

Hunt, Lester H. *The Philosophy of Henry Thoreau: Ethics, Politics, and Nature*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2019. Pp. 184. \$115.00 (cloth).

Central to what it is to be a philosopher, thought Henry David Thoreau (1817–62), is “to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically” (*Walden*, ed. Jeffrey S. Cramer [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004], 14). In Thoreau’s own case, some of his attempts to do this took the form of what he called “experiments” in how to live. His best-known work, *Walden* (1854), is, among other things, a description of one such experiment that he engaged in from the age of about 28 to 30 (July 4, 1845–September 6, 1847). During this time, writes Thoreau in the opening sentence of *Walden*, “I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only” (*Walden*, 1). In the preface to his recent book on Thoreau, Lester Hunt shares with his readers that the first time he read *Walden* he, too, was “living alone beside a pond in the woods” (ix). He tested Thoreau’s method for reattaching the head of an ax (it worked), tried a recipe for baking bread that Thoreau quotes from Cato the Elder (the bread tasted the way he imagines that a cedar roofing shingle might taste), and was “at the time very much preoccupied with the practical problem around which the whole book revolves: how to earn a living without losing one’s soul” (ix).

For Hunt, one of the things that makes Thoreau a unique author is the extent to which “readers and scholars relate to him in a personal way” (ix). This can take both positive and negative forms. He calls his own book a “personal” book about Thoreau (as he thinks “any book about Thoreau should be”) and suggests that the very personal way that he relates to Thoreau helps to explain his decision to vary in the text whether he refers to him as Thoreau (at more scholarly moments) or as Henry (at moments when he is viewing Thoreau more as a “respected older brother . . . whose influence [he feels] strongly but must to some extent resist”; ix, x). Hunt also observes how common it is for Thoreau and his writings to inspire “surprisingly . . . negative reactions in people” (7). (For a recent example, see Kathryn Schulz, “Pond Scum: Henry David Thoreau’s Moral Myopia,” *New Yorker*, October 19, 2015, 40–45.) Hunt thinks that the frequency of such personal attacks on Thoreau and the vehemence with which they arise may be due, in part, to the nature of Thoreau’s subject (“his great subject was the greatest of them all: *How should we live?*”) and to Thoreau’s manner of trying to address this subject (“as he attacks this question in *Walden*, he sets himself up as some sort of example”; 8). Whether a given attack is warranted, of course, will depend, among other things, on whether its account of “what he is saying” and “what he actually did” is accurate (8). For example, in the case of whether or not Thoreau did his own laundry while at Walden Pond, Hunt thinks that he is not vulnerable to charges either of hypocrisy or of being some sort of freeloader, but he may be open to an economic or philosophical objection that his project is “only feasible if most people don’t follow it” (9).

Rather than a comprehensive assessment of Thoreau’s philosophy as a whole (as the title suggests), Hunt’s book is a series of reflections on Thoreauvian themes: What is the individual’s relation to the state? What is materially necessary for human beings to live and to flourish? What does it mean for an individual to follow his or her genius, and how does this relate to Thoreau’s conception of value? In

what ways was Thoreau an ascetic, and is his asceticism compatible with his larger project? How does Thoreau conceive of nature, and what it is for something to be wild?

While Hunt seems to have been personally drawn to Thoreau because of the practical questions he raises about how to live, this is not the focus of his book. He classifies these issues more under the heading of “self-help” than of philosophy, and he does not discuss how Thoreau himself seems to have conceived of philosophy, where the theoretical and the practical appear to be more closely bound up with one another than is often the case in more recent conceptions of philosophy (ix). Hunt says that the “main purpose” of his book is to “untangle what in [Thoreau’s] thinking can stand up to criticism from that which is vulnerable to weighty objections” (x). Even as he acknowledges that some of Thoreau’s prose is “often trying to show and not to theorize,” he seems to take it as his own task to argue that Thoreau’s writings present us with “doctrines” and that Thoreau himself had “philosophical ideas and theories, that he gave reasons for them, and that the ideas and the reasons are worth thinking about” (x, xi). In the process of reflecting on what he takes to be Thoreau’s chief philosophical doctrines, it is not his aim to provide readers with a full account of any of Thoreau’s individual works. He does, however, carefully analyze certain selections from Thoreau’s texts, notably portions of “Economy” and “Higher Laws” in *Walden*, together with some central passages in Thoreau’s essays “Civil Disobedience” (1849) and “Walking” (1862).

Chapters 2–4 are the main chapters of the book and will be the focus of my review. In chapter 2, Hunt develops an account of Thoreau’s conception of value. He then examines what role this conception plays in Thoreau’s thinking about ethical matters (chap. 3) and economic matters (chap. 4). These three chapters are framed by a chapter on Thoreau’s life (chap. 1) and a helpful chapter on Thoreau’s conception of nature (chap. 5).

Chapter 2 (“Politics and the Logic of *Walden*”) opens with a brief discussion of “Civil Disobedience” (published in Thoreau’s day under the title “Resistance to Civil Government”—see *Essays: Henry D. Thoreau*, ed. Jeffrey S. Cramer [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013], 145–71). Hunt argues that Thoreau’s conception of neighborliness is “crucial to the case he builds [in this essay] for his political method and for his conception of the ideal state,” as well as for the “critique he launches against the political arrangements he opposes” (17). He draws attention to the fact that the narrative that appears at the center of “Civil Disobedience” (“the famous story of [Thoreau’s] incarceration for nonpayment of taxes”) also appears, in compressed form, in *Walden* (a work published five years later; 16). Hunt contends that *Walden* “surrounds and undergirds” this essay, providing it with a “context and foundations,” and suggests that if readers treat “Civil Disobedience” as a kind of appendix to *Walden*, then it will itself gain in “stature as a work of philosophy” (17). Most of this chapter focuses on *Walden*, returning briefly to “Civil Disobedience” in the final section.

After an insightful discussion of what sort of book *Walden* is, a “very singular book” that “mixes abstruse philosophical musings with very minute observations of woodchucks, pond water, ants, and other details of the natural world,” Hunt develops an extended contrast between two types of proof: one, more familiar, involving logical necessity, and a second that concerns what he calls “vital necessity” (17, 25). He argues, unconvincingly in my view, that Thoreau possessed a deep

antipathy or “resistance” to logical necessity (26). He claims that Thoreau put “effort into avoiding the state of mind in which one accepts a certain thought because the evidence dictates that one must accept it,” that is, he “resist[ed] necessity in the very structure of thought itself” (26). Apart from the general oddness of such a view, this does not square well with what we know about Thoreau. He was someone who frequently praised the value of strict, rigorous, mathematical thinking, and who made use of such thinking in many of his own undertakings. As Hunt notes elsewhere in his book, Thoreau says that he has “always endeavored to acquire strict business habits; they are indispensable to every man” (*Walden*, 19). He also made important mechanical innovations for his family’s pencil business, was considered a trustworthy handyman by the Emerson family, and was known throughout Concord as a reliable surveyor.

Hunt’s discussion of what he calls vital necessity is more promising. He ties Thoreau’s fondness for speaking paradoxically to his desire to help his readers discover that what they sometimes take to be necessary for how they currently live their lives is in fact something that only appears necessary to them at present. By testing themselves in a variety of ways, readers may be able to “shrink the realm of necessity and so to expand that of pure possibility, to include possibilities that [they] had never even hoped for” (30). Hunt claims, however, that Thoreau’s notion of proof in these sorts of cases is not limited to the “bare notion of revealing possibility” (32). Thoreau also puts forward, Hunt suggests, something “distinctly normative and ethical in nature,” something that can serve as a “positive guide for action” (32). That something, according to Hunt, is what Thoreau calls one’s genius, that part of oneself whose promptings an individual can learn to attend to and which has “considerable authority as a guide to conduct” (34). Since, according to Hunt, Thoreau holds that to follow the promptings of one’s genius is to be most alive as a human being, this serves to “elevate the notion of life to the position of a standard of value by which choices can be evaluated” (34).

Hunt closes the chapter with a lengthy discussion of Thoreau’s critical remarks about philanthropy, claiming to find in Thoreau’s text as many as eight distinct arguments which Thoreau puts forward to respond to the charge that the experiment he is engaged in at Walden Pond is “very selfish” (*Walden*, 69). That is, by reducing the “amount of time [that] he spends producing the necessities of life, so that he produces only what he really does need,” thereby allowing him to “spend more time on the activities that serve best to realize his own individual genius, activities like writing and contemplation,” Thoreau also “minimizes his production of what others need,” and this allegedly makes what he is doing selfish (36). Hunt calls this a “serious ethical problem” (36). Despite the thoroughness of Hunt’s discussion, it is limited by its too-ready acceptance of the idea that Thoreau’s main goal in criticizing philanthropy is to defend his individual right to do what he is doing. It is true that Thoreau does want to defend the right to follow his genius, even if that leads him to engage in such seemingly selfish projects. He is clearest about this when addressing what an individual’s obligations are with respect to various political matters. He defends the idea that, however important these matters may be (including two very important ones that occupied him: advocating for the abolition of slavery and against the Mexican-American War), this does not mean that they preclude a person from having “other affairs to attend to,” ones that Thoreau provocatively marks out with these words: “I came into this world, not chiefly to

make this a good place to live in, but to live in it, be it good or bad" ("Resistance to Civil Government," in *Essays*, 155). Thoreau also wants, however, to help readers appreciate the value of other things besides philanthropy (as it is conventionally defined), including the sort of activity that he, Thoreau, is engaged in. If the philanthropist is trying to help those who are least well-off (sometimes referred to by Thoreau as the "degraded poor"), Thoreau is targeting a different audience with a different set of problems, those who are in "*moderate* circumstances" and "leading lives of quiet desperation" (*Walden*, 34, 7). To object that what Thoreau is doing is selfish is to misconceive what he is doing. It is, in effect, to insist that everyone must be a philanthropist (narrowly conceived). It is to fail to recognize that Thoreau saw himself as engaging in a different kind of philanthropic activity, one that he hoped would be beneficial for his readers, especially perhaps the youth: "How could youths better learn to live than by at once trying the experiment of living?" (*Walden*, 49).

Chapter 3 ("Knowing Right from Wrong") is somewhat more removed from Thoreau's texts and might be characterized as Hunt's attempt to think further about Thoreau's notion of following one's genius and how this relates to what he calls Thoreau's "ethical intuitionism" (49). Hunt distinguishes between "intuitionism proper" and "methodological intuitionism" and claims to find strands of each in Thoreau's writings. He defines the former as "the theory that we can know ethical truths by means of unmediated (in the sense of non-inferential) awareness" (49). He defines the latter as "the notion that one ought to act *as if* ethical intuitionism were true" (49). Hunt thinks methodological intuitionism follows from Thoreau's view that one "ought to act on the pronouncements of [one's] conscience" (treating this as equivalent to following one's genius), but he questions whether intuitionism proper also follows (49). He thinks there may be a tension between the requirements of "truth" and "universality," on the one hand, and Thoreau's commitment to a kind of "pluralism" that Hunt believes also follows from Thoreau's "vitalism" (52). He examines this alleged tension in Thoreau's thinking by returning to "Civil Disobedience" and looking more closely at Thoreau's discussion of what role an individual's conscience ought to play in determining whether or not to obey the laws of the state. This discussion complements his earlier discussion of "Civil Disobedience" in chapter 2 and provides some of the philosophical payoff that readers might have expected to find at the end of that chapter. Hunt next considers (and responds to) several objections that might be raised against what he is calling Thoreau's ethical intuitionism, before turning to discuss in more detail two specific problems he thinks that Thoreau addresses: the problem of how to determine when individuals should do what the state tells them to do, and the problem of how to create "social order in a society of neighbors, in the absence of a coercive state" (65).

Chapter 4 ("Economy") turns to Thoreau's critique of certain features of how the economy is organized and discusses what Hunt calls a "distinctly otherworldly strain" in Thoreau's thinking (77). He calls this otherworldly strain of thinking Thoreau's "asceticism" and questions whether we can reconcile this with "the fact that we so often find him celebrating physical nature," including the "animal side of his own nature" (77). Hunt identifies two types of asceticism that he thinks can be found in Thoreau's writings. Generically, he defines asceticism as "any ethical code or principle that entails that the concerns most intimately connected with

the physical basis of human survival are much less valuable and important than they are normally taken to be" (77–78). One species of asceticism "includes ideas that devalue the activities of eating and drinking, and sex as well, since these are all essential for the survival of the species" (78). A second type of asceticism concerns Thoreau's "critique of trade" and the seemingly "low value" that he places on "commerce and the result at which it aims—wealth," leading to the "strong suggestion that morals and business are incompatible or nearly so" (78).

Hunt's discussion of the first species of asceticism (raised by Thoreau in "Higher Laws") does not address some of the things that Thoreau says about himself with respect to this ascetic ideal. Early in "Higher Laws," Thoreau claims to "love the wild not less than the good": "I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is called, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both" (*Walden*, 202). It is true that Thoreau seems to define a "blessed" life as one in which the "animal is dying out in [a person] day by day, and the divine being established," a life that will allow one to "preserve [one's] higher or poetic faculties in the best condition" (*Walden*, 211, 206). But he also makes clear that he himself does not live up to this ideal: "I am obliged to confess . . . I have grown more coarse and indifferent"; "My practice is 'nowhere,' my opinion is here"; "I hesitate to say these things . . . because I cannot speak of them without betraying my impurity" (*Walden*, 209, 212). Moreover, Thoreau appears to think that, apart from the rare exception, "we are" at best "such gods or demigods only as fauns and satyrs, the divine allied to beasts, the creatures of appetite" such that "to some extent, our very life is our disgrace" (*Walden*, 211). That is, while Thoreau spends much of "Higher Laws" praising the ascetic ideal that Hunt discusses, it is not clear that he thinks that it is actually suitable to his life or to the lives of most of us. He closes "Higher Laws," in fact, by seeming to suggest that there is a different ideal that may be more suitable, one in which an individual would indeed "practice some new austerity," but do so by letting one's "mind descend into [one's] body and redeem it," leading to a condition in which one treated oneself with "ever increasing respect" (*Walden*, 213).

Hunt's discussion of the second species of asceticism (raised by Thoreau primarily in "Economy") examines Thoreau's appropriation of economic terminology to describe the ethical or spiritual condition of his readers, where we can speak of various vital "costs," things that "benefit" us, and things that might count as either "profit" or "loss" in terms of our lives (90–91). Thoreau's critique of commerce rests on his "critique of the division of labor," both with respect to ways that this may lead people to develop themselves in a one-sided manner and with respect to how this may undercut the vitality of the individual in service of the larger community (92). Hunt argues that Thoreau is mistaken on both counts, claiming that the "costs of commerce are [not] as great as he [Thoreau] thinks they are" and that the "relevant benefits are greater than he supposes" (101). He concludes this chapter by returning to an objection that might be raised against Thoreau, one that he had earlier discussed in chapter 1: is Thoreau's project ("cutting back his participation in the exchange economy so that he could pursue his own genius") open to the economic/philosophical objection that he is only able to carry it out because "he was surrounded by a relatively productive economy, and the economy was as productive as it was precisely because people participated in it fully and did not pull back as he did" (108)? Thoreau's idea only "seems feasible, according to this line of

reasoning, because it has not been enacted" (108). If it were enacted, the "system would collapse and the idea would become unfeasible" (108). Hunt maintains that this objection is misguided since it assumes that Thoreau is prescribing a "universal rule that gives the same advice to everybody" (108). But that is to ignore Thoreau's "pluralism," which allows for different people to be prompted in different ways, including the sort of case where one's genius might even prompt one to participate fully in the economy (108). Hunt notes that Thoreau excludes a variety of people from those for whom *Walden* was in fact written:

I do not mean to prescribe rules to strong and valiant natures, who will mind their own affairs . . . ; nor to those who find their encouragement and inspiration in precisely the present condition of things . . . —and, to some extent, I reckon myself in this number; I do not speak to those who are well employed, in whatever circumstances, and they know whether they are well employed or not;—but mainly to the mass of men who are discontented, and idly complaining of the hardness of their lot or of the times, when they might improve them. (*Walden*, 15)

It is thus only the discontented whom Thoreau is seeking to help, in part by providing them with an account of his own experiment of living, of what worked (and what did not), and of what he did when, having "obtained those things which are necessary to life," he next proceeded "to adventure on life now" (*Walden*, 15).

All told, Lester Hunt has written a book about Thoreau that is personal, thoughtful, and intellectually stimulating. It could attract new readers to Thoreau and may inspire those who know Thoreau well to return to his texts with a renewed interest.

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Norcross, Alastair. *Morality by Degrees: Reasons without Demands*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. 176. \$50.00 (cloth).

Ethical theories have traditionally been understood as theories of right action. In *Morality by Degrees*, Alastair Norcross urges consequentialists to reconceive of their ethical theorizing. Consequentialists care about promoting value, something that comes in degrees. Accordingly, it makes little sense to try to twist the view into centrally concerning an all-or-nothing property of rightness; we may even do better to banish the latter from our fundamental theory altogether. The resulting view—scalar consequentialism—could plausibly dethrone maximizing act utilitarianism as the paradigmatic form for consequentialism to take. In this short and very accessible book, Norcross draws together his previous papers on scalar morality into a unified whole. His provocative arguments are essential reading for anyone interested in the consequentialist tradition.

The introductory chapter nicely explains how Norcross conceives of the heart of consequentialism, as captured by the following principle: "**Core Consequentialism (CC)**: An action is morally better or worse than available alternatives, and thus there is greater or lesser (moral) reason to opt for it, entirely to the