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Theological Aesthetics and the Many Pragmatisms of Alejandro García-Rivera

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My first encounter with Alejandro García-Rivera was through a letter. In the late 1990s, I had applied to the doctoral program at the Graduate Theological Union (GTU), and a few weeks after having been accepted, I received a personal letter of invitation from him. In the letter, Alex (as I would be privileged to call him later) described the GTU as a promising new center for the study of theological aesthetics. I was intrigued by this phrase, “theological aesthetics,” for it was new to me. Moreover, I was deeply touched by the fact that Alex took the time to correspond with me personally. I felt honored that such a respected academic would go out of his way to reach out to me.

As things turned out, I ended up staying on the East Coast for my doctoral work. Fortunately, however, through the Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians of the United States (ACHTUS), I eventually got to know Alex and many of his talented students. Over the years, I have been impressed to hear stories of how deeply Alex cared for them. Especially significant is the fact that Alex directed to completion the largest number of Latina Ph.D. theologians in the United States.1 By all accounts, he was a Doktorvater in the deepest and best sense of the word.

In what follows, I will reflect a little on Alex’s engagement with U.S. pragmatism, an area in which I do work as well.2 Let me say up front that my approach to pragmatism has much in common with Alex’s, but it also diverges from it in some respects. As for similarities, we both take everyday experience as a methodological starting point and ending point; we are both interested in offering a non-reductive account of reality; and we both take the question of aesthetics seriously. As for differences, one might point to the fact that Alex and I were introduced to pragmatism in two different intellectual settings. At Berkeley, and owing much to the influence of Don Gelpi and Frank Oppenheim, Alex gravitated toward the work of Charles Sanders Peirce and Josiah Royce. I, in turn, studied under Cornel West, Hilary Putnam, and David Lamberth, and, as a consequence, I read more William James and John Dewey.

Accordingly, when I read Alex’s work in pragmatism, I always feel stretched. He reframes pragmatism in ways that are refreshing and original and yet, at times perplexing and elusive. Throughout his many works, Alex draws on Peirce and Royce to shore up what he sees as a promising, yet still somewhat deficient, articulation of theological aesthetics in the work of Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar. As Alex explains, theological aesthetics should encompass more than Alexander Baumgarten’s classic articulation of aesthetics as the science of sensory knowledge. Instead, for Alex, theological aesthetics begs “a more profound question: what moves the human heart?” This question, he maintains, “brings us closer to the mysterious experience of the truly beautiful, an experience that transcends geological space and prehistoric time …”3 While Alex credits von Balthasar for restoring the ancient theological insight that we know God best through, he also shows how the semiotic logic and the metaphysics of relations, as developed by Peirce and Royce, can give philosophical clarity and depth to von Balthasar’s position.

As one charts the development of Alex’s thought from early to later writings, one sees that he adds John Dewey’s voice to his pragmatic repertoire. On numerous occasions, such as in A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art (2003), Alex speaks glowingly of Dewey, who is widely recognized as one of the most important philosophers and social critics of the twentieth century. Yet, Alex’s appropriation of Dewey sometimes gives rise to moments of paradox and ambiguity. In what follows, I’d like to reflect on some of these moments in order see where Dewey’s pragmatism both fits, and does not fit, within Alex’s line of thinking.

One of Alex’s most explicit statements on Dewey is found in his 2006 essay, “Interfaith Aesthetics: Where Theology and Spirituality Meet.” Drawn to Dewey’s understanding of “the religious,” Alex correctly notes that Dewey separates out institutional religion from a naturally occurring sense of “the religious.” Today, this distinction is roughly akin to the difference between being a “religious person” versus being a “spiritual person.” The former usually has a lot to do with adhering to the tenets of institutional religion (Dewey’s “religion”), while the latter speaks to
an innate sense of spirituality within all human beings, irrespective of one’s affiliation with institutional religion (Dewey’s “religious”). Alex writes approvingly of Dewey’s “rather provocative thesis” which “attempt[s] an expanded notion of faith.” Dewey’s faith, he explains, is “a faith open to something bigger than itself.” It is a faith that “points to a unity of a whole.”

Somewhat paradoxically, however, Alex then immediately moves into a discussion of how Dewey’s insight can be applied to Roman Catholic debates around the nature of Christian faith. Alex draws a distinction between Vatican I’s “extrinsic” understanding of faith, which required the “submission of the intellect and will to truths that God reveals to men and women,” and Vatican II’s more “intrinsic” understanding of faith, wherein faith is “rooted in the historical, experiential process culminating in Jesus Christ, who reveals to the human his and her very nature.”

In drawing this parallel, Alex seems to suggest that Dewey’s own organic understanding of faith is akin to the vision of faith articulated in Vatican II. This parallel, I would argue, is correct, but only up to a certain point. Dewey would indeed eschew Vatican I’s extrinsic view of faith as an assent to doctrine. But it is only partially correct, however, to assume that he would affirm Vatican II’s more intrinsic understanding of faith. In other words, Dewey would affirm that faith is indeed “rooted in the historical, experiential process,” but the mature Dewey would never go so far as to say that this process culminates in Jesus Christ, as Alex suggests. Thus, I think Alex overextends his use of Dewey here. This is not to say that Dewey couldn’t—or indeed shouldn’t—he reconstructed in such a way as to be applicable and relevant to institutional religions, Roman Catholicism included. In fact, my own work probes this very possibility. But what I am saying is that this kind of reconstruction requires a more explicit analysis of where, exactly, Dewey falls short in his analysis of institutional religion as well as where we may use his insights productively and creatively.

A second, and arguably more substantial, tension between Alex and Dewey has to do with their respective understandings of “the unity of the whole.” Since Alex never addresses Dewey’s understanding of this idea, we must momentarily take a step back and extrapolate where such a discussion might have occurred. I believe that Alex’s discussion of Peirce’s aesthetics takes us closest to this issue.

In order to appreciate Alex’s use of Peirce, a word or two must be said about the thinkers that, for Alex, lead up to Peirce. As already mentioned, Alex turns to the semiotic logic of Peirce to add philosophical depth to von Balthasar’s theological aesthetics. Equally significant, he also turns to Peirce to overcome the nominalism of William of Ockham, a 14th century scholastic philosopher. As Alex shows, Peirce and Ockham vary significantly in their response to the question: “Can something real be said about two very different individuals that somehow applies to both of them without destroying their individuality?” For William of Ockham, the answer is no. According to Alex, Ockham presupposes an “anthropocentric epistemology” in which the human creature knows only percepts (the data of sense) and concepts (the constructs of the mind), with the burden of epistemology falling on the latter. As a consequence, a concept has “reality only to the mind; it is not found in the physical world.”

Alex takes issue with Ockham’s epistemology, both for playing down the role of perception, which has traditionally been so central to aesthetics, and, even more significantly, for approaching reality dyadically. For Ockham, there are only two possibilities: We understand reality either through percept or through concepts.

In response, Alex turns to the thought of Duns Scotus, an English contemporary of Ockham, who adds “a third element to reality.” Alex explains:

There exists the physical world of the individuals. There also exists the conceptual world of the mind. There exists, however, a further third reality, a metaphysical reality that has one foot in the physical world and the other foot in the mental world. This metaphysical reality, the Common Nature, is part of the reality found alongside the physicality of the unique individual even if it can only be “seen” by the mind. If the physical individual corresponds to a visible reality, then the Common Nature corresponds to an invisible reality, a reality independent of the mind and only “seen” by it.

Alex is drawn to this position, for it underscores three different, yet related, modes of being: the physical, the logical, and the metaphysical. Alex is especially interested in the latter, the metaphysical being, Scotus’ ens reale, which,
In doing so, Peirce reframes von Balthasar’s (more “substantial”) metaphysics of substance to a metaphysics of relations. Put another way, Scotus’ metaphysical being serves as an important principle of difference that is related to, but distinct from, the other two modes of being. All told, Scotus’ triadic approach proves so pivotal because it helps to “assure the reality of the universal.”

As helpful as Scotus is for Alex, Alex finds that Scotus does not sufficiently explore the implications of this third reality, metaphysical being, for an aesthetics. As Alex puts it, Scotus’ world, “a world that is experienced not simply by percept and concepts but also by a reality invisible and ‘in-between,’” is a world that is ready-made for an aesthetics. Such a world “can entertain aesthetics not simply as passive perception of beauty, nor the purely active act of mind, but as a making visible the invisible, an act that involves … the whole creature.”

By taking into account this “invisible reality,” such a world “allows room for the spiritual.” In a sentence that encapsulates much of what his project is all about, Alex writes: “An invisible metaphysical reality makes the mind’s act a spiritual act of ‘seeing’ rather than a mechanical ‘connecting’ of perceptions.” Accordingly, Alex wants to extend Scotus’ thought so that it is more attentive to this third “in-between” and “invisible” reality that “allows room for the spiritual.”

In order to move in this direction, Alex turns to the thought of C.S. Peirce, who, “working from Scotus’ foundation, developed a logic based on the metaphysics of relations rather than the metaphysics of substance.” Peirce therefore proves indispensible for Alex because he “introduce[s] a new way to understand the transcendentals.”

As I read Alex, there are four primary reasons why he is drawn to Peirce. First, as just indicated, Peirce helps shift the discussion of aesthetics from a discussion about a metaphysics of substance to a metaphysics of relations. In doing so, Peirce reframes von Balthasar’s (more “substantial”) understanding of “seeing the form” to a more pragmatic understanding of the logic of sign. For Alex, sign not only “refers to making visible the invisible,” but also underscores how substance and Being are intrinsically relational.

Second, Alex is drawn to the social dimensions of Peirce’s (and, later, Royce’s) thought. “Logic,” Peirce writes, “is rooted in the social principle.” By this, Peirce means to say that the validity of any given belief or idea is tantamount to what a community of inquirers, through the process of sign interpretation, would understand as true in the infinite long run. Thus, for Alex and Peirce alike, a logic of signs always presumes much more than the mental processes of any single individual. Rather, it is, by necessity, always a communal affair.

Third, Alex is drawn to Peirce’s idea of the aesthetically “good” as a “quality” of experience. Peirce writes:

> In the light of the doctrine of categories, I should say that an object, to be esthetically good, must have a multitude of parts so related to one another as to impart a positive quality to their totality; and whatever does this is, in so far, esthetically good, no matter what the particular quality of the total may be. If that quality be such as to nauseate us, to scare us, or otherwise disturb us to the point of throwing us out of the mood of esthetic enjoyment . . . then the object remains nonetheless esthetically good, although people in our condition are incapacitated from a calm esthetic contemplation of it.

Alex appreciates Peirce’s approach here because it “flings the objects of aesthetic appreciation out of the museum into the universal world of experience.” As Alex makes clear from his very earliest works, the aesthetic symbols of Hispanic popular religion—the “little stories” of popular devotion that are found not in museums or books, but rather, in everyday life—can give tremendous insight into the meaning, and even mystery, of our humanity. Alex thus agrees with Peirce that any experience has the potential to be aesthetic in quality, even those that we do not typically associate with fine art or with beauty.

Last but not least, Alex agrees with Peirce that aesthetic ends serve as regulative ideals. The “End is something that gives sanction to action,” writes Peirce. For Alex, this means simply that “Actions, to be logical, must be guided, indeed, initiated, by Ends.” Thus understood, the end is the regulative lightpost that helps to guide actions. Ends give meaning and direction to action.

One may notice that these last two points regarding aesthetic quality and the functional role of ideal ends are especially pronounced in the work of John Dewey, to whom we now return. In Art as Experience (1934), for example, Dewey shifts our understanding of aesthetics from a discourse around fine art to a more organic understanding of aesthetics.
of aesthetic quality, which has the potential to take root in any and all forms of experience, everyday experiences included. Indeed, Dewey's aesthetics may be seen as a logical outgrowth of his metaphysics, or theory of experience.

Likewise, Dewey also underscores the functional character of ideal ends, which help to guide experience to a sense of completeness, wholeness, and, as Dewey often puts it, “consummation.” As Dewey explains in *A Common Faith* (1934), religious symbols and religious figures are reflections of “moral and other ideal values.” Historic personages with divine attributes are “materializations of the ends that enlist devotion and inspire endeavor.” If Alex finds Peirce’s pragmatic approach to aesthetics somewhat unsatisfying, I think he would have even more reservations about Dewey’s aesthetics, given Dewey’s suspicion of any talk about the intrinsic “nature” of “ideals in themselves.” Dewey holds that an inherent vice of idealism is that it converts naturally-occurring enjoyed meanings and “consummations” of experience into antecedently and a priori Realities. The true power of an ideal lies not in its purported intrinsic and self-standing “nature,” but rather, in its role or function in guiding human action to a greater sense of meaning and value. For Dewey, “To see the ideal as ideal means to see it as a possibility of the present, not as a pre-existent, self-established reality.”

In *Experience and Nature* (1925, 1st ed.), for example, Dewey argues that idealists, who otherwise extol the role of thought and the ideals of human aspiration, nevertheless often seek to prove once and for all that “these things are not ideal but are real—real not as meanings and ideals, but as existential being. Thus the assertion of faith in the ideal belies itself in the making; these ‘idealists’ cannot trust their ideal till they have converted it into existence . . .” Dewey carries this critique forward in *A Common Faith* when he writes: 

> [M]en have gone on to build up vast intellectual schemes, philosophies, and theologies, to prove that ideals are real not as ideals but as antecedently existing actualities. They have failed to see that in converting moral realities into matters of intellectual assent, they have evinced lack of *moral* faith. Faith that something should be in existence as far as lies in our power is changed into the intellectual belief that it is already in existence. When physical existence does not bear out the assertion, the physical is subtly changed into the metaphysical.

As I read both Alex García-Rivera and John Dewey, I see significant overlap in their thinking, but I also see marked differences. Dewey, it seems to me, would question Alex’s underlying commitment to a philosophical idealism, whereas Alex would likely want to push past Dewey’s instrumentalism to a discussion of theology. Both positions
no doubt warrant further investigation. On the one hand, would Alex's use of Royce represent a more acceptable version of idealism to Dewey? On the other, is it possible to develop a theological aesthetics from within the framework of Peirce's or Dewey's aesthetics?

However one may choose to answer these questions, one thing is abundantly clear: Alex rarely closes off conversations. He borrows eclectically from thinkers, weaving a web that is greater than the sum of its parts. This fact may lead us to two very different observations. In the first place, Alex may be rightfully critiqued at times for leaving individual threads in tension or at odds with one another. In other words, at the analytical level, his method calls out at times for more precision. I think it would be a real loss if at least some of his colleagues, students, and friends didn't continue to tease out the analytical threads that run in different directions throughout his work. This is part of taking seriously Alex's work and, in doing so, honoring it.

However, I also believe that we have much to learn from thinking beyond the level of analysis to thinking more inferentially, more speculatively, and more cosmically, as Alex does. Alex carried out his intellectual work with the mindset of an artist. He had an uncanny ability to piece together discreet particulars into larger imaginative wholes. And yet Alex was very up front about the fact that his method “leads to a certain style of writing that not everyone finds to be their cup of tea.” Critics, he notes, may find his style of writing “beautiful but imprecise, saying too much and saying too little,” to which he humbly responds: “To critics of my method and style, I beg forgiveness for giving offense. Yet I believe whole-heartedly that we must begin to see the interconnectedness of the world, to grasp its complexity, even if our intellectual traditions have conditioned us to seek a different type of grasping.”

It may very well be, then, that Alex's inferential way of seeing the world is, in the larger scheme of things, much more important than any particular cases of imprecision. Alex invites us to switch our thinking to another register of thinking, a register that Peirce would call musing, a register of puzzlement, inference, and play. This is not always easy to do, especially when most of us have been trained to analyze things and break things down. Alex's scholarly contributions remind us, however, that although the parts are important, we must never lose sight of the whole that unites them. From Alex, we learn:

In variety, unity. In particularity, beauty. Thank you, Alex.

ENDNOTES


2 I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of this journal for their feedback on an earlier version of this article. I'd also like to thank Peter Casarella and Felicia Kruse Alexander for their helpful advice and suggestions.


5 Ibid.


7 Ibid.

8 Garcia-Rivera, The Community of the Beautiful, 95.

9 Ibid., 99.

10 Ibid., 100.

11 Ibid., 101.

12 Ibid., 100.

13 Ibid., 101.

14 Ibid., 101.

15 Ibid., 102.

16 One should note that, alongside Peirce, Josiah Royce, a disciple of Peirce, plays an important role for this same reason. See especially chapter five of The Community of the Beautiful, 119-154.

17 Garcia-Rivera, The Community of the Beautiful, 90.

19 The Community of the Beautiful, 116.
20 Ibid., 116.
21 Alejandro García-Rivera, St. Martín de Porres: The “Little Stories” and the Semiotics of Culture (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 1-5.
23 The Community of the Beautiful, 114.
25 Ibid., 43.
27 Ibid., 113.
28 Ibid., 117. Alex argues this point in light of Vincent Potter’s account of Peirce’s aesthetics, which Alex finds “reasonable, but … unsatisfying.”
29 Ibid., 118.
30 Ibid.
31 Refers to a Platonic/transcendental realm of existence.

Father Arthur Poulin, Full Moon Over Big Sur, acrylic on canvas, 24” x 36”, 1998