

Rick Anthony Furtak, Jonathan Ellsworth, and James D. Reid, (eds.)

Thoreau's Importance for Philosophy.

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Near the end of the Fall semester, the Harvard Museum of Natural History brought together invited scholars and the public to explore the complex question, *How Does Thoreau Matter?* A complex question is one which simultaneously raises two issues, one assumed and the other proposed. For the Harvard community, the assumed portion of the question, *Does Henry Thoreau Matter?*, must be answered affirmatively: *Clearly, Thoreau matters.* After all, the celebrated author attended Harvard in the years 1833-1837 and prepared enduring compositions like *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* and 'Civil Disobedience.' The proposed portion of the question, on the other hand, aimed to specify the importance of Thoreau today.

A similar exploration defines the new book edited by Furtak, Ellsworth, and Reid. *Thoreau's Importance* offers a collection of essays the goal of which is to recognize Thoreau's contributions to philosophy and to give justification for Thoreau's 'membership in the congress of philosophers' (179). Among the issues explored by the thirteen contributors must be the definition of philosophy itself; for, if Thoreau's compositions are to be included in the area of philosophy, then it is only because the author's compositions are shown to possess those qualities or virtues that distinguish philosophy from areas of advocacy writing like journalism.

There is no hint from the editors in the introductory essay, 'Locating Thoreau, Reorienting Philosophy,' as to how the contributions were first collected. Twelve of the contributions, including one from each of the editors, are scholarly essays composed by philosophers stationed at North American colleges and universities. Two exceptions are the editor Jonathan Ellsworth, an independent scholar, and the contributor Laura Dassow Walls, a professor of English. In addition to the twelve essays is the thirteenth contribution: an interview conducted by email between Furtak and Harvard professor Stanley Cavell, who, for some, embodies one of few academic careers to explore Thoreau's compositions as philosophy.

What must be complimented about the collection is the remarkable fit among the compositions beginning with Stanley Bates' title, 'Thoreau and Emersonian Perfectionism,' and ending with the brief essay, by Paul Friedrich, titled 'The Impact of Thoreau's Political Activism.' For one, the vision of Thoreau's philosophy that emerges is consistent throughout; for another, the later essays develop and explore insights expressed in earlier essays. This remarkable fit must be due to the careful work of the editors and not to the intentions of the individual authors. That the essays were prepared, together, for an academic conference bearing the question, *How Does Thoreau Matter Philosophically?* would also account for the unity evident in *Thoreau's Importance*.

What must also be observed about *Thoreau's Importance* are the accurate, detailed interpretations given in all the compositions. What we have in *Thoreau's Importance* are not half-hearted Thoreau dabblers, ornamenting the author's philosophy with ready-made concepts. Such a publication would be lamentable and forgettable. What we have are first-rate scholarly

explorations, all of which strongly advocate in favor of the author *qua* philosopher. Let us explore two areas of Thoreau that emerge in *Thoreau's Importance* and, from these, let us observe two modest objections to the project. The two areas are, for one, the author's deliberate choice of transformative, first-person prose to express philosophy and, for another, Thoreau's placement in what contributor Edward F. Mooney calls the tradition of 'great moral philosophy' (181).

All editors and contributors agree that Thoreau's compositions are presently excluded from the contemporary study of philosophy, whether among scholars or in the classroom. First among the causes of the author's exclusion is the lack of what the editors call 'straightforward argument' (6) and what Mooney calls 'disciplined argument' (174) in favor of the impassioned, poetical writing style and first-person reports characterizing *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*. Coming from English, contributor Laura Dassow Walls, in 'Articulating a Huckleberry Cosmos: Thoreau's Moral Ecology of Knowledge,' makes the case that Thoreau's subjective writing style is necessary for what the author sought: the articulation of perceived nature. The other contributors express analogous claims: to wit, Thoreau composed the way he did in order to achieve his aim to refresh our experience of reality.

What the collection offers us is a fruitful approach to the analytic/continental divide of 20th Century philosophy. Let us portray the divide as follows: for many North American philosophers, what philosophy must do is provide deductive arguments, the aim of which is neither to move nor provoke the audience, but to provide formally justified conclusions in distinct areas like epistemology and ethics. This defines analytic philosophy. On the other hand, for many philosophers what philosophy must do especially is to give inducements to self-reflection, cultural questioning, and political activity using whatever means and mediums appear suitable. All contributors agree: Thoreau's contributions to philosophy belong to the second class of philosophy, which, for some contributors, approximates to areas of continental philosophy.

For example, Reid's essay, 'Speaking Extravagantly: Philosophical Territory and Eccentricity in *Walden*' underlines Thoreau's project to refresh, through poetic prose, our experience of life with his own allusions to the 20th Century explorations of meaning by Heidegger (52) and Bateman's essay, 'Thoreau and Emersonian Perfectionism,' describes kinships between Thoreau and Karl Marx's treatments of labor, debt, and physical life (21). Similarly, Mooney makes the case for the juxtaposition of Thoreau's mission with the satirical, literary project of Søren Kierkegaard; while contributor Walls brings to light the powerful influence of Alexander Von Humboldt's *Cosmos*, published in 1845, upon both Thoreau and his mentor, Emerson.

Surprisingly, not one contributor situates Thoreau in the analytic school. But continental philosophy is not the only area known for provocation and artful style. Interviewee Stanley Cavell notes, in '*Walden Revisited: An Interview with Stanley Cavell*,' that the analytic philosopher Wittgenstein employed provocation often and that this approach to philosophy has not at all excluded Wittgenstein. Moreover, Cavell observes that literary, poetical touches may create the extraordinary moods necessary for the commencement of philosophical reflection (228). In short, two points of evidence may be brought justifying Thoreau's inclusion in philosophy: literary styles characterize and are celebrated by the continental area of philosophy, analytic philosophy, for its part, sometimes employs non-formal methods of inducement.

If Thoreau's compositions offer inducement and his aim is solely to improve the reading audience, then his area of philosophy may justly be identified as *moral*. That Thoreau contributes a moral philosophy is the second outstanding claim of *Thoreau's Importance*. What becomes clear is that Thoreau is not perceived to contribute a formal moral philosophy, in the manner of a Kant or Moore. Instead, the author is believed to contribute 'great moral philosophy,' the aim of which is to transform the discontent reader, the unjust community, and our impoverished perception. The contributors provide several perspectives on this claim; and give us opportunity to consider what moral philosophy truly is. The best essays, like Mooney's "Wonder and Affliction: Thoreau's Dionysian World," give substantial argument that what Thoreau offers is moral philosophy proper. Alfred I. Tauber's essay, "Thoreau's Moral Epistemology and Its Contemporary Relevance," describes Thoreau's project as offering a *moral epistemology*, aiming to restore us by solving the subject and object divide enforced by modernity. Contributor Walls provides an analogous description she calls *moral ecology*. For her, Thoreau's compositions give us moral ecology, articulating the complexity of nature for the purpose of restoring our place in the cosmos.

At the conclusion of *Thoreau's Importance*, the interview between Cavell and Furtak aims to explore trans-Atlantic intellectual kinships and the question of philosophical style. Yet, unexpectedly, the interview gives instruction in an area for which the collection is silent: the problem of idolatry in philosophical studies. The problem of idolatry and the need to sufficiently recognize the value of non-fallacious argument for philosophy emerge as two modest objections to the project.

For his part, Cavell disputes the observation of Furtak that his own published writings, exploring Thoreau and others, carry a unique, literary style. Admonishing the obsequious Furtak, Cavell expresses his ordinary belief about good philosophy: 'I am, to the best of my ability, insisting on meaning every word I say. I take it that this is no more or less what philosophy asks' (234). What seems to underlie Cavell's position is the belief that the idolization of authors, whether Cavell or Thoreau, does not suit the exploration of ideas particular to philosophy. The study of Thoreau's compositions similarly instructs us to recognize idolatry as pernicious.

Thoreau's Importance defies the important distinction between exploring the author and exploring the ideas expressed by the author. Indeed, most contributors strongly advocate for Thoreau. But, just here, we are in danger of obscuring the commitment of philosophy begun in ancient Greece and China. Above all, philosophy cannot submit to idolatry and the worship of celebrity. Idolatry, for one, *is* a false inducement to truth, whereas true philosophy carries the aim of building the identity and autonomy of the audience. To wit, if we are to consider Thoreau's philosophy, then we must not be overly concerned to consider Thoreau.

The definition of philosophy as giving 'disciplined argument' and 'straightforward argument' expresses the ideal of rationality. Above all, good philosophy gives us non-fallacious reasoning and writing. In philosophy, for example, we do not appeal to the people nor use loaded words. Surprisingly, the contributors of *Thoreau's Importance* must be willing to concede that the compositions of Thoreau argue fallaciously. But this claim is hasty. The compositions of Thoreau, indeed, offer reasonably formal arguments and reasonings. The oration 'Civil Disobedience' is the best example. Where Thoreau does not give actual deductions, Thoreau nonetheless practices a careful writing style that is sufficiently formal as to be non-fallacious. Much is to be said on this score for the long, moral argument defining the opening chapters of *Walden; Or, Life in the Woods*.

So, rather than only emphasize the subjective in Thoreau and argue for the value of subjectivity in philosophy, let us also notice the works of the New England author and others of his circle as showing an artful formal style that allows us to consider them among our required readings for any 'Introduction to Philosophy' course.

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