

Thomas M. ALEXANDER, *The Human Eros: Eco-ontology
and the Aesthetics of Existence*

New York, Fordham University Press, 2013, 456 pages

Connor Morris



Publisher
Associazione Pragma

Electronic version

URL: <http://ejpap.revues.org/360>
ISSN: 2036-4091

Electronic reference

Connor Morris, « Thomas M. ALEXANDER, *The Human Eros: Eco-ontology and the Aesthetics of Existence* », *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* [Online], VII-1 | 2015, Online since 07 July 2015, connection on 08 March 2017. URL : <http://ejpap.revues.org/360>

This text was automatically generated on 8 March 2017.

EJPAP

Thomas M. ALEXANDER, *The Human Eros: Eco-ontology and the Aesthetics of Existence*

New York, Fordham University Press, 2013, 456 pages

Connor Morris

REFERENCES

Thomas M. Alexander, *The Human Eros: Eco-ontology and the Aesthetics of Existence*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2013, 456 p.

Introduction

- 1 Like most scholars of Dewey's aesthetics, Thomas Alexander (who may be counted foremost under that banner), has a tendency to see in Dewey's work an inextricable tendency toward *unity*. Aesthetic experience in Dewey's *Art as Experience*, turns on the concept of 'fusion' in which meanings are 'fused' into aesthetic wholes which can be embodied in art. Aesthetic experiences, taking in hand Dewey's understanding of 'experience' as objective process involving the interplay of nature and culture, is no longer a subjective or mystical *kind* of experience that can be safely differentiated from other *kinds* of experience, e.g. scientific, moral, religious, etc. Indeed, one of the things which the essays collected in this book shows with remarkable clarity, is just how far Dewey was willing to go in reconstructing the concept of experience; experience is not simply passive reception, but active engagement in projects of reconstruction in which concepts and the world itself are (often radically) developed and remade according the purposes of the inquirer (or better yet, artist) through the world in which she lives, and that this reconstruction is carried out in the aim of securing a world rich in meaning and

value. Thus, we see, through Alexander, the true thrust of Dewey's incredibly rich naturalism: nature and culture are one, despite the differences between the two, and only because of this underlying continuity can culture (in the form of artistic inquiry) remake itself and nature through processes of deliberative inquiry.

- 2 Alexander sees his project as more than simply exploring the themes and devices in Dewey's work. He sees the essays collected as his attempts to "explore what may be called an 'aesthetics of existence' in terms of an ecological, humanistic naturalism" (HE: 1). The word 'naturalism' carries a long history around with it, going back to Aristotle's *Physics*, and re-appearing many times under many guises in the canon of Western Philosophy. However, Alexander's understanding of naturalism, compounded with his rather original conception of an 'ecological ontology' and a rich, anthropologically tinged humanism, is far from the norm of contemporary philosophy; perhaps even contemporary pragmatism. Furthermore, Alexander's project is not simply to re-define naturalism along grounds more favourable to himself and Dewey. His humanism, which he understands along the lines of an 'existential phenomenology' – think Merleau-Ponty, rather than Heidegger or Sartre – is a means to a rethinking of 'Western Ontology' along the same lines which Dewey did in books like *Experience and Nature* and *Art as Experience*, but also in books like *Essays in Experimental Logic* and *Logic: the Theory of Inquiry*. And part of this effort requires humanizing nature and naturalizing culture all in the same move. Hence, the move from aesthetics to humanism to ecological naturalism. Seeing the unity of experience requires that art (and artifice) be taken as continual with nature. Seeing human values in this light reconnects them with the natural world in terms of a genetic or emergence story of their development out of nature. This breaks the ground to plant the seeds of an 'ecological' ontology, one which fuses the two previous moves into an ontology which can support at the epistemic and aesthetic levels that which reveals this ontological move as necessary in the first place. Naturalism, in Alexander's understanding, must be broadened beyond an epistemic criterion into an ontology which affords the weaving of 'spiritual ecologies'.
- 3 The book itself consists of essays spanning more than two decades of Alexander's admirable philosophical career, uniting studies of Dewey, Santayana, Royce, and classical pragmatism all under the banner of his general approach to develop a coherent grounds and possible defence of the ontological aspect of naturalism along Deweyan lines, and indeed beyond. The book contains two essays which will be of special interest to first time students of Dewey – an (aptly named) essay on the difficult first chapter of *Experience and Nature*, and a fascinating essay on Dewey's equally difficult book on religion, *A Common Faith*. Along with this are several essays on Native American philosophy which Alexander uses to great effect to not only actively practice the pluralism which pragmatism requires, but further to stretch and play with the understanding of naturalism as a conceptual approach. The essays on Santayana and Royce put Dewey in a category of American naturalism which attempts to see spirit and not science as the fundamental cause of human action, something which contemporary pragmatists (avowed naturalists) have ignored or derided. The book is a timely collection of incisive and delightfully written essays which capture the fire of an argument a long time in the making.
- 4 In this review, however, I should like to put the above general comments (which I think capture the fire of Alexander's understanding of Dewey and, indeed, a criticism of the direction of contemporary pragmatism under analytic philosophy) to the test and see, in true pragmatist fashion, if they work. One of the things which I (and others) have found so compelling about Dewey's work is the attention he paid to the breakdowns of

experience, the indeterminacies and confusions, which coalesce into his most important conceptual device: the problematic situation. I think that something of Dewey's insights may be put at risk (if not lost altogether) by focusing on the unity which emerges from aesthetic experiences. Dewey understood, perhaps better than any other philosopher, alive or dead, that concepts, practices, culture itself, are forged in the fire of the indeterminacies which nature is shot through with. Aesthetics, as the guiding light of pragmatist research program, is in danger of privileging unity over the diversity and indeterminacy which conditions the very possibility of such unity.

Pragmatism as Epistemology or Philosophical Anthropology?

- 5 A recent issue of the *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* raised the question of the direction of pragmatism wholesale in the 21st century. The question was posed in unequivocally *epistemic* terms: the choice for pragmatists is between language and experience. Presumably this disjunction was meant to hark to the typical distinction drawn between classical- and neo-pragmatisms: neo-pragmatism has taken the 'linguistic turn', where classical pragmatism is still beholden to some (perhaps 'subjectivist') conception of experience. Neo-pragmatists see it as their great victory to eschew all talk of 'experience' along Peircean, Jamesian, or Deweyan lines, in favour of an approach that takes the 'best' ideas from these classical pragmatists and runs them through a Wittgensteinian threshing machine, separating the classical chaff from the wheat.
- 6 I think the most positive upshot of Thomas Alexander's work in *The Human Eros* is to challenge the basic validity of this disjunction. If we are to talk about the basic nature of pragmatism it need not be a debate about whether or not it is a linguistically founded epistemology or an experientially founded epistemology: and in *The Human Eros*, Alexander sketches out a favourable alternative to this disjunction. We can, on Alexander's view, see pragmatism which offers a re-working of ontology on existential grounds which affords us the possibility of seeing pragmatism wholesale as a philosophical anthropology instead of an epistemology. The upshot is not to dispense with the epistemological questions which pragmatism raises (that might well be impossible), but rather to reconceive of these questions in line with an existential conception of meaning. This shift in the understanding of meaning as semantic content and the questions of the normative character of that content (the linguistic paradigm of pragmatism) to the conception of meaning as human need (construed on Deweyan aesthetic lines, it must be said) is captured under the eponymous concept: 'the Human Eros'. This conception of meaning takes the best parts of Dewey's aesthetics, namely the idea of meaning as fulfilments and the idea that instrumental action must have aesthetic or artistic fulfilments (and not simply *further* instrumental implication). *The Human Eros* is a postulate which governs Alexander's understanding of an aesthetics lead pragmatism program which reconceives traditional epistemological, ontological, and metaphysical questions along the lines of a philosophical anthropology. Meanings are artefacts of human existence and all this implies, i.e. finitude, the possibility of failure (and thus success), and the orientation toward the future (356). To make this aspect of his project clear, Alexander develops at some length the idea of the 'Human Eros', the eponymous concept which connotes "man's search for meaning", which he gives a distinctly Deweyan tone, with talk of such meanings being rooted in a 'primarily qualitative' engagement

with the world (7). This takes some of Dewey's keenest logical insights (cf. "The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism", and "Qualitative Thought") and puts them to work in a broader 'existential' project, one which opens the way to the ontological work which Alexander takes as given (though perhaps not understood) in Dewey's own work. *The Human Eros* begins with recognising the phenomenological facticity of our 'being-in-the-world' as firstly non-cognitive/aesthetic, secondly humanistic, and thirdly depending on a rich ontology.

Aesthetics, Anthropology, and Experience

- 7 I do not mean, by construing Alexander's new book as a challenge, to say that it is all challenge and no proposals. Nor do I mean to say that it is an un-flawed choice alternative to the dominant programs. Indeed, the introduction to this review promises a criticism of Alexander's book – centring on the taking as foundational for pragmatism the aesthetics which Dewey developed. But this leaves out what one might think of as the architectonic structure of Dewey's work. I do not present this as a knock down criticism of Alexander's work on Dewey, nor his own project in pragmatism; I present this argument only to suggest that there is a manner of construing Dewey's understanding of the *need* for active deliberation which preserves the undergone (aesthetic) and indeed founds the achievement of fulfilling meanings on different grounds. Existence, Dewey tells us, exhibits precariousness and stability in near equal measure. Experience carries these traits with it, and the unity which emerges in the artistic is hard won from this constant indeterminacy.
- 8 However, I still need to cash out what I mean by the above claim. In *Experience and Nature*, Dewey is roundly concerned with cashing out the metaphysical and ontological implications of his instrumentalist understanding of experience and reality. Experiences are temporal, situated, situational, expanses of action in which the unity of the antecedent course of experience (habitual, unproblematic action) is lost. This unity must be imaginatively reconstructed through a process of 'transforming' or 'manipulating' that indeterminate situation (indeterminate in its *meaning*, namely what it signifies for us in terms of the possibilities of actions) into a determinate situation (a situation which exhibits a unity). This is also Dewey's definition of inquiry (Dewey J., 1938, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, 104-5). But experience is not inquiry: that is, all inquiries are experiences, but not all experiences are inquiries. There is the ever-present undergone element, that which we suffer or enjoy (Dewey's words) which is decidedly non-cognitive in the dual sense of not being either an inferential construction or an inferential product, nor in the sense of being capable of propositional elucidation. The pervasive quality which evokes deliberative thinking (reflection, judgment, inquiry) is that sense of a situation which guides action along in the first place. It sets the terms by which the problem is to be solved. It *affords* our thinking and our conduct. And this is the reason why Alexander stresses the undergone component of experience to the extent (correctly) that he does: to deny or misconstrue the pervasive (undergone) quality in experiences is to commit the most pernicious and pervasive fallacy which Dewey saw in the history of philosophy – namely, the intellectualist fallacy, the view that all experience is knowing experience. With this diagnosis, Dewey sets a problematic for philosophy which demands that philosophy be brought back to existential conceptions of meaning rather than the detached epistemological philosophy which he sees in contemporary pragmatism.

- 9 The understanding of experience sketched above is Dewey's instrumentalism. What we see from Alexander is Dewey's aesthetics. For Alexander, what is key for Dewey's pragmatism is a break with the traditional focus on inference and justification in favour of an approach in which thinking (and knowing) are contextualized into the broader sweep of experience and being. And it is clear that Dewey wanted this to be the upshot of his philosophical program. Everywhere in Dewey's work we find that meanings, facts, values, goodness, justice, aesthetic quality in general, and artistic experiences in particular, are collapsed into a genetic account of the emergence of such qualities from an existential conception of being (which he terms 'Eco-ontology' – a nuanced twist on Dewey's understanding of the problematic situation) in which the world is shot through with possibilities. For Alexander this is not an epistemological convenience or a metaphysical doctrine, but a liberating aesthetic which captures the fire of human being. And it is the basis for his demand that contemporary pragmatism recognize that it is at its best when it abandons epistemology in favour of a thoroughly existentialized and anthropological philosophy which sees pluralism in larger terms than securing the possibility of fruitful disagreement between communities with varying or clashing values and more in terms of the possibilities of a multitude of cultures to construct meaning systems along lines which though vastly different point to an anthropological fact about humans; namely, that we *need* to have a world which embodies the meanings which fulfil us – and this 'fulfilment' bears not a trace of subjectivism – and that this embodiment is the product of a process of imaginative reconstruction of the world. The world is a problematic situation. And the world is what is reconstructed, not solely the terms of discourse, or the methods of inquiry.
- 10 All of this goes rather well with the idea that Dewey's philosophy (especially *Experience and Nature* and *Art as Experience*) need to be read as continual, with the former before the latter. Art, Dewey tells us in Chapter 9 of *Experience and Nature*, fulfils the instrumental and gives it the possibility of becoming artistic conduct. And *Art as Experience* tells us that Dewey, when talking about 'art', meant something more suggestive of artifice or production than he did art in its museum sense. Artistic experience is not the solitary possession of the artist, but is an achievement open to all, and the means to this level of action is not via an epistemological move but via education. Art is a social achievement and a social responsibility, for to act artistically means to secure goods in creative and imaginative manners and to give desires, wants, and needs a greater and more fulfilling meaning than the simple achievement of them through rash and unimaginative action. *The Human Eros*, Alexander's 'master concept', is a product of viewing meaning along this Deweyan aesthetic line of thinking, but there is scant mention of the role of indeterminacy (logical and metaphysical) that conditions the possibility of this (conclusion) to the Deweyan line of thinking. Simply put, my point is this: Alexander, in focusing on the aesthetic leaves out the indeterminacy which conditions the possibility of a Dewey's theory of meaning altogether. Without an absence of determinate signification (talk of aesthetics put aside for a moment) there can be no *determination* of signification and *a fortiori* no fusion of fulfilling meanings in the manner which 'weaving spiritual ecologies' would require. Without the problematic situation to motivate thinking there is simply no thinking. Without the need to deliberate we do not deliberate at all – this is a foundational principle of pragmatism: the intellectualist fallacy requires us to see that active thinking is but a phase in passive (undergone) being. We are not, as Charles Taylor

has it, dealing with mediation of the world through concepts at all times in our mental life. Our primary orientation to the world is non-cognitive.

Flux, Indeterminacy, and Eros

- 11 It is through this ontological move we see the richness of Alexander's approach – and, indeed, the thrust of the critical point I stated and wish to make, that an aesthetic approach may well miss the varieties of indeterminacy which underpin Dewey's thought at large. The ontological move takes account of Dewey's views on embodiment (cf. Chapter Seven of *Experience and Nature*, "Nature, Life, and Body-Mind") and roots the imagination in this biological, and ontological, factor of being: imagination is "a dynamic, structuring of experience that arises from our lived embodiment" (9). Alexander proceeds to characterize the imagination according to the role it plays in our experience in general:

[...] initially [imagination] gives us patterns of possible actions that are rooted in our own vital form but gives these possibilities as possibilities, and so open to consideration apart from immediate action". (9)

- 12 This approach is, despite the apparent focus on action and the role of deliberative thinking, richly aesthetic. Possibilities as possibilities are not simply signs reducible to their origin in a 'grammar' or 'language game' – a way of life – they are culminations out of a biologically tinged ontology which terminates in the creation of signs for conduct, signs which can be communicated and shared, yes, but which carry with them the drama and narrative of a being for whom these possibilities are possibilities. And as possibilities, they can be distilled from immediate experience, the qualitative, non-cognitive experience which Dewey described as 'having', and applied to such experience as instruments for purposes. But this view already presupposes – but does not explicate – that this function for symbols depends on the metaphysical, and a *fortiori*, logical indeterminacy which makes possibilities what they are. As Dewey notes in "The Logic of Judgments of Practice", if a value is given then no judgment is required. Possibilities, as possibilities of *this* or *that* situation (as given) depend on there being no value (no judgment as to future conduct) obtaining – there is logical *indeterminacy*. And this indeterminacy is 1) rooted in the metaphysical indeterminacy which characterizes nature, and 2) is the condition of possibility for possibilities as possibilities. Focus on *unity* and *consummation*, the 'had' aspects of experience puts at risk (at least by possible omission) the conditions of possibility of that unifying experience in which meanings are fused to create consummate wholes – that is, art. The point here is that unless Alexander is explicit in his understanding of the aesthetic being underpinned by the instrumental (as we see Dewey thinking this way in the closing chapters of *Experience and Nature*) we cannot take it that the dimension of the possible is as thoroughly integrated into experience as he would like.
- 13 My point is this: if Alexander wants to shift pragmatist philosophy toward the kind of aesthetically grounded ontology in which human activity is seen as striving to construct a world which supports and fulfils 'the Human Eros', then he must take account of the background of indeterminacy which conditions the possibility of the kinds of fulfilling meanings which emerge from artistic conduct. And this means shifting the focus of the philosophical anthropology from its desired outcome (Eros instead of Eris) toward the conditions which not only threaten that outcome but show the need for such an

understanding of meaning and experience and show those conditions (the indeterminacy which emerges non-cognitively in the problematic situation; the precarious nature of reality). Dewey writes in *Experience and Nature*:

Because of the mixture of the regular and that which cuts across stability, a good object once experienced acquires ideal quality and attracts demand and effort to itself. A particular ideal may be an illusion, but having ideals is no illusion. It embodies features of existence. Although imagination is often fantastic it is also an organ of nature; for it is the appropriate phase of indeterminate events moving toward eventualities that are now but possibilities. A purely stable world would permit of no illusions, but neither is it clothed in ideals. (Dewey 1925: 62)

- 14 Dewey's understanding of the fragility of value and meaning in a world which is not assured is not the grounds for pessimism but optimism and faith in the ingenuity of imaginative, artistic conduct, to create a world of meaning. What Alexander perhaps does not give enough voice to is the systematic place this understanding of frailty has in Dewey's philosophy. *The Human Eros* ought to be seen as an achievement in the face of indeterminacy, but furthermore that such indeterminacy is the condition of possibility of the achievement at bottom.

Conclusion

- 15 Thomas Alexander's book is an important contribution to Dewey studies, American philosophy, and pragmatist philosophy in general. The essays collected in this book span the length and breadth of the issues which are faced by pragmatists (among other philosophers and each other) and provides a unique and original way of seeing the value of pragmatism, which shifts the focus away from the epistemology industry and toward a philosophical anthropology which aims at understanding the possibilities of the emergence and preservation of meaning along existential grounds. This new ecological, ontological conception of naturalism frees pragmatism from the chains of the primarily negative thesis of methodological naturalism and returns the human touch to nature. One might say that Alexander has taken Santayana's famed criticism of *Experience and Nature* and ran with it. Santayana claimed that Dewey had infected the category of nature with the human; for Santayana, despite being totally opposed to reductionism and having a distinct spiritual element in his philosophy, it could not be the case that nature could have cathedrals of human value – nature knows no norms. But Alexander, in his quest for a humanistic, aesthetically rich, ecological ontology has shown how this is not only possible, but that surely it must be the case if we are to make naturalism a plausible thesis. While I remain discontent with his lack of recognition of the architectonic structure of Dewey's philosophy (logical theory revealing the dependence of inference on indeterminacies which really are natural, thus paving the way for naturalistic metaphysics and *then* aesthetics), Dewey scholars and contemporary pragmatists have a challenge to face: they must make naturalism look as plausible, and indeed as *desirable*, as Alexander has.

AUTHORS

CONNOR MORRIS

University College Dublin

conor.morris[at]ucdconnect.ie