



# The Biologist's Mistress: Rethinking Self-Organization in Art, Literature, and Nature

*Victoria N. Alexander*

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As 20th century geneticist J. B. S. Haldane famously quipped, "Teleology is like a mistress to the biologist; he dare not be seen with her in public but cannot live without her." Teleology is the study of the purposes of nature. As a scientific discipline, it began its celebrated decline in the 17th century, with the birth of modern empiricism, and continued to plummet apace the rise of the Enlightenment, Darwinism, and quantum mechanics. Those who continued to think nature could be purposeful were primarily spiritualists, artists, or madmen, who credited the guidance of gods, muses, or fate.

But could a wholesale rejection of teleology be an overreaction? Is there something in the idea, as Haldane implies, that we need? Applying research from the complexity sciences, Peircean semiotics, and poetics, Alexander helps us re-imagine what purposeful behavior might be, in ourselves as well as in nature. Lurking at the heart of the discussion about purposefulness is the too-often overlooked question of creativity, for without creativity there is no purposeful action, only robotic execution of design.

Using her knowledge and experience as an art-theorist and novelist, Alexander takes us "inside" paradoxical self-organizing processes (which, somehow make themselves without having a self yet to do the making) and shows us how poetic-like relationships -- things that are coincidentally near each other or metonymic, things that are coincidentally like each other or metaphoric -- help form organization where there was none before. She suggests that it is these language-like processes that result in the emergent phenomena we call meaningful and functional. *The Biologist's Mistress* deals deftly with postmodern theories that unfairly snubbed the purposeful artist and offers a view of a non-essentialist emergent self. It's a much-needed antidote to the extreme relativism and anti-intellectualism that has lately wreaked such havoc on human culture.

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