoist adepts in question have returned to unhewn simplicity (*pǔ* 樸/朴), disappeared into namelessness (*wúmíng* 無名), merged with the dust (*tóngchén* 同塵), activated empty/infusing *qi* (*chóngqì* 沖氣), and follow the path of non-contention (*wúzhēng* 無爭) and non-harm (*wúhài* 無害). From a broader Daoist perspective, this relates to both “protective *qi*” (*wèiqì* 衛氣), the personal energetic field that wards off illness and injury, and mystical disappearance in formlessness (*wúxíng* 無形) and namelessness (*wúmíng* 無名). Ultimately, one “forgets being a thing among things” (*lún yǔ wù wàng* 倫與物忘) and merges with “great pervasion” (大通) and “great unity” (大同) (Zhuāngzi, chp. 11; see Watson 1968, p. 122). This relates to what might be understood as “Daoist field energetics”, specifically the resonance between the Dao, including as Nature, and all beings as other relational, overlapping, and intersecting fields.¹³ Perhaps other beings simply perceive and encounter one as a manifestation of the Dao. Such a mode may result in animal companionship, or at least non-injury. One is no longer a threat, but rather a beneficial and transformative presence, infused with the Dao’s numinosity.

Animal companionship, including being befriended by “non-human” animals, is another outcome of Daoist contemplative practice. This relates to both my previous points about the classical Daoist ideal of “sages” as well as the later Daoist ideal of “immortals” (*xiānrén* 仙人). From a comparative perspective, one might also consider the larger phenomenon of “saints” and associated hagiographical discussions in terms of animals. Interestingly, the Chinese character here translated as “immortal”, but also rendered as “ascendent” and “transcendent”, consists of *rén* 人/ (“human/person”) and *shān* 山 (“mountain”). Immortals are of/from the mountains, in all of their varied Daoist meanings. Many Daoist sages and immortals are associated with specific companion-animals, so much so that artistic depictions and iconography include said animals (see, e.g., Little and Eichman 2000). Probably the most famous Daoist companion-animal is Lǎozǐ’s (“Master Lao”) ox (*niú* 牛). The former is the legendary author of the previously-mentioned *Dàodé jīng*, and he is often depicted leaving China (due to socio-political corruption and instability) riding

on the back of his trusted ox with the scrolls of the text. Other fairly well-known examples include Chén Tuán's 陳搏 (d. 989) donkey (*lú* 驢), Liú Hǎichán's 劉海蟾 (10th c.) toad (*chán* 蟾), Wèi Bóyáng's 魏伯陽 (151?–221?) dog (*gǒu* 狗), and Xīwángmǔ's 西王母 (Queen Mother of the West) phoenix (*fēnghuáng* 鳳凰), all with unknown names. There also are various anonymous immortals depicted with cranes (*hè* 鶴) and deer (*lù* 鹿). While some of these are “immortal mounts”, many representations rather show the human figure sitting or reclining next to the accompanying animal, sometimes even disappearing into the animal-other (see Komjathy 2017). Equally interesting are the depictions in which the Daoist is riding backwards. In addition to invoking the previously-mentioned Daoist “reversal” and “effortless” approach, this suggests trusting and relying on the animal for direction and guidance. Along these lines, there also are various immortals who have “gone to seed” or even “turned mineral”, including Chìsōngzǐ 赤松子 (Master Redpine), Húgōng 壺公 (Gourd Elder), Huángshí gōng 石公 (Elder Yellowstone), Lùpí chǔshì 鹿皮處士 (Deerskin Recluse), Máiyīzi 麻衣子 (Hempclad Master), Mǎmíng shēng 馬鳴生 (Master Horseneigh), Máonǚ 毛女 (Hairy Lady), and Xiūyáng gōng 修羊公 (Elder Tending-Sheep). Here we find a clear return to the animalic, organic, and wild.¹⁴

On a more practical and applied level, informed by critical pedagogy, we can identify, explore, and develop “animal-centered contemplative exercises”. In my own work using “contemplative pedagogy”, that is, teaching and learning informed by and perhaps expressed as contemplative practice (see Komjathy 2015, 2018), I have organized contemplative hiking events as well as developed animal-observation and animal-identification practices. In the most recent articulation (2019), I had students choose a particular living animal-familiar, based on their own interests and affinities, and engage said animal as teacher for a week. We then met as a class in a local canyon and walked and discussed what we learned. For my part, I chose a raccoon who was living behind the main administration building, perhaps proving prescient about my then-forthcoming departure from mainstream academia (corporate “higher” education). The employment of such exercises of course depends on one’s own pedagogical aspirations, motivations, and goals. For example, I know that Dr. Vaishali Mamgain (Economics; University of Southern Maine) uses a “lobster liberation exercise”, in which students also consider the economics and ethics of Maine lobster fishing (pers. comm.; author’s field observations). As mentioned, I have particular interests in backpacking and wilderness education (see Outward Bound with Inward Bound Mindfulness Education), so one might use some of the survivalist Tom Brown’s “awareness exercises” such as the “square-inch of ground” and “concentric circles” (see www.trackerschool.com). Having some similarities with the now fairly widely-disseminated Buddhist “raisin tasting exercise”, the first awareness practice involves focusing on the presences and activities occurring in the area in front of one’s feet, while the second involves exploring place through expanding and contracting circles. Although beyond my own knowledge-base, such an approach could be expanded to include indigenous wisdom and spirituality (e.g., herbology and plant-lore) and perhaps community empowerment and work-study. This could include seeking guidance from and dialogue with indigenous community elders on tradition-based practices (see, e.g., Aftandilian 2019, 2021). As radically, I imagine other (respectful) adaptations of traditional identification and compassion-based practices, specifically the “nine cemetery contemplations”, also referred to as “reflection on the nine kinds of corpses”, in the Indian Buddhist *Satipatthāna Sutta* (Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness) and *Mahāsātipatthāna Sutta* (Great Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness; for discussion see, e.g., Komjathy 2018, pp. 277–79, 294–95). As this traditionally involves meditation in an Indian cremation ground, if one were more daring (and wanted to get fired), one could have students go to an American industrial feedlot or slaughterhouse and “contemplate (confront) animal suffering, torture, and death”.¹⁵ For the moment, we may simply recognize how few animals in modern “factory farming” actually die (are slaughtered) at home and among their family and friends. One also might consider the actual scale of the killing for the “healthier choice”: more than 9 billion chickens, along with half a billion turkeys, are slaughtered for

food in the United States each year. Worldwide, more than 50 billion chickens are raised and slaughtered annually (see, e.g., www.animalclock.org). Similarly, with(out) respect to human companion-animals and “animal friends”, some six to eight million cats and dogs enter shelters in the United States each year. Of these, three to four million are “euthanized” (see www.asPCA.org; www.peta.org). Like “death statistics” in general, these obscure as much as they reveal: what is the actual experience of each individual being?

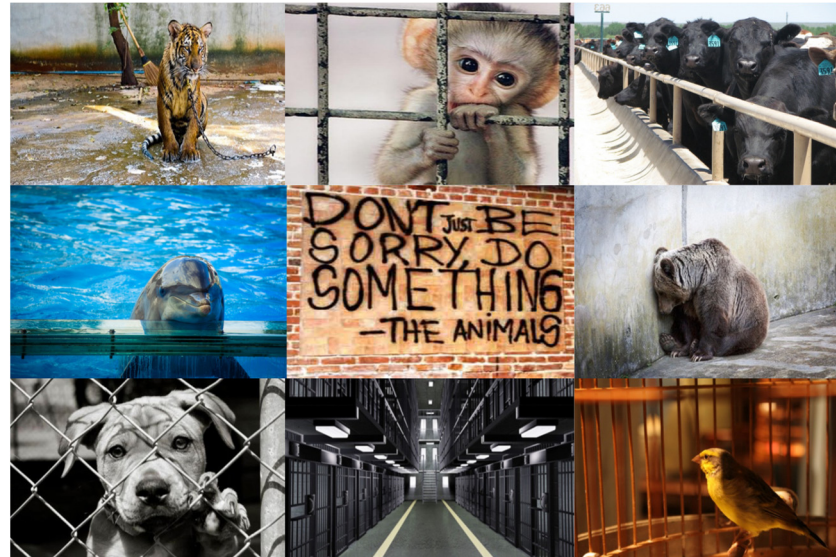


Figure 2. Contemplating Animal Captivity and Freedom (source: Collage by Louis Komjathy).

4. Becoming/Being Animal

Animal Studies, especially Animal Studies in dialogue with Contemplative Studies and Religious Studies, increases one’s awareness of the various animal presences in human culture, including as depicted and engaged through art, literature, and other mediums. As we have seen, this includes philosophical assumptions about and constructions of as well as the often-overlooked appearance of (“non-human”) animals. What is not readily recognized is the influence of *specific animals* on human thinking about animals. For example, both the Austrian Jewish philosopher and theologian Martin Buber (1878–1965) and the above-mentioned Jacques Derrida partially developed their philosophy under the gaze (direction?) of their cats (see, e.g., [Gross 2014](#)).¹⁶

The eyes of an animal have the capacity of a great language . . . I sometimes look into the eyes of the house cat . . . Undeniably, this cat began its glance by asking me with a glance that was ignited by the breath of my glance: “Can it be that you mean me? Do you actually want that I should not merely do tricks for you? Do I concern you? Am I there for you? Am I there? What is that coming from you? What is that around me? What is it about me? What is that?!” (Buber 1970, pp. 144–45)

And

What animal? The other.

I often ask myself, just to see, *who I am*—and who I am (following) at the moment when, caught naked, in silence, by the gaze of an animal, for example the eyes of a cat, I have trouble, yes, a bad time overcoming my embarrassment.

Whence this malaise?

I have trouble repressing a reflex dictated by immodesty. Trouble keeping silent within me a protest against indecency. Against the impropriety that comes of

finding oneself, one's sex exposed, stark naked before a cat that looks at you without moving, just to see. (Derrida 2002, p. 372; italics in original)

There are many relevant dimensions for the larger field of Animal Studies, but for present purposes, three are especially important. First, both Buber and Derrida are confronted with their own animality through the gaze of another, “non-human” animal, specifically their cohabitating cat companions that are supposedly domesticated and subordinate. Second, Buber's reflections on the human-God relationship (I-Thou) were at least partially influenced by this inter-species encounter. Similarly and third, Derrida's inquiry into the human/animal binary, his recognition of “being animal” and the associated process of self-alterity, is facilitated by feline presence. Thus, the history of modern Western philosophy, at least this alternative philosophical trajectory, is indebted to cats, and no doubt other currently unidentified and unacknowledged animals as well.

Moving from “Buber's cat” through “Geertz's cock(s)” and “Derrida's cat”, and now perhaps informed by “Jixingzi's rooster”, we arrive at a fundamental contemplative question: how do we become fully human-animal? How do we recognize and cultivate animal-being/being-animal? As I have suggested, contemplative inquiry and formal meditation practice offer one potential resolution, at least from a Daoist perspective, to the dynamic tension, including animal-otherness and animal-othering. As expressed in the famous Daoist “Joy of Fish” (*yú zhī lè* 魚之樂) story (see Figure 3):

Zhuāngzi 莊子 (Master Zhuang) and Huìzi 惠子 (Master Hui) were strolling along the banks of the Háo 濠 River when Master Zhuang said, “See how the minnows come out and dart around where they please! That's what fish really enjoy!”

Master Hui said, “You're not a fish, so how do you know what fish enjoy?”

Master Zhuang said, “You're not me, so how do you know I don't know what fish enjoy?”

Master Hui said, “I'm not you, so I certainly don't know what you know. On the other hand, you're certainly not a fish—so that still proves you don't know what fish enjoy!”

Master Zhuang said, “Let's go back to your original question. You asked me *how* I know what fish enjoy—so you already knew I knew it when you asked the question. I know it by standing here beside the Háo River”. (Zhuāngzi, chp. 17; adapted from Watson 1968, pp. 188–89)

Although these and similar stories, like the “Butterfly's Dream/Dreaming of a Butterfly” (*mèngdié* 夢蝶; see Watson 1968, p. 49), are often read conventionally in terms of “irrationality”, “relativism”, “skepticism”, and the like, by now it should be clear that they rather point towards contemplative being and mystical participation, specifically a trans-human and inter-species mode of being, consciousness, and experiencing. As a (non)form of “neuro-anomalousness”, this involves realization of shared animality as present-moment energetic connection beyond discrimination and rumination.



Figure 3. “Yúlè 魚樂” (The Joy of Fish; dat. 1291) by Zhōu Dōngqīng 周東卿 (fl. 1280–1300) (source: Collection of A. W. Bahr, Purchase, Fletcher Fund, 1947; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). Accession Number: 47.18.10. Met’s Open Access program.

Adding “Zhuāngzi’s fish” to our contemplative bestiary, field-guide and imaginarium, we may, in turn, allow our inquiry into “religion and animals” to be infused with the “contemplative X”. We may develop a larger animalic inquiry informed by contemplative questions.

Contemplative Questions for Animalic Inquiry

Are animals good to be?

What is the relationship between animality/humanity/divinity?

If innate nature is originally and inherently connected to the sacred, how is it possible to be/become disconnected?

What would an open pen represent in porcine consciousness?

What are you listening to/with?

How does one develop deeper inter-species relationality?

To these, we may add what I refer to as the “Through the Looking Glass (TLG) Exercise”, recalling the various animal-teachers whom Alice met during her “adventures in Wonderland”.

TLG Exercise

believe

as many as

six impossible things

before breakfast

For my part and in the present moment, I imagine the following impossible possibilities: animal freedom, bloodless relationality, embodied presence, inter-species communication, land conservation, and watershed ethics. Here I remember my various backcountry

wilderness experiences, specifically the lessons of/from bear, bison, coyote, deer, elk, fox, lizard, owl, porcupine, raccoon, and raven as well as my trail companionship with many. I have learned as much about being, consciousness, and presence from them/you as from the human-primate collective. Perhaps a shift towards animal-being and animal-becoming, in which we (re)discover shared animality expressed as mutual respect and mutual flourishing, is the rewilding that will ensure that something else is possible. Something else beyond the impending (ongoing) ecological collapse, including the mass destruction and extinction of other-animals. Recalling Rilke's unknown, but loved animal, perhaps the animal that has never been is a wild animal, alive and free in their own habitat. But of course such animals have been and continue to be. So, perhaps the animal that has never been is you.

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Appendix A. Further Reading and Supplemental Publications

As mentioned in the body of the article, there are a variety of important theoretical writings, supplemental discipline-specific publications, as well as problematic "philosophical" presentations related to Daoism and animals. The latter should be used with caution because they often use outdated and inaccurate Orientalist constructions and often lack sophisticated understanding of the *religious tradition which is Daoism* (see Komjathy 2013, 2014). As the present journal utilizes "works cited" bibliographies, and as my own practice involves including "further and supplemental readings" for archivist and genealogical purposes as well as for more comprehensive intellectual inquiry, I have added this appendix.

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Notes

- ¹ One must, of course, wonder about the connection between Heidegger's Nazi involvement (Dasein=Volk?), the death-camps, and his post-WWII reflections on "the question concerning technology" (see [Heidegger 1977](#)). If one were slightly more daring, one might see a clear connection with industrial slaughterhouses (see, e.g., [Patterson 2002](#); [Fitzgerald 2010](#); below).
- ² The French title is "*L'Animal que donc je suis (à suivre)*". In addition to invoking Rene Descartes *cogito ergo sum* (*je pense, donc je suis*; "I think, therefore I am"), and paralleling the wordplay of Lévi-Strauss' *bonnes à penser*, Derrida's title "also takes advantage of the shared first-person singular present form of *être* (to be) and *suivre* (to follow) in order to suggest a displacement of that

priority, also reading as ‘the animal that therefore I follow after.’ Throughout the translation ‘I am’ has, very often, to be read also as ‘I follow’, and vice versa” (Derrida 2002, p. 369; translator’s note).

Note, for example, that Clifford Geertz’s wife [“my wife”] was present in the article and participated in the cockfighting, perhaps both literally and figuratively, as well.

For the moment, I will leave aside deeper questions about the connection between these discoveries of the so-called “Life Sciences” with laboratories, animal experimentation, and zoos.

My critique of “philosophy” (lit., “love of wisdom”) is that it tends to center on (imagined) disembodied “thought” and “ideas”, often with an accompanying insular privileged social location (e.g., academia, wealth). As I have expressed in both oral and written form (see, e.g., Komjathy 2018, 2021a), I am open to a philosophical (re)framing along the lines of Pierre Hadot (1922–2010) (“spiritual exercises”) and the later Michel Foucault (1926–1984) (“techniques of self”), but that would probably be the end of (Western) philosophy, or at least departments of Philosophy and perhaps academia. The same is obviously true if animals (beyond “comfort/therapy animals”) were released on/from university campuses across the country.

See Derrida’s *l’animot* (“the Animal”) (2002, especially 400) (see also Slater 2012; Michta 2017).

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own. Reliable translations of the *Zhuāngzi* include those by A.C. Graham, Victor Mair, and Burton Watson, with the latter being my preferred literary rendering.

As a technical term, the “governing of sages” (*shèngrén zhī zhì* 聖人之治) usually refers to commitment to and fruition of Daoist inner cultivation, especially apophatic and quietistic meditation. This includes identifying self as world, with “governing” also related to “self-regulation” and even “somatic healing”.

Note that the first half of the received *Dàodé jīng* (chps. 1–37) is referred to as the so-called “Dao section”, while the second half (chps. 38–81) is referred to as the so-called “*dé* section”. That is, as presented, the text focuses on Reality and its human expression.

I am grateful to Kate Townsend (Daoist Foundation/Root Medicine) for her suggestion of this phrase.

The ritual officiant also imagines his own potential and aspirations to be a court official, which Daoists might say is another animal sacrifice. This might be further connected to the *Tàiláo* 太牢 sacrifice/festival in DDJ 20, with *láo* (“corral/enclosure/pen”) consisting of *niú* 牛 (“ox”) under *mián* 𦉳 (“roof”). This was one of the largest and most complex ancient and imperial Chinese rituals. It involved the sacrifice of an ox, pig, and sheep. Read in its contemplative context, while ordinary people participate in said festival and perhaps witness and even conduct the sacrifice, the Daoist contemplative observes them and, in the process, may come to recognize ordinary society as a larger *Tàiláo* sacrifice or blood-rite. See below.

From a revisionist historical perspective, the *Nèiyè* is a lost and now-retrieved text included in the classical Daoist textual corpus (see Roth 1999, 2021; Komjathy 2013, 2015). Other classical Daoist discussions of the “apotropaic power” of Daoist practice appear in DDJ 50, NY 16 and 26, as well as ZZ 2, 6, 19, 22, and 23. On the latter, see (Watson 1968, pp. 46, 182, 198, 246).

Although beyond the present discussion, one also thinks of the potential transformative influence and effects of the later Daoist renunciation of animal sacrifice and embrace of vegetarianism/veganism, especially in the context of Daoist monasticism in general and *Quánzhēn* 全真 (Complete Perfection) in particular. This relates to what I have labelled the “theology of blood(lessness)” (see Komjathy 2011a, 2011b, forthcoming). One also might consider the possibility of overcoming predator/prey and fight/flight relationality through contemplative practice (see, e.g., Komjathy 2017).

A fuller discussion of “animals and Daoism” would have to consider at least the following dimensions of the larger Daoist tradition: (1) Daoist application of traditional Chinese correlative cosmology (Five Elements/Phases), especially the five directional, animal-emblems (snake-turtle/two-headed deer [north], vermilion bird [south], white tiger [west], azure dragon [east], golden phoenix [center]); (2) Daoist rejection of animal blood sacrifices and the accompanying “vegetarian pantheon”; (3) Daoist ritual purity as based on meatless fasting; (4) Daoist bioregional attentiveness and “watershed ethics”; (5) Daoist inner observation (*nèiguān* 觀) as connected to egrets (*guàn* 鵲); (6) Daoist monastic vegetarianism and associated monastic codes; and (7) Daoist use of symbolic animals in Daoist body-maps and contemplative training, see (Komjathy 2011a, 2011b, 2013, 2017, 2020, 2021b). From a comparative perspective, just as one may map religions according to the primary sense utilized (e.g., audition in Daoism) and preferred geography (e.g., mountains in Daoism), one also may consider the relationship between blood and divinity (e.g., vegetarian gods in Daoism). The latter is especially interesting in terms of comparative theology, given that Daoists believe that only lower deities will accept (and perhaps require) blood sacrifices.

See also the films *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982), *Temple Grandin* (2010), and *Eating Animals* (2018).

Significantly, neither Buber nor Derrida mentions the cats by name (see Komjathy 2017).

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