
The first book length study of the philosophy of Richard McKeon (1900-1985) is a superb book for the students and the admirers of this great contemporary American philosopher.

George Plochmann studied with Richard McKeon as an undergraduate at Columbia in 1934 and then as a graduate student at the University of Chicago from 1936 until 1948. Plochmann knew the philosopher for over fifty years.

The Preface and Chapter 1, "Reminiscences of the Years 1932-49," are a delightful and open introduction to a philosopher Plochmann maintains "was for his breadth of mastery, clearness of penetration, and originality, a mind virtually on the level of Immanuel Kant" (p.13). Plochmann's humorous asides, jokes and clever anecdotes begin in this preface and enliven the entire book.

Chapter 2, "Conspectus," characterizes McKeon's writings, the intellectual reputations and schools he founded, the relationships he had with his contemporaries (e.g. Russell, Carnap, Wittgenstein and Ryle, whom he knew personally), and comments on his style and arrangements (in class as well as in his publications). The ever rising difficulty of reducing what in McKeon is already too compact and too complex results in an even greater density and complexity. Richard McKeon the author or editor of a half a dozen books, contributed to over two dozen books and wrote over 250 articles, reviews and published conference papers, in many fields and disciplines. He taught in universities for over 50 years; he was an outspoken leader on boards and committees in international philosophy as well as in the university academic community, and its peripheries. All of this is too much to put in a twenty-three page conspectus.

Chapter 3 "A Learned Apprentice" reviews McKeon's early career, publications and pre-World War II teaching. It is a brief (eight pages) and remarkable précis of an exciting academic maturation.

Chapters 4 through 7 introduce the history, the development and the application of all McKeon's original schemata to metaphysics, politics and the arts of discourse. For McKeon's students this is dense, sometimes unacceptable, but always fascinating. For others it must be maddening and impenetrable. The dialectical structures set forth by Plochmann are so abstracted from the texts and measured matrices McKeon himself used to introduce his schemata that their real uses are distorted.
Chapter 8 sets McKeon's philosophy into twelve theses, along with deceptive statements of the McKeon philosophy on either side, the left called "McKeonistic," the right called "McKeonesque." The theses are detached from their sources; none cite the works upon which they are based; some are conceptually simple and clearly true; some are simply wrong. For example Plochmann's Thesis I that philosophy need not disentangle itself from history and can valuably enter into the "running conversation" that forms that history is true of McKeon's philosophy. However, Thesis II that as philosophers, we can select freely from philosophical systems which "are roughly equivalent in their self-consistency . . . on the basis of our own needs" (p. 168) is not true. For McKeon there is no free will existential choice by philosophers of systems out of some personal need or preference. Philosophical choices are a response to an environment: intellectual, scientific, artistic, political, etc. McKeon is not a sophist in the sense that the philosopher or the reader is the primary measure of the system. Philosophy is connected not only to the other disciplines of its time, but to the cultural milieu out of which the disciplines and their practitioners together arise, as well as the milieu from which we the readers and contemporary philosophers see their systems.

Chapter 9, "Concessions, Queries, Objections, Refutations" criticizes McKeon's philosophy as it is contained in the "twelve theses." It is impossible for this reviewer, who often disagrees with the very formulation of the theses to agree with many of the objections--some because of the formulae of the theses and some because of McKeon's philosophy. My reply to this chapter is itself an article or a chapter in a book. This last chapter, though, is so well organized and the queries are so intriguing and the queries are so intriguing poised, that for me it was a most exciting challenge. For example in response to Thesis I above, Plochmann objects that McKeon's system "aids in justifying a number of philosophies each of which would deplore in its own way this array and seek to undermine the procedure (p. 178). McKeon's pluralism does justify a number of great philosophies, and it is this multiplicity of respect, coupled with the new power of his philosophy, that justifies each of the philosophies one at a time, and this in turn aids in justifying McKeon's philosophy. Plochmann then objects that the semantical understanding of the old systems, can not give new inquiries answers that are true and fresh. This is partly correct, but the appropriate understandings of other philosophies, ancient and contemporary, often leads to innovations that are fresh, true and enriched by regard for their historical origins. In response to Thesis II, also mentioned above, Plochmann objects that every philosophy has "gaps or irrelevancies and superfluities when viewed in terms of itself (so far as that is possible)." The truth about a philosophy comes not in general, but in the examination of the particular philosophy, and McKeon's efforts at defending the great philosophers from Aristotle through Spinoza to himself, belies the generalization that all philosophies have gaps, irrelevancies and superfluities.

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Professor Plochmann will not be the philosopher who popularizes Richard McKeon for professional philosophers and certainly not for the general academic public. Yet because Plochmann presents the overview of the development of McKeon's powerful anti-relativistic pluralism his book belongs in the library of every scholar and of every university where the teachers and students of Richard McKeon's philosophy work.

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Emerson on the Scholar, Merton M. Sealts Jr., University of Missouri Press, 1992 iv+326 pp. $39.95

Merton M. Sealts Jr. is Professor Emeritus at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Some might see this as an "old man's" book. It is, to be sure, more the fruit of "ripe" scholarship than a volume prematurely published in some frenetic grasping after tenure. It is more a "labor of love" than a "cry for recognition." His "scholarship" may seem rather "old-fashioned" to some. He is not a Marxist, a structuralist or a "post-modernist." He is simply an honest scholar trying to understand Emerson. This is a book for those who love Emerson, though probably not for beginners. It is a sort of biography of Emerson, though one focused on Emerson's thoughts on "the Scholar." Professor Sealts can make even tired topics seem fresh and alive. He is much concerned with how the published Emerson is related to Emerson's unpublished works. However, philosophers will not find much philosophical thought (or sophistication) in this book. This is more a contribution to "literary scholarship" than to philosophy. Some philosophers, of course, see Emerson as merely a "seer," "prophet" or "preacher," but no philosopher. It does seem to me that there is in truth much philosophical thought in Emerson (at least to those who rely on "Reason" and not just the "Understanding"). But there is not much "philosophy" in this book. One can not call this a "brilliant" book, but for those interested in Emerson, it is an illuminating one. After reading this book, one does feel that one's understanding of Emerson has been significantly enlarged (and deepened), though it would be difficult to state precisely how. There is no simple thesis to this book; its strength lies rather in the details, in the sensitive "reading" of Emerson on many issues. We see how Emerson's notion of the "Scholar" developed, and how it was tested by such issues as Slavery and the Civil War. But all this may sound rather "thin." This book must be read; it can not be "summarized" in brief. All those interested in Emerson should find something of interest here. Yet this book is not likely to "revolutionize" your understanding of Emerson. (It does not try to argue that Emerson was really a "male Lesbian," or a "unconstructed Trotskyite.") This is a very good book, though perhaps not a truly great book.

This is also a beautifully produced book (though the quotation marks seem somewhat inadequate). There are some minor