SEVEN

THE VALUE OF BEING

Thoreau on Appreciating the Beauty of the World

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What is the relation between a bird and the ear that appreciates its melody, to whom, perchance, it is more charming and significant than to any else? Certainly they are intimately related, and the one was made for the other. It is a natural fact.

—Henry David Thoreau, *Journal*, 2/20/57

According to a common philosophical bias, the material world is devoid of value: Such axiological qualities as the beauty of a bird's song must lie only in the eye (or the ear) of the beholder. On this view, the color and scent of autumn leaves, the radiance of the sun, and the soothing voice of a friend, are alike false properties that do not actually reside in objective reality. If the world of appearance were stripped of its illusory tints, it would be "a dull affair, soundless, scentless, colorless: merely the hurrying of material, endlessly, meaninglessly."[1] No one philosopher or school of thought holds sole responsibility for this position, which has been represented in variations from the Greek atomists through the logical positivists. It generally arises from the desire to separate the observed properties that truly belong to objective reality from those that depend on peculiarities of the observer's constitution. This, in principle, would enable us to arrive at a description of the world that is free of all that is relative to our own experience. The "absolute conception of reality," as it has been called,[2] would be purged of all that is "arbitrary and individual" or otherwise subjective.[3] The charming significance of a bird's

song can hardly be described without reference to the sensory responses of a particular creature: namely, the appreciative perceiver who is moved when he or she hears the bird. It would therefore have to be classified as illusory, so long as we assume that the vantage point of any particular sentient being must be transcended in order to arrive at "an undistorted view of the world as it really is."[4] This assumption leads John Stuart Mill, for instance, to characterize poetry as a description of "things as they appear, not as they *are*," which portrays them "not in their bare and natural lineaments" but in the "exaggerated colors" that appear to the observer whose imagination and emotions are excited by what he or she sees. Presumably, these colors are "not in the object itself," as it would be described by a naturalist.[5] Thoreau, however, had difficulty maintaining this distinction.

> I have a commonplace book for facts and another for poetry—but I find it difficult always to preserve the vague distinction which I had in my mind—for the most interesting & beautiful facts are so much the more poetry and that is their success. . . . I see that if my facts were sufficiently vital & significant . . . I should need but one book of poetry to contain them all. (*Journal*, 2/18/52)[6]

Elsewhere in his journal, Thoreau reports that his goal is to "state facts" in such a way that "they shall be significant," rather than allowing himself to be blind to "the significance of phenomena" (*Journal*, 11/9/51, 8/5/51). Those facts he records should not be "dry" and "stated barely," but "warm, moist, incarnated," and charged with meaning: "A man has not seen a thing who has not felt it" (*Journal*, 2/23/60). Clearly, he does not accept that whatever we register through our aesthetic and emotional responses ought to be viewed as unreal. In fact, Thoreau would argue that the person who is seldom moved by the beauty of things is the one with an inadequate conception of reality, since it is the neutral observer who is less well aware of the world as it is. When he states that the intimate relation between the bird's melody and the appreciative listener is a "natural fact," Thoreau is making a polemical claim. Poetic and naturalistic accounts of reality need not be at odds with one another. If we assume that they are, then we are guilty of either a philosophical error or, perhaps, a perceptual failure.

The philosophical error would be to believe that a list of insignificant facts might give us the whole truth about being; the perceptual failure

would be to lose touch with the significance of phenomena due to a deficiency in our own mode of observation. Rather than imposing a sharp division between facts and values, Thoreau urges his reader not to "underrate the value of a fact," since each carefully recorded fact may eventually "flower in a truth." Later in the same essay, he writes that the "true man of science" will "know nature better" by virtue of having disciplined and refined his way of seeing: One "must look a long time" in order to see.[7] Here Thoreau outlines an epistemological task that will occupy him for the rest of his life, namely, to develop a method of attending to objects so that they will be experienced as elements of a meaningful world. One of Thoreau's most distinctive contributions to philosophy is "his discerning naturalist's eye, informed by a scientific attitude yet committed to an enchanted vision of nature."[8] He writes in *Walden* that each of us faces the task of making his life, "even in its details, worthy of the contemplation of his highest hour," keeping in mind that "we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality which surrounds us."[9] The world is rich with value that is not of our making, and "whatever we have perceived to be in the slightest degree beautiful is of infinitely more value to us than what we have only as yet discovered to be useful and to serve our purpose."[10] For Thoreau, the most reliable observer is one who can "see things as they are, grand and beautiful" (*Journal*, 1/7/57)—in other words, the beauty and grandeur of the world really *are* there to be seen, even if we are not always capable of seeing them. We can easily fail to perceive the value of being if we do not approach the world with the appropriate kind of emotional comportment. It is all-important, then, to cultivate our perceptual capacities—and a good part of Thoreau's work, from first to last, is dedicated to this endeavor. He attempts to elaborate a vision of reality as significant, and to identify the subjective conditions that enable us to become aware of this significance.

If *Walden* is an "account of transformed understanding," as Stanley Cavell points out, then "every word in it" might qualify as philosophical.[11] However, it is difficult to locate Thoreau's project within any one area of philosophy. When he says that "the perception of beauty is a moral test" (*Journal*, 6/21/52), he places an ethical imperative in the context of aesthetic experience. Yet the reason why aesthetic perception carries such weight is that our conception of reality will be inadequate if we are blind to the world's beauty: So it is for ontological and epistemological reasons

that we have a moral obligation to develop our aesthetic sensitivity. Moreover, one could justifiably claim that the "central task" of Thoreau's philosophy is to articulate a "religious attitude" in which all of existence is regarded with wonder, reverence, and awe.[12] This "piety toward the actual," as John Dewey calls it, is an attitude toward phenomena that would allow us to experience "moments of intense emotional appreciation" in which the beauty of the universe is revealed.[13] "How sweet is the perception of a new natural fact!" Thoreau exclaims. It suggests "what worlds remain to be unveiled" and reminds us that the constitution or disclosure of reality depends partly on us. "When the phenomenon was not observed—It was not—at all" (*Journal*, 4/19/52). Such a passage indicates that Thoreau has anticipated some key insights of the phenomenological movement. He recognizes that the world is "known only insofar as our mental faculties allow," as Tauber points out.[14] Although the interdependence of subject and object has been noted by many philosophers since Kant, Thoreau is especially mindful of how the content of experience depends on the unique character of the individual's mind, defined by its own mode of vision. Because different "intentions of the eye and of the mind" are required to attend to different aspects of reality, it is useless to speak of "significant facts" without explaining the habit of attention that makes it possible for a person to perceive them (*Journal*, 9/8/58, 3/28/57). The world appears differently to us insofar as we approach it with differing orientations, since our perception is influenced by our beliefs about the qualitative nature of what we are perceiving. Our ability to experience things as meaningful, then, is predicated on encountering the world "as we best imagine it," with eyes that can find profound significance in the midst of everyday reality.[15] Self-discipline and purification are required in order to develop this kind of receptivity; according to Thoreau, it may also be necessary to bring simplicity and repose into one's life.

"We need pray for no higher heaven than the pure senses can furnish," Thoreau writes, suggesting that we can realize the sacred value of being through a discipline of our perceptual capacities.[16] Reality and value, knowledge and conduct, do not fall into separate domains of inquiry for Thoreau any more than they do for Plotinus. Even an essay on autumn colors must incorporate a theory of perception, for it "requires a particular alertness, *if not devotion* to these phenomena," in order for us to appreciate their distinctive beauty.[17] Because any change in our way of

experiencing things will bring about a transformation in our understanding and an alteration in the quality of our world, the task of learning to see has an importance that cannot be exaggerated. Taking up residence at Walden, Thoreau claims, was an expression of his "wish to meet the facts," that is, "the phenomena or actuality the Gods meant to show us,—face to face" (*Journal*, 7/6/45). He wanted, he says, not to suppose or invent a case, but to "take the case that is," knowing that in those rare moments of sanity when we are truly awake and aware this is what we regard: "the facts, the case that is" (*Walden*, 318–20). And he uses the same biblical phrase ("face to face") as he portrays in a tone of mystical rapture what this encounter might be like.

> If you stand right fronting and face to face to a fact, you will see the sun glimmer on both its surfaces . . . and feel its sweet edge dividing you through the heart and marrow, and so you will happily conclude your mortal career. Be it life or death, we crave only reality. (*Walden*, 96)

Thoreau speculates that, if his habits of observation were adequate to the challenge, he could "improve every opportunity to wonder and worship" until he would be "elevated enough" to "dream of no heaven but that which lies about me" in common, "every-day phenomena" (*Journal*, 8/30/56, 3/11/56). It is impossible to tell whether he is describing a process of aesthetic education or of spiritual enlightenment. This shows how much is at stake for Thoreau in striving to find beauty in the world: To have a significant fact impressed upon us completely, he suggests, would leave us so fulfilled as to be willing to perish at once. Although it is a worthy accomplishment "to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful," Thoreau maintains that "it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do. To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts" (*Walden*, 88). Significantly, he refers to this as a *moral* enterprise: The perception of beauty is a moral test, a test of our character as embodied in our dispositions. Furthermore, the literary process of articulating a vision of the world cannot be detached from the practical task of inhabiting it. In other words, the project of envisioning and depicting a way of life is bound up with the discipline of living.

In the midst of a tirade about the decadence of modern culture, Thoreau remarks that he would like to count himself among "those who find their encouragement and inspiration in precisely the present condition of things, and cherish it with the fondness and enthusiasm of lovers" (*Walden*, 15). Yet contemporary civilization, with its obfuscating prejudices and its "restless, nervous, bustling, trivial" activity (*Walden*, 320), tends to instill a distorted sense of value. It threatens to prevent human beings from having the opportunity or the inclination to embrace the world in a spirit of grateful affirmation. For example, "If a man walk in the woods for love of them half of each day," he is regarded as a lazy person; but "if he spends his whole day as a speculator, shearing off those woods and making earth bald before her time, he is esteemed an industrious and enterprising citizen."[18] Going for a walk in the woods thus becomes not only a political act, but—as Thoreau provocatively claims in his late essay "Walking"—one that also carries a religious significance. It is when I go for a walk, for its own sake and with no other goal in mind, that I "return to my senses" and renew my acquaintance with the beauty of the woods.[19] The red color of an autumn leaf is a natural fact that is out there in the world "to be met with" by the appreciative perceiver, and the activity of going to meet with it is an end in itself. If the scarlet oak appears to possess a "more brilliant redness" than it does at other times, this "partly borrowed fire" may be due to the angle of the low sun in relation to the observer's eye.[20] As this sort of phenomenon shows, we need not escape into a realm of artificial fantasy in order to find our experience animated with sacred radiance. Rather, we need only adjust the lens through which we are perceiving things, in order to become less oblivious and more alert toward the intricate world that surrounds us. Nature will repay the closest investigation, continually disclosing new wonders for those who have eyes to see. And the "living poetry" that we find in the world of natural facts will not be exhausted by our best efforts to search for beauty in concrete things. Fact and value are deeply entangled, as Hilary Putnam has more recently argued;[21] therefore, we cannot embrace the notion that our aesthetic responses are untrue to reality. It is "by closing the eyes and slumbering" that people deceive themselves, but by steadily observing only what is real we can develop a clarified vantage point and come to discover that "reality is fabulous" (*Walden*, 94). Some of the most striking features of our surroundings are at risk of being missed due to avoidable limitations in our mode of vision.

The imagination, properly understood, is a faculty that gives us access to reality—not a means of taking flight from it.[22] Although our conceptions

are answerable to how the world is, we have no access to the world except through the ways of apprehending it that are available to us. Between the extremes of dogmatic realism and subjective idealism, Thoreau stays on a middle path that is quite characteristically his own. The human mind is not a blank slate that simply mirrors empirical reality or an empty receptacle that simply takes things in. But neither is the mind a projector that casts its own fancies onto a blank screen without constraint, encountering only itself as it encloses us within a world of our own invention. Even if the imagination "half-creates what it perceives," what this means is that our receptive faculties are actively involved in interpreting the "significant facts" whose meaning is not self-evident to just any observer.[23] In order to read the "language which all things and events speak without metaphor" (*Walden*, 108), we must stretch our imaginations in the very process of coming to terms with material nature in its otherness. We must, for instance, figure out how to decipher the intonations of various birds, whose cadences carry their own connotations in a language that is (at first) foreign to us. If we attentively dwell on the essential facts of life, looking always at what is to be seen, then what we ultimately find will satisfy the most extravagant demands of our imagination. The great poet is simply a writer who is entirely occupied with "giving an exact description of things as they appeared to him, and their effect upon him." Thoreau continues:

> We can never safely exceed the actual facts in our narratives. Of pure invention, such as some suppose, there is no instance. . . . A true account of the actual is the rarest poetry, for common sense always takes a hasty and superficial view.[24]

We should worry only that our most rhapsodic and astonishing accounts of what we have experienced will fall short of the reality with which we have been acquainted. As far as his own experience is concerned, Thoreau attests that he "cannot exaggerate enough even to lay the foundation of a true expression" (*Walden*, 315). Although it would be naive to think that we have the power to construct our own world without any restrictions, it is nonetheless true that the lens through which we are looking goes some way toward determining what we see. As Thoreau says, the "boundaries of the actual are no more fixed and rigid than the elasticity of our imaginations" (*Journal*, 5/31/53). Reality depends on the attentive perceiver in order to be brought to articulation, since observation is a creative

process in which the observer plays a decisive role in the taking-shape of what is observed. We take in only what we are morally and intellectually prepared to receive, seeing only what concerns us and comprehending "only what we already half know" (*Journal*, 1/5/60). If our life seems to be impoverished, this might be due to our own failure to attain a state of poetic awareness that would enable us to apprehend its true splendor. After all, "the fault-finder will find faults even in paradise" (*Walden*, 319), and what we see in an appreciative mood is different from what we see when we are looking at things more scornfully. Just as a skeptical bias condemns us to experience uncanny doubts, an attentive focus on the wondrous realities of the world allows us to perceive much that would otherwise be missed. "All the phenomena of nature need to be seen from the point of view of wonder," Thoreau claims, such as the lakeshore whose "poetic" beauty is visible only to someone who is looking at it with the eyes of a poet (*Journal*, 6/27/52, 8/29/58). Wonder, after all, is the emotion with which philosophical reflection is said to begin. It is the affective state in which we are struck by something of great but unknown importance that we wish to understand. A more prosaic, neutral, or disinterested attunement might lead us to assume that a landscape is objectively barren, and that it only later becomes colored by our imaginations.[25] For Thoreau, however, its beauty really is there to be seen: "All things are significant," he writes (*Journal*, 11/1/51), and yet we could not become aware of their significance from an apathetic or disengaged perspective.

If our "forms of feeling" are "as revelatory of the world" as other modes of experience,[26] then any substantial change in our affective receptivity will transform our sense of reality. By "looking at things microscopically," we shut out "a great part of the world"; when we take a wider view, on the other hand, we notice "a certain meagerness of details" as a result (*Journal*, 3/5/52, 7/2/52). What faces us in our historical moment is the challenge of acknowledging what actually exists: Whereas the Greeks "with their gorgons, sphinxes," and so forth, "could imagine more than existed," in our disenchanted era we have trouble imagining "so much as exists" (*Journal*, 2/18/60).[27] In order for an author "to defend nature's intrinsic value," as Thoreau certainly wishes to do,[28] he or she must find a way to amplify our awareness, making us see something that we are at risk of missing. This includes everything from the way a pond's colors vary under different atmospheric conditions to the hint of "holiness groping for expression" that can be discerned in one's neighbor as he

labors outside on a spring day (*Walden*, 171–72, 303). Now, Heidegger would say that it is the poet's role to restore weight to things, opening up new worlds of tangible value rather than merely neutral facts.[29] But since it is also the goal of the phenomenologist to make us "see or experience something which otherwise remains hidden,"[30] Thoreau's representation of the world as emphatically *not* value-neutral can be viewed as a contribution to phenomenology as well. And yet, regardless of whether *Walden* is best viewed as a poetic narrative with philosophical significance or as a work of phenomenological philosophy, it clearly insists that a true account of reality must do justice to all the qualities that the human mind is capable of perceiving in the material world. Most of the time, "our vision does not penetrate the surface of things," and we assume that "that *is* which *appears* to be," according to an impaired way of seeing (*Walden*, 94). Lacking "sanity and sound senses," we are too often "comparatively deaf and dumb and blind, and without smell or taste or feeling."[31] As a result, we are monstrously obtuse, occupying "the heaven of the gods without knowing it."[32] In short, Thoreau suggests that many noteworthy properties of objects will be inaccessible to us unless we encounter them with a suitable attunement.

What he is gesturing toward is a disposition that can be deliberately cultivated, and which would enable us to perceive the beauty of the world. Due to his conviction that "the perception of beauty is a moral test," Thoreau often rebukes himself—or humanity in general—for failing at this task: "How much of beauty . . . on which our eyes daily rest goes unperceived by us?" (*Journal*, 8/1/60). He wonders if a child might pick "its first flower with an insight into its beauty and significance which the subsequent botanist never retains" (*Journal*, 2/5/52). And he adds that "the truest description, and that by which another living man can most readily recognize a flower, is the unmeasured and eloquent one which the sight of it inspires" (*Journal*, 10/13/60). As the pragmatists have underscored, our attitude toward the world is one element in the constitution of reality, and therefore the truth about the universe will vary to some degree depending on the disposition with which we approach it.[33] What we "meet with," as Thoreau might say, depends in part on our subjective comportment toward the world. The "objects which one person will see from a particular hilltop are just as different from those which another will see as the persons are different," since things are concealed from us "not so much because they are out of the course of our visual ray as

because we do not bring our minds and eyes to bear on them."[34] Taking notice of another person's suffering, for instance, involves more than having the requisite physiological equipment and facing in the right direction: It also requires a certain kind of emotional receptivity. It is a mistaken way of thinking that allows us to speak "as if seeing were all in the eyes, and a man could sufficiently report what he stood bodily before," when in fact what we see depends partially on us (*Journal*, 1/12/52). This is not because the external world is merely a fund of inchoate matter upon which order is forcibly imposed by our mental powers: It is, rather, because our way of seeing affects what in the world commands our attention as well as how it appears.

Thoreau attempts to do justice to both the knower and the known, the lens of perception and the independently existing world that is shaped and highlighted by the mind's own categories. So he can consistently maintain that "the universe constantly and obediently answers to our conceptions" *and* that "the universe is wider than our views of it" (*Walden*, 64, 188). We meet the world halfway in the event of perception, and a satisfactory philosophical explanation will acknowledge both sides of this story, rather than exaggerating one at the expense of the other. The question of whether or not one perceives "the significance of phenomena," on Thoreau's view, is decided not only by "what you look at," but also by "how you look & whether you see" (*Journal*, 8/5/51). Accordingly, he argues that there will be "as much beauty visible to us in the landscape as we are prepared to appreciate," but "not a grain more."[35] An alert observer who has become emotionally attuned to the place where she is situated will consequently find herself "in a living and beautiful world" (*Journal*, 12/31/59). Hence it is impossible to overestimate the importance of "being forever on the alert," and of "the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen" (*Walden*, 108). As William James points out, a "rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth, if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule."[36] This is why the stance of the poetic observer, who is maximally susceptible to being impressed by the world's beauty, is rationally justified. Although we are always at risk of growing indifferent, Thoreau assures us that "the laws of the universe are not indifferent, but are forever on the side of the most sensitive" (*Walden*, 210). Remarking that it is only right for us to ascribe more reality to our visions of significance than to any other experiences, James comments: "Life is always worth living,

if one have such responsive sensibilities."[37] Our convictions about the reality of the world are based on this affective awareness, and we are intimately bound to our environment by a sense of its meaning.

This, I think, is what Cavell has in mind when he writes that "our relation to the world's existence is somehow *closer* than the ideas of believing and knowing are made to convey."[38] Rejecting the ideal of neutral objectivity, Thoreau seeks "to preserve an enchanted world and to place the passionate observer in the center of his or her universe."[39] He also reminds us that "there is no such thing as pure *objective* observation" and asserts that all observation, in order "to be significant, must be *subjective*" (*Journal*, 5/6/54). The world cannot be accurately known or described, that is, except in terms that refer to a subject's possible or actual experience. And we have no good reason to base our overall conception of reality on experiences in which the world appears to be especially flat, value-neutral, and irrelevant to us. Even in his observations of natural phenomena, Thoreau finds that "the objects I behold correspond to my mood"; what is crucial, then, is to develop an attunement that keeps us from being "blind to the significant phenomena" that are always before us (*Journal*, 8/7/53, 8/5/51). In principle, a naturalistic approach to the world should be able to grasp its significance; part of Thoreau's motivation for measuring the depth of Walden Pond is to show that his appreciation of its beauty is not undermined by knowing this kind of quantifiable fact. Practically speaking, however, it may be "impossible for the same person to see things from the poet's point of view and that of the man of science" (*Journal*, 2/18/52). A maximally "objective" description, or one that aspires to reach this ideal, is bound to deliver an account of reality that is partial and incomplete, as it overlooks certain features of the world. Yet whether or not he ever succeeds at uniting the poetic and the scientific perspectives, Thoreau is confident that both of them are converging upon a single reality. Our various "points of view" on the universe, he proposes, correspond to the "infinite number of profiles" that a mountain displays as we glimpse it from a different angle on every step of our climb. Although it has "absolutely but one form," the mountain always has further aspects that we have not seen: Even if we tunnel all the way through it or cut it into slices, it will not be "comprehended in its entireness" (*Walden*, 281). The fact that there is a "subjective element" in the equation does not entail that objects have no actual properties; indeed, what we have apprehended of them is always only part of what they are.[40]

This is why we are not at risk of exceeding the facts in our most poetic descriptions.

Thoreau acknowledges that the axiological qualities of the natural world include the awesome, and the awful, no less than the beautiful: Nature is "untamed, and forever untamable," an autonomous power that we should expect neither to predict nor to control.[41] Moreover, the whole truth about the world cannot be apprehended from any one perspective—what has been imparted to each of us is necessarily only a partial view of a larger reality. Because every person's "view of the universe" is so "novel and original" (*Journal*, 4/2/52), it follows that if another human being "has lived sincerely, it must have been in a distant land to me" (*Walden*, 2). All of this suggests that Thoreau is trying to outline a kind of personal knowledge that depends to a great extent upon the interests and concerns that define our framework of observation. Recognizing that the thoughts of each perceiver are "part of the meaning of the world," he asks: "Who can say what *is*? He can only say *how* he *sees*" (*Journal*, 11/4/52, 12/4/46).[42] We have no transparent access to reality, in other words, and no vantage point from which to determine whether the world *itself* is somehow falsified by the categories of the human mind. Truth is radically perspective-dependent, and to the degree that our outlooks differ we will find ourselves living in different worlds.

Because all perception has a subjective aspect, the universe can be defined as a sphere centered on each perceiver: Wherever we are located, "The universe is built around us, and we are central still" (*Journal*, 8/24/41). "Wherever I sat, there I might live, and the landscape radiated from me accordingly" (*Walden*, 78). This does not imply that we are trapped inside of our own consciousness: The point is that it is only through the lens of our own subjectivity that we have access to the outside world. All of Thoreau's experience in the field enabled him to arrive at the realization "that he, the supposedly neutral observer, was always and unavoidably in the center of the observation."[43] It is the sympathetic encounter between mind and world that brings to light what is most wondrous in our existence, as when we see that "suddenly the sky is all one rain bow" (*Journal*, 8/21/51). Just as the "intense burning red" of the scarlet oak "asks a clear sky and the brightness of late October days" in order to be known in all its brilliance, the colors of a rainbow are disclosed only where there is a conscious observer to perceive them.[44] Claiming that "when the phenomenon was not observed," it "was not,"

Thoreau declares that "the philosopher for whom rainbows, etc., can be explained away, never saw them" (*Journal*, 4/19/52, 11/5/57). In the latter entry, he adds that "the point of interest" with such appearances "is somewhere *between* me and them"—that is, between the knowing subject and the object of knowledge. These words bring him very close to the position of another philosopher for whom the phenomenon of the rainbow demonstrates something about the nature of perception in general.

> Thus it is true, e.g., that when during a rain accompanied by sunshine we see a rainbow, we will call it a mere appearance, while calling the rain the thing in itself. And this is indeed correct, provided that we here take the concept of a thing in itself as meaning only something physical. . . . But suppose that we take this empirical something as such, and that—without being concerned about its being the same for the sense of every human being—we ask whether it presents also an object in itself. . . . In that case our question about the presentation's relation to the object is transcendental, and the answer is: not only are these drops mere appearances; rather, even their round shape, and indeed the space in which they fall, are nothing in themselves.[45]

To argue that a rainbow is a phenomenal appearance is not to dismiss it as a mere illusion—after all, the same can be said about the raindrops themselves—but to make room for it within an account of reality. To equate "reality" with "objective reality," however, would be a mistake. If Thoreau is "the American heir to Kant's critical philosophy,"[46] it is because his analysis of the observer's relation to what is observed leads him to explore and develop what is fundamentally a Kantian insight. We must account for the seer, one might say, in accounting for the scene. By doing so, Thoreau provides an original response to the problem of knowledge in modern philosophy. He stipulates that our comprehension of reality is limited by our capacity for seeing, and that the world as known is therefore "dependent on character."[47]

If Descartes had conceived of knowledge as embodied in our practical dispositions, he could not so easily have compared his beliefs to building blocks in an edifice that he could step outside of while it was being demolished and remodeled.[48] The project of pure inquiry must not be affected by the moral, aesthetic, or epistemic virtues of the particular human being who is carrying it out, since it relies on assuming an impersonal, disinterested vantage point. One commonplace of ancient philosophy

that was largely abandoned during the early modern period is that a person "could not have access to the truth" without undertaking a process of self-cultivation that would render him "susceptible to knowing" it.[49] Descartes does not seek to develop and refine his individual point of view, but to arrive at a purified viewpoint that is not that of an individual person. Thoreau, by contrast, assures his philosophical readers that we should not go around "like true idealists, rejecting the evidence of our senses," and he entertains the idea of an evil demon for no longer than he imagines that he might be dreaming.[50] Yet he shares the Cartesian aspiration to get to the bottom of things and to find a solid grounding for knowledge, and he is interested in exploring how we might renew contact with the world that is lost to us when we doubt its existence. Furthermore, the "connection with things" that Thoreau wishes to recover will be insufficient if it includes nothing beyond the mere assurance that an external world exists.[51] He realizes that the philosopher who hopes to develop a convincing response to skeptical doubt must also explain how the perceived beauty and meaning of things are more than an illusion. As we have seen, this is above all a matter of examining how to develop eyes that are capable of appreciating the value of being.

Thoreau notes in a late journal entry that different frames of mind, even "morbid states," render us "peculiarly fitted for certain investigations," and thus "better able to deal with certain phenomena" (*Journal*, 7/18/59). Because there are "innumerable avenues to a perception of the truth," we must "reconsider our experience from many points of view and in various moods" in order to know the world more thoroughly (*Journal*, 9/4/51, 3/24/57).[52] According to Thoreau, the most desirable epistemic position is that of the person who sustains "a meticulous and discerning awareness of the particularities of nature," keeping in mind that "every perception bears an enormous weight of significance."[53] Since nature is not an inventory of dry facts, scientific knowledge may not have an exclusive claim to deliver the truth about the natural world. For Thoreau, the more important goal is to be "sensible to the finest influence" (*Journal*, 2/14/51) so that one can accurately perceive the beauty of the universe. As he is willing to concede, this aspiration might never be perfectly achieved.

> I do not know that knowledge amounts to anything more definite than a novel and grand surprise, or a sudden revelation of the insufficiency

> of all that we had called knowledge before; an indefinite sense of the grandeur and glory of the universe. It is the lighting up of the mist by the sun. (*Journal*, 2/27/51)[54]

Thoreau laments his discovery that the "facts most astounding and most real" are often the "farthest from being appreciated." We "easily come to doubt if they exist," and yet "they are the highest reality" (*Walden*, 208). Whether or not these realities are lost on us depends on how we are oriented toward the actual world, and on whether we have succeeded at opening ourselves to a wider horizon of experience. As Thoreau wrote in his final journal entry, "All this is perfectly distinct to an observant eye, and yet could easily pass unnoticed by most" (*Journal*, 11/3/61). In other words, the alert and emotionally attuned observer will have access to many significant facts that would be invisible from the vantage point of dispassionate detachment. The world's beauty is not fabricated by the eye of the beholder, but it does require the right kind of eyewitness in order to be seen.

and expressive as any in Europe; he died before he could finish this study, and the scattered manuscripts are only now turning up in European libraries. His correspondence with the pioneering American linguist John Pickering was part of this project. The work and philosophy of the Brothers Humboldt was ultimately taken up by Franz Boas, who used it to found modern anthropology. In the United States, Albert Gallatin took up the study of Native American languages at the same time as Pickering, and under Alexander von Humboldt's encouragement, founded the American Ethnological Society, still in existence today; Gallatin's work, also little known today, was taken up by John Wesley Powell. I have covered this story in some detail in *Passage to Cosmos*, chap. 4, but the larger story remains to be told.

30. Earl Shorris, "The Last Word," *Harper's*, August 2000, 43.

7. THE VALUE OF BEING: THOREAU ON APPRECIATING THE BEAUTY OF THE WORLD

Rick Anthony Furtak

1. Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Free Press, 1967), 54. Cf. Susan Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 37–38.

2. Bernard Williams defends this notion in *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), 230–42, 300–301.

3. C. S. Peirce, "A Critical Review of Berkeley's Idealism," in *Selected Writings* (New York: Dover, 1966), 82.

4. John McDowell, "Aesthetic Value, Objectivity, and the Fabric of the World," in *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 119.

5. J. S. Mill, *Early Essays* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1897), 206–7. On "secondary" qualities, see also John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1689; Oxford University Press, 1979).

6. All references to Thoreau's *Journal* are cited by date of entry. Unless otherwise noted, I refer to *The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*, ed. Bradford Torrey and F. H. Allen (New York: Dover Publications, 1962).

7. Henry David Thoreau, "Natural History of Massachusetts," in *Collected Essays and Poems*, ed. Elizabeth Witherell (New York: Library of America, 2001), 41.

8. Alfred I. Tauber, *Henry David Thoreau and the Moral Agency of Knowing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 18. Laura Dassow Walls remarks that Thoreau's "quest for meaning" led him to seek "a new form of science," one that would be defined by "relational knowing." Facts, on this view, are not "objective givens," uncontaminated by subjectivity; they are, rather, "*made* by the interaction of mind with external nature" (Laura Dassow Walls, *Seeing New Worlds: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Natural Science* [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995], 86, 147).

9. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, ed. Jeffrey S. Cramer (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004), 88–95. All parenthetical citations of *Walden* refer to this edition.

10. Henry David Thoreau, *Faith in a Seed*, ed. Bradley Dean (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1993), 144.

11. Stanley Cavell, "Night and Day: Heidegger and Thoreau," in *Appropriating Heidegger*, ed. James Faulconer and Mark Wrathall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 44. "The transformation would be of our relation to our language," he adds; this would bring about "a transformation in our relation to the world."

12. Douglas Anderson, "Awakening in the Everyday," in *Pragmatism and Religion*, ed. Stuart Rosenbaum (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 145–47. On the seriousness of Thoreau's highly unconventional religious language, see Paul Friedrich, *The Gita within Walden* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 7–10.

13. John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1960), 302–6.

14. Tauber, *Henry David Thoreau and the Moral Agency of Knowing*, 152. See also page 174: for Thoreau, "the world indeed exists independent, real, and knowable," and yet there is a "dialectic" between subject and object.

15. Cf. Stephen R. L. Clark, *God's World and the Great Awakening* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 220. On coming to know the divine by refining one's power of sight, see Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.6. See also Pierre Hadot, *Plotinus*, trans. Michael Chase (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 56–65. If God is absent from the world, then nothing in life will matter very much, as Plotinus claims in *Enneads* 2.9.

16. Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), 382.

17. Henry David Thoreau, "Autumnal Tints," in *Collected Essays and Poems*, ed. Elizabeth Hall Witherell (New York: Library of America, 2001), 390. Italics added.

18. Henry David Thoreau, "Life without Principle," in *Collected Essays and Poems*, 349.

19. Henry David Thoreau, "Walking," in *Collected Essays and Poems*, 229. The phrase "to be met with," in the next sentence, is from Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), note "a" to B70: the redness of a rose is there "to be met with" in the object's "relation to the subject."

20. Thoreau, "Autumnal Tints," 391. Making a similar point in connection with another example, William C. Johnson comments: "It is a reality born in the conjunction of the light source and the right use of the eye" (William C. Johnson, *What Thoreau Said* [Moscow: University of Idaho Press, 1991], 43).

21. See Hilary Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact-Value Dichotomy and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002). On page 135, Putnam adds that value pertains to all of our experience, not only a small portion of it.

22. Cf. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, note "a" to A120: "Imagination is a necessary ingredient of perception itself." This implies that "worlds are 'made' by the interaction . . . of the creative self and the world" (H. Daniel Peck, *Thoreau's Morning Work* [New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990], 122–23).

23. John Gatta, *Making Nature Sacred* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 131, 137–38. On "the way in which the play of our imagination makes possible the disclosure of reality or truth," see also Colin Falck, *Myth, Truth, and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 127–38. When William Blake proposed that all deities reside in the human breast, Falck observes, "he was not thereby denying the sense in which they might also be disclosures or revelations of the true nature of the world in which we live."

24. Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, 325–26. Goethe is the "great poet" to whom Thoreau refers in this passage.

25. This assumption is attacked by Martin Heidegger. See "Remembrance of the Poet," in *Existence and Being*, trans. Douglas Scott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), 275. Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), p. 130 [§29], on the mood of theoretical observation.

26. Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, exp. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 104. Cf. McDowell, "Aesthetic Value, Objectivity, and the Fabric of the World," 130: "How can a mere *feeling* constitute an experience in which the world reveals itself to us?" Unlike Kant, McDowell does not wish to conclude that feeling lies outside our faculty of knowlege altogether: see, e.g., *Critique of Pure Reason*, A802/B830.

27. See also Loren Eiseley, *The Star Thrower* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 237.

28. As Philip Cafaro points out in *Thoreau's Living Ethics* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 132.

29. See, e.g., Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 94–111.

30. Max Scheler, "Phenomenology and the Theory of Cognition," in *Selected Philosophical Essays*, trans. David R. Lachterman (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 137–38.

31. Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, 382–83.

32. Henry D. Thoreau, "Wild Apples," in *Wild Apples and Other Natural History Essays*, ed. William Rossi (Athens,: University of Georgia Press, 2002), 144.

33. Cf. William James, "Is Life Worth Living?" in *James and Dewey on Belief and Experience*, ed. John M. Capps and Donald Capps (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 91–93. Dewey agrees that our "so-called means of verification" are "constituent parts of the object," and not only in exceptional cases. See David Hildebrand, *Beyond Realism and Antirealism* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2003), 52.

34. Thoreau, "Autumnal Tints," 393.

35. Ibid., 393–94.

36. William James, "The Will to Believe," in *Selected Writings*, ed. G. H. Bird (London: Everyman, 1995), 268.

37. William James, "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," in *Selected Writings*, 326–34. When the poet "opens up to receive, in a flood of emotion, the being of the thing he sees," then he or she has arrived at the "way of seeing" that is "the origin of poetry" (J. Hillis Miller, *The Disappearance of God* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000], 321).

38. Cavell, *Senses of Walden*, 145. See also Stéphane Mosès, *System and Revelation*, trans. Catherine Tihanyi (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), 91: "Our primordial certitude of the reality of the world, the certitude underlying all our experiences, is of the realm of values." I am grateful to Karin Nisenbaum for pointing out this reference.

39. Tauber, *Henry David Thoreau and the Moral Agency of Knowing*, 20.

40. Cf. Marcel Proust, *Time Regained*, trans. Andreas Mayor and Terence Kilmartin (New York: Modern Library, 1993), 325–26. See also Clark, *God's World and the Great Awakening*, 69: the "thing we think of existed before we thought of it, and exists even while we think of it in ways that we do not know."

41. Henry David Thoreau, *The Maine Woods* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 93–95. If there is ever a real abhorrence of Nature to be found in Thoreau's writings, it is when he considers what the "vast and wild" sea is able to "vomit" onshore after a shipwreck: see Henry David Thoreau, *Cape Cod* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), 5–6, 90.

42. Cf. James, "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," 337: "Neither the whole of truth nor the whole of good is revealed to any single observer, although each observer gains a partial superiority of insight from the peculiar position in which he stands."

43. Robert Kuhn McGregor, *A Wider View of the Universe: Thoreau's Study of Nature* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 113. On this point, James is again in harmony with Thoreau: "The *fons et origo* of all reality," he writes, "is *ourselves* . . . as thinkers with emotional reaction." See William James, "The Psychology of Belief," in *James and Dewey on Belief and Experience*, 67.

44. Thoreau, "Autumnal Tints," 391. As Peter Blakemore notes, "An actual rainbow requires an actual perceiver" in order "to be seen and, more importantly, [to be] significant." See Blakemore, "Reading Home," in *Thoreau's Sense of Place*, ed. Richard Schneider (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), 117.

45. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996), A45–46/B63.

46. Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1991), 136.

47. Tauber, *Henry David Thoreau and the Moral Agency of Knowing*, 4–5. See also Walls, *Seeing New Worlds*, 212–13.

48. As René Descartes does in part 3 of his *Discourse on Method* (1637; Chicago: Open Court, 1962), adding that he will have to live somewhere else during the renovation.

49. Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, trans. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 278–79. Thanks to Jonathan Ellsworth for making me aware of this quotation.

50. *Walden*, 250; see also *Walden*, 172–73. 273, on the "evil genius" hypothesis and on the possibility that one might be dreaming, respectively. I also discuss Thoreau's relation to Cartesian skepticism in Furtak, "Thoreau's Emotional Stoicism," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 17, no. 2 (2003): 123.

51. Cavell, *Senses of Walden*, 51. See also Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 84: "Epistemology is obliged to keep aesthetics under control, as if to guard against the thought that there is something more (and better) seeing can be, or provide, than evidence for claims to know, especially claims that particular objects exist."

52. William James also observes that we "feel things differently" in different moods and states of awareness. See Russell Goodman, *American Philosophy and the Romantic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 63.

53. David M. Robinson, *Natural Life* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004), 100–101. On the "synthesis of poetic, scientific, and ethical perception" that Thoreau aims to achieve, see Robert Milder, *Reimagining Thoreau* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 175.

54. Cf. "Walking," 250. In Kant's terminology, the imagination expands our thoughts to include more "than what can be apprehended and made distinct" (*Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), p. 183 [§49]. I am indebted to James Reid for noting the relevance of this passage, and for many suggestions that have improved this essay. For helpful comments in response to earlier drafts, I also thank Gail Baker, Stanley Bates, Jonathan Ellsworth, Russell Goodman, Marion Hourdequin, Ed Mooney, and Karin Nisenbaum.