
This book consists in a fine set of essays about Prof. John McDermott by a diverse group of philosophers, some of whom were his students. McDermott was one of the more prominent advocates of the value of pragmatism during the period when it was fading from the academic philosophy scene in the fifties and sixties and remains so now that pragmatism is more in fashion. He was also apparently a very inspiring teacher, first at Queens College of the City University of New York and more recently at Texas A & M University where he has been named “Distinguished Professor.”

The essays are diverse and cover topics from McDermott’s philosophy of experience to his medical ethics. The contributors are prominent educators and philosophers in their own right and despite their high regard for McDermott, are not willing to write about his work without any critical evaluations: the essays are partly descriptive but also appraise it.

Prof. William Gavin examines McDermott’s experiential approach to philosophy in the first essay. For McDermott, experience is dynamic and disrupts any a priori categories. Gavin does a fine job of tying this in to the American Frontier experience. The changes revealed by experiences also imply a critique of the “linguistic turn” in analytic philosophy. The categories of language cannot capture experience in its contextual particularity and language must evolve within the framework of such experience.

Gavin and Michael Allen, among others, note the Existential Strain in McDermott’s work. McDermott came of age in the period after World War II when Existentialism was in vogue and the influence of the latter on his work was significant. McDermott’s work reflects a fertile hybrid of Existentialism and Pragmatism. Indeed one could almost describe it as Existential Pragmatism. The problematic of Camus in particular—is life worth living, a question that dates from ancient times—pervades many of McDermott’s books and essays. McDermott is concerned that modern life can rob us of many worthwhile experiences. Like later French figures (Merleau-Ponty, Foucault), McDermott argues that experience works through the body, an implicit criticism of the Cartesian view and a rejection of the technical understanding of the body as a complex machine. Allen’s essay in particular is quite good at bringing out the fertile influence of Camus on McDermott.

In the second essay, Prof. James Campbell connects this philosophy of experience to pragmatism. Campbell notes that McDermott’s pragmatism is pluralistic, melioristic and anti-foundationalist. Since human experience is closely connected to a historical situation, finitude is the human condition. Dynamic experience is life and the problems of life and the role of philosophy in dealing with life form McDermott’s main concerns. These ideas tie McDermott more to the Jamesian-Schillerian model of pragmatism, although McDermott has also been influenced by Dewey. Experience is didactic and
present experience thereby becomes instrumental in facing the challenges presented in future experience. It is also open to possibilities and thus to transforming the future. Echoing Mead, McDermott believes that the self is formed relationally. The theme of the self ties into similar themes in the Existentialist tradition.

Prof. Jacqueline Kegley addresses McDermott’s philosophy of death and dying in the context of medical ethics, relating the existential or rather axiological question of “is life worth living” to decisions about death at the end of life. Kegley gives a nuanced account of McDermott while maintaining that “his focus is too individualistic and thus he neglects forms of alienation and possible conditions for creative living.” Kegley, like some of the other essayists, also notes the influence of Royce particularly on the young McDermott, although McDermott is more critical of Royce than of James and Dewey.

Eugene Fontinell, a former colleague, examines McDermott’s personalism, which is consistent with his experiential framework. Being a person includes having a unique set of experiences. Fontinell argues that McDermott’s existential strain tempers his optimism, but despair is replaced by pragmatic meliorism and the loneliness of Sisyphus by relations to others and to place in McDermott’s personalism.

Prof. Richard Hart discusses McDermott’s attempt to encourage a more up to date aesthetic based on the urban landscape that most humans now inhabit. There is a time lag in our aesthetic discussions in that our aesthetic tradition was the product of a largely rural or small-town sensibility. We need a new aesthetic for the jazz age and hip(-hop) culture. McDermott would like to see a greater celebration of urban space. In this regard I would suggest that Giorgio de Chirico’s urbanscapes, with their haunting emptiness and brooding shadows might also fit McDermott’s combination of existential angst and pragmatic contextualism.

Prof. Paul Thompson raises the question of McDermott’s ethic—a question since McDermott never wrote on ethics in the formal sense of a treatise, or analysis of the meta-ethical sort. Thompson suggests that this is because he values ethics more highly. In sum, ethical themes pervade McDermott’s entire output, focused as he is on the value of life and experience. Ethics is too important to be treated academically.

Prof. Arthur Lothstein, a former student, concentrates on the humanist strain in McDermott in a style with an admirable literary flourish. Like Hart, he notes that nature seems to be absent from McDermott’s “ultimate concern,” focused as he is on urban experience. The almost adulatory tone of Lothstein’s essay attests to McDermott’s fine teaching manner.

Prof. John Ryder covers McDermott’s contributions to philosophy of education, which he believes is neglected. McDermott has defended the Deweyan view that education should not just teach the “three R’s” but prepare youngsters for citizenship in a democracy. McDermott is also critical of any “technical” or business oriented approach to education. He uses the pragmatic themes of meliorism, relations and context to
advance a distinctive alternative view of educational goals, a "contemporary cultural pedagogy."

McDermott briefly responds to all of the essays in an Afterword. One thing that struck me in these afterthoughts was the tension he sees between the social, relational self and the emergence of individuality as such. Thus the social formation of the existential individual results in a divided self threatened by either too much or too little autonomy.

A few critical comments: McDermott presents an anthropocentric account of experience that leaves out non-human nature. Thus the clear-cutting of first the Eastern and then the Western forests, the removal of Native America and the imposition of agriculture during the colonial period and after Independence are scarcely mentioned as indicative of the American character. The transformation of the land that was a precursor to technological society and led up to it are as much a part of American experience as cherry pie. The frontier experience sharpened but did not alter these tendencies and attitudes toward the land.

Gavin argues that Europe could not restrain the Frontier spirit initiated by the Puritans. But Europe did place normative constraints on American Puritanism in the form of Reason, the standard of the Enlightenment, which influenced Jefferson in particular. Jefferson rewrote the Bible to conform to what he considered to be plausible by rational standards. Gavin/McDermott are surely right in interpreting the Puritans as Biblically inspired, as the New Hebrews settling in the Promised Land and transforming it by the Grace of God. And their attitudes toward the natives, as latter-day Philistines, pervaded much of Colonial and post-Colonial America. But the Biblical strain was only one of several—Georgia was settled by convicts, New York by merchants and Virginia and the other southern colonies largely by cavaliers, sons of the well to do classes who did not receive inheritances due to the British custom of primogeniture. These groups came to America with quite different outlooks, formed by quite different experiences, and behaved accordingly.

Altogether an excellent book, highly worth reading, as well as a good introduction to McDermott’s considerable output. The editors did a balanced job and the contributors both expound upon McDermott’s philosophy and raise pertinent questions for critical examination.

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If speculative philosophy is noting and then arguing for ‘correlations’ between or among apparently distinct domains, then this book is clearly an exercise in speculative philosophy. From a wide-angle perspective, it seeks to establish correlations between quantum mechanics and Whitehead’s cosmological scheme. In this it carries on a project