Book Review: Dalia Nassar, *Romantic Empiricism: Nature, Art and Ecology from Herder to Humboldt*[1]

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In *Romantic Empiricism: Nature, Art and Ecology* Dalia Nassar (2022) attempts to forge a connection between romanticism and empiricism – acknowledged initially as a "paradox of sorts" (1) – and, in doing so, sets out to convincingly argue that "[romantic empiricism] is a philosophical tradition that deserves renewed attention today" (1).[2] For Nassar, the problem that romantic empiricism can provide a response to is that our practices of knowing have led to seeing nature in an abstracted, instrumental way and that this has contributed to the present ecological crisis. Her claim is that romantic empiricism can help to rethink "the *way in which we know,* with the very practices of knowing" (246). In other words, Nassar's solution to the ecological crisis, is not just a reformulation of any one concept or system of concepts, but an epistemological one. Nassar continues and frames the current times, termed the Anthropocene by Crutzen & Stoermer

(2000), “not only a crisis of reason, but also of sensibility and imagination, or more accurately, of the separation of knowing from sense, feeling, imagination, and action” (246). This formulation of the problem creates space for Nassar’s thesis that romantic empiricism offers an approach to knowledge that enables us “to know *well”* (247), i.e., to know in a way that contributes to ‘solving’ the ecological crisis. Furthermore, Nassar contends that, whilst much research has been carried out on the philosophies that emerged in the period under consideration (late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries), “little work has focused on the *methodologies* that underpin these philosophies” (4). So, Nassar’s claim is that revisiting and rethinking these methodologies has been left underexamined but is a necessary step in addressing the ecological crisis.

Romantic Empiricism is a text worthy of consideration for philosophers of education, because Nassar implores us to rethink our ways of knowing in an openly normative sense and argues that this shift is to be brought about by (re-)education of our cognitive capacities. I will return to this point later, but, before getting too far ahead with the argument, let us start with an overview of the book.

Nassar builds her argument over the course of 7 chapters, in each of which selected ideas of Kant, Herder, Goethe and Alexander von Humboldt are presented to articulate romantic empiricism. At first glance, one might be critical of this approach: the alignment of Kant with either romanticism or empiricism (let alone both) might appear questionable and it is initially unconvincing that these thinkers collaborated in some kind of unified project given that the first edition of

Humboldt's *Kosmos* wasn't published until 1845, over 40 years after Kant and Herder's deaths.[3] But to focus the analysis on the individuals would not do justice to Nassar's argument. Instead, what Nassar does is show that some of the key ideas put forward by each of these thinkers can together be considered as romantic empiricism. In other words, it is (some of) the ideas associated with each of the four thinkers that can collectively be considered 'romantic empiricism', rather than the thinkers themselves. Each chapter progressively adds to and clarifies Nassar's conception of romantic empiricism. The argument flows well and, by the end, Nassar's argument is clear that romantic empiricism both recognises the role of artistic capacities in how we perceive and think about the world and ourselves within it and concurrently emphasises the need for observation and basing claims to knowledge on the observed phenomena.

Each of the seven ideas presented by Nassar is framed as a response to a problem expressed by Georges-Louis Leclerc Comte de Buffon (an eighteenth-century French naturalist, mathematician and cosmologist), which Nassar claims is still unresolved. The fundamental problem that Buffon articulated, and romantic empiricism responds to, is a dissonance between our cognitive facilities and the process of nature: cognition proceeds linearly apprehending one object after another; in contrast, in nature, objects are interrelated and relations are multidirectional (32). As Buffon puts it, nature "does not take a single step except to go in all directions; in marching forward, she extends to the sides and above" (32). Nassar introduces Buffon's thinking to illustrate the problem she is seeking to address, and it is upon this problematisation that the rest of the argument is

built. To illustrate Buffon's thinking, Nassar invites us to consider the perhaps familiar example of the difference(s) between a bird and a clock. In the bird (a part of nature), the parts such as its heart, feathers, vocal cords, etc. supposedly cannot be considered separately; each part only makes sense through the whole and the whole only makes sense through the parts. In contrast, in the clock it is claimed that each part can be considered separately and put together sequentially to form the whole, the clock itself (that would be the job of a clock maker in fact to do just that). According to Buffon, human cognition (proceeding linearly) can comprehend the mechanistic ordering of parts that make up the clock but is unable to grasp the complexity of the bird (nature). Thus, the question that all seven of the ideas presented in *Romantic Empiricism* seek to address is: How is one to resolve this incommensurability between linear human cognition and multidirectional, interrelated nature?

At this point, it might reassure readers to pause and think about the premise on which Nassar's argument is built. Does it make sense? Does cognition really proceed *linearly* in a way that is incommensurable with *multidirectional* nature? Revisiting the example of the bird and the clock, it seems unconvincing to claim that the human mind is unable to understand the complexity of the bird. After all, without even considering non-western philosophies, does not the whole discipline of evolutionary science since Darwin (1859) show that we *can* in fact understand the complexity of nature? And since Piaget (1923), cognition can be understood in terms of 'schemas', in which ideas are connected and build upon one another to enable a complexity of understanding. By this conception of

knowledge, the human mind has a bird schema, to which each bird we observe adds, enriches, and widens our schema: for example, we see a penguin for the first time and extend our bird schema to include flightless birds. Thus, the human mind does, it seems, have a mechanism for understanding interrelated, multidirectional nature. Perhaps this was a problem when it was articulated by Buffon in 1766, but I am not convinced that it still is.

Even though I am unconvinced by the premise of Nassar's question (that Buffon's problem still needs solving), it seems nevertheless reasonable to suggest that linear cognition applied to multidirectional nature still pervades (at least some) thinking today. For example, consider briefly current climate change policies such as 'Net Zero' targets to see how linear thinking is applied to ecological problems. The focus on 'Net Zero' reduces the problem of climate change to a simple mechanistic fix: we only need to offset emissions to solve a whole web of ecological challenges associated with higher emissions, such as resource depletion, soil health, species extinctions etc. So, it seems that traces of Buffon's problem formulation are still relevant, and for this reason Nassar's argument holds weight. In fact, a particular strength of Nassar's argument is that a 'solution' to the problem of the ecological crisis seemingly already exists; we just need reminding of it, to revisit ideas that may have been forgotten, or rethink old ideas in a different light.

It is beyond the scope of this short review to discuss all the ideas presented in *Romantic Empiricism*; instead, I will give readers a flavour of Nassar's argument by illustrating one of the key ideas she presents. One such idea presented as a

response to Buffon's problem is Humboldt's *embodied cognition.* For Humboldt, understanding the complexity of nature is not purely intellectual, but also aesthetic and embodied. Knowing, by this conception, involves sensing, feeling and imagining, fundamentally connected to lived experience. To illustrate, consider Humboldt's essay collection *Ansichten der Natur*, described by him as *Naturgemälde* (nature paintings), which seeks to offer an "aesthetic treatment of great scenes of nature" (215). The essays aim to achieve both aesthetic and scientific ends, i.e., "to occupy the imagination and at the same time, through the increase of knowledge, to enrich life with ideas" (215) through a "living description [*lebendige Schilderung*]" of nature (216). In the essay *Über die Steppen und Wüsten*, the reader is invited to begin the journey at the foot of a high granite mountain. Humboldt wants readers not only to picture the mountain, but to stand at its foot. Humboldt makes no mention of himself in the work, and in his place instead stands "the astonished wanderer" (233). This invites the reader to adopt the perspective of the wanderer, to imaginatively become the wanderer. We are asked to walk from the verdant valleys as the wanderer and feel astonished, to watch the clouds thicken overhead and sense the constriction of the atmosphere, and to observe with wonder the behaviour of the animals encountered. The reader is not just an external observer, but "an embodied wanderer, fully involved in the landscape as she walks, climbs or rides through it" (233). So, the aim of Humboldt's *embodied cognition* is to tether us to nature, to enable us to grasp its multidirectional character through our senses.

A question then follows as to how we can develop such a sense of *embodied cognition*. In order to answer the question "how are we to develop the sense of embodied cognition?", Nassar turns to Goethe. His suggestion is *education of our aesthetic sensibilities:* to develop the capacity to see with the mind's - as well as the physical - eye. As Goethe puts it, “there is a difference between seeing and seeing” (130). This is illustrated by how Goethe was able to ‘see’ the intermaxillary bone (a small bone located in the upper jaw, now called the premaxilla, and which Goethe claimed to have discovered in 1784) which, according to Nassar, “lies at the heart of the romantic empiricist project” (98). Goethe ‘saw’ the intermaxillary bone not as an exact replica of how it appears in other animals, but as recurring in humans in a uniquely human way, which made sense in light of the whole human form. Most importantly, Goethe knew *how* to look for it (because he had a well-trained aesthetic sensibility): to take account of the human being as a whole and compare it to the structure of other animals in their completeness. That meant looking for the bone in its larger context, the human body. For example, Goethe observed that the human frame is distinctively upright, and so the human intermaxillary bone must reflect this uprightness. Informed by Herder's thinking (a preceding section on his *analogical reflection* helps to construct this point), Goethe was able to ‘see’ more than others before him had been able to, and thereby ‘discover’ the human intermaxillary bone. To do this (see with both the physical and mind’s eye) requires education, specifically, *education of aesthetic sensibilities*. As Goethe puts it, "we must conceive of science as an art if we are to expect any kind of holistic results"

(169). Aesthetic education is required to do this: education of our perceptual capacities and education in and through art. So, for Goethe, by developing the capacity to 'see' with both the mind's and physical eye, *education of aesthetic sensibilities* enables us to grasp nature's dynamic unity. For Nassar, this artistic appreciation of nature is a necessary first step in retuning our relation with nature: we have to first connect with nature and feel a part of 'it' in order to care for nature, i.e., to act in an ecologically responsible way. Nassar does not present this argument as a step-by-step method, but rather the intention seems to be to stimulate discussion, to encourage readers to wonder about possibilities for such an aesthetic education and how we can 'know well' in the context of the ecological crisis.

And on this last point, on stimulating a rethinking of ways of knowing, realised through aesthetic education, *Romantic Empiricism* is a worthy read. Nassar writes well and builds a compelling argument that calls on readers to reconsider old ideas in perhaps novel ways, with a focus on (re-)education. For that reason, notwithstanding my reservations about the premise of the argument (Buffon's problem formulation), it is a text well worth reading, particularly for philosophers of education.

Endnotes

[1]I am grateful to the comments and suggestions on this review from the UiT Philosophy of Education research group Finnsnes meeting.

[2]Whether or not romantic empiricism can in fact be considered a 'tradition' would be an interesting line of critique but falls beyond the scope of this short review. Thanks to Pål Anders Opdal for highlighting this.

[3]*Cosmos* began as a lecture series and was published in five volumes between 1845 and 1862.

References

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