

## BOOK REVIEWS

Thoreau the Platonist, by Daniel A. Dombrowski, New York: Berne and Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1986. xxx pages, including

We are still learning how to place Emerson and Thoreau in the traditions of Western philosophy, and Dombrowski is surely right in trying here to relate Thoreau's thought to that of the ancient Greeks. Thoreau makes frequent references to Greek literature, e. g. to Homer and the Stoics. He shares with those he calls "the ancient philosophers, Chinese, Hindoo, Persian, and Greek" the view that the philosopher is not merely one who has "subtle thoughts" but one who so "love[s] wisdom as to live according to its dictates . . . ." (Walden, Modern Library edition, 13).

That Plato is the key, or even an important influence on Thoreau is a novel claim, especially in view of such contrary evidence---which Dombrowski cites---as Channing's testimony that "I never knew him to say a good word for Plato" (7). Thoreau read Plato at Harvard, however, and absorbed Platonic and Neoplatonic influences through his readings of Wordsworth and Coleridge, and the Cambridge Platonists. Dombrowski is correct in suggesting that the Platonic influence may nevertheless be there.

The evidence of Platonic influence is set out in Chapter Two of Thoreau the Platonist, entitled "The Platonic Structure of Thoreau's Universe." It soon becomes apparent that "Platonic" is an approximate term for Dombrowski, referring not only to Plato, but also to Socrates, Plotinus, Pythagoras, and even the Stoics (cf. 43 and 58). Comparing Thoreau to this cast of characters yields the following parallels: Plato and Thoreau oppose the "material" to an "eternal" or "real" world; Plato, Pythagoras, Plotinus and Thoreau hold that we must be silent about the highest principle (e. g. the Good); "philosophy" is love of wisdom in the Socratic-Platonic tradition, and Thoreau wrote about friendship and had a "love of life" (35); Socrates and Thoreau accepted the body, and Plato was "a great wrestler" (43); Thoreau, the Stoics and the Brahmins wanted philosophers to embody wisdom, not just talk about it (58). These scattershot observations occur in a chapter which contains a substantial and belabored digression on Rawls' distinction between civil disobedience (aimed at changing the law) and conscientious refusal (a matter of principle), and an argument that Thoreau embraced both. The chapter ends where it might have begun, with the interesting but unexplained (and in the light of the obscurity of "Platonism" as Dombrowski uses the term) vague, claim that "Thoreau's Platonism must be seen as similar to that of Whitehead, in which at the heart of things there are always the formal dream of youth and the material harvest of tragedy" (60).

In his third chapter Dombrowski argues that Thoreau was a "dipolar theist". This means--here Dombrowski relies on Charles Hartshorne--that he rejects that the sharp line between such traditional philosophical poles as being and becoming, self-

sufficiency and dependence, oneness and diversity. There is much to recommend this view, but this chapter does not assemble the evidence in a compelling way, particularly since it has little to say about Thoreau. Dombrowski begins by considering views he wishes to reject, viz., a) that Thoreau was a pantheist, and b), that he was a transcendentalist with regard to God, placing him "in some way beyond nature" (78). Before defending his rejection, Dombrowski launches a long exposition of Hartshorne (78-91). The main argument occurs in a brief (91-96) discussion of Thoreau. First, Dombrowski argues that "Thoreau's God is a God of becoming" citing Thoreau's statement that "The good Hebrew Revelation takes no cognizance of all this cheerful show . . . . We know of no scripture which records the pure benignity of the gods on a New England winter night" (91). Dombrowski does not explain what this passage has to do with becoming, or with "God" as opposed to "gods." He continues by arguing that "the evidence for divine transcendence also is easy to find, as when Thoreau compares the relationship between a human being and an insect to that between God and a human being" (93). But one could as easily that this to be about immanence, since both we and the insect at fellows in the same animal world--the sort of point Thoreau on more than one occasion makes. Dombrowski next returns to the charge that Thoreau is a pantheist, but, strangely, doesn't use any of the Hartshornian resources he has deployed. He argues that "without a doubt the influence of the Bible on Thoreau, much commented on, prevents him from being a pantheist . . . ." (94). This move, just when one might have been prepared for comparison of pantheism and dipolar theism, takes the breath away.

To conclude his chapter on Thoreau as a dipolar theist Dombrowski considers the objection that Thoreau could not have been one "because he never read Hartshorne" (97). One might expect Dombrowski's reply to be that Thoreau was an original, and that he (perhaps like many in the Romantic tradition) was working in his own way to overcome or reconcile traditional, and problematic oppositions. But, in what seem almost a parody of the imitative view of the world so derided by Emerson, Dombrowski argues that Emerson could have been a dipolar theist after all, because Plato was one, and Thoreau read Plato (97)! Perhaps Plato read Hartshorne.

Chapter Four is entitled "Thoreau, Sainthood, and Vegetarianism." Like earlier chapters, it is an amalgam. There is a little bit of analytic philosophy, as when Dombrowski considers the question (following Urmson) whether Thoreau's vegetarianism makes him saintly or merely heroic (113-120). There is discussion of the "neoplatonic vegetarians" Porphyry and Iamblichus, whom Thoreau read. There is an interesting collection of statements about vegetarianism in Plato, which Dombrowski admits does not unambiguously support the view that Plato was a vegetarian. Why this chapter on vegetarianism in a book on Thoreau and Plato? Dombrowski would clearly like to argue that Thoreau's vegetarianism derives from Plato. But since it is not clear either that Plato embraced vegetarianism or that Thoreau "got it" from him--as opposed to many other possible sources, including the hunting and

fishing experiences he records in Walden--this chapter falls flat.

This book is not so clearly about either Plato or Thoreau. The connections between Thoreau and ancient Greek philosophy remain largely unexplored.

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John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience and Nature: The Horizons of Feeling, by Thomas M. Alexander. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987. 325 pages, including notes, bibliography and index, \$45.00.

Beginning with a review of some criticisms of Dewey's aesthetics, Thomas Alexander develops in succeeding chapters--"The Logic of Life," "The Metaphysics of Experience," "The Embodied Mind" and "The Art of Experience"--a well-informed, even masterful, account of Dewey's aesthetics in the context of his entire philosophy.

Alexander himself says, in his introduction, "I propose to investigate what I consider to be the central, guiding thought in his philosophy: the aesthetic dimension of experience" (xiii). And in the last paragraph of the book, he claims, "Nothing in Dewey's philosophy makes sense without understanding his philosophy of experience, and it is impossible to comprehend this without coming to full terms with the aesthetic dimension of experience" (277). These two statements reveal the tension in Alexander's sense of what he has accomplished. I will argue that he should have settled for the latter. The former claims too much. Moreover, he writes as if others had not noticed the centrality of consummatory experience for Dewey.

Let me take up the second complaint first. Although Alexander has many pertinent criticisms of Richard Bernstein's effort to split up Dewey's philosophy, rending what Dewey thought was a whole, Bernstein should be given credit for calling attention to the significance of aesthetics for Dewey. Moreover, Bernstein was not the first to do so. In the bibliographical note at the end of John Dewey (1967), Bernstein writes of George Geiger's John Dewey in Perspective (1958): "Geiger is one of the major commentators who has enabled us to see the importance of the esthetic dimension of experience in Dewey's philosophy. Consequently, it serves as a corrective to narrow and distorted interpretations of Dewey's ideas."

To Alexander's credit, he has recognized what Geiger and Bernstein recognized, but he has gone beyond them, attempting to make sense of Dewey's aesthetically-informed philosophy. He has tried to answer the many critics--Santayana, Croce, Pepper, Bernstein and others--who thought Dewey's aesthetics (or metaphysics) was incoherent and thus rendered his entire philosophy suspect. Moreover, Alexander has done this, not by surveying what Dewey has written, book-by-book or topic-by-topic, but by "systematic[ally] thinking through . . . Dewey's philosophy" (xiii).