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REVIEW

John J. McDermott, *The Drama of Possibility: Experience as Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), ISBN: 978-0823226634

John J. McDermott's *The Drama of Possibility: Experience as Philosophy of Culture* not only provides an aperture in the philosophical dialogue with Foucault's thought, but it is first and foremost a seminal work in the field of philosophy and the humanities as a whole. The text is a collection of essays divided into five key sections: "An American Angle of Vision," "Environing," "Turning," "Bequeathing," and "Teaching" that link the genesis of the American project to a thought-provoking discussion of the pedagogical status of our country and the author's vision and hopes for the future. Through this approach, McDermott weaves theoretical discourse with matter-of-fact anecdotes to illustrate his ideas. "So long as I was able to marry the rich historical and philosophical versions of the wisdom literature with an affective reconnoitering of my own experiences and those of my family, my children, my students, and my friends, the pedagogy took place and the possibilities for growth became extant." (7) Thus, the crucial point for McDermott is the "reconnoitering of my own experiences." In other words, he sets out to inspect, examine, survey, and explore the American philosophical landscape not just through an abstract and solipsistic discussion, but through what McDermott so aptly calls experience. In doing so, he summons his experience both as a philosopher and as a teacher. For him teaching is a calling that requires intellectual sophistication, which has an almost spiritual purpose and McDermott is sincere in the undertaking of such an important task. Thus the mission of his writing is "in response to the calling of the public." (9)

So what does McDermott want to communicate to the general population? The object of the missive is two-fold. First, McDermott seeks to contextualize and explain the American philosophical tradition within the greater Western heritage, and second he actively promotes philosophy as a cornerstone to the pedagogical endeavor and to American culture. The purpose of elucidating some of the caliginous nooks and crannies of philosophy is in order to create a new understanding of the country's intellectual heritage that may perhaps create a renewed sense of community, which McDermott at times fears and doubts will happen again as it has been done in the past three centuries. "Eros" builds the collective and allows society to come together not as a selfish Eros, but rather as a desire

for self-preservation and continuity. But if the love of knowledge and wisdom falters, McDermott fears the threat of an inconspicuous enemy, namely fascism. Fascism for McDermott, like drug abuse, seems harmless initially, but soon the high of the substance becomes a compulsion. This metaphor serves McDermott to illustrate how subtle forces can threaten liberty when there is ignorance and a lack of solidarity among a country built on the commitment to freedom.

In the midst of a pluralistic society that requires a renewed promise to community, the response is often one of “indifference” or of “stereotypical ignorance.” Yet, McDermott is careful about his approach. He does not want an added surveillance mechanism that will normalize judgment, as was done during the eighteenth century when various calls to reform punishment were put into place that resulted in the development of the penal system and the disciplined and docile body, as explained by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1977). For McDermott, “The attempt to legislate moral sensibility has been and can only be but a prod, a DEW line that signals the presence of trouble ahead.” (28) The analogy of the DEW Line or the Distant Early Warning Line, a system of radar stations in the far northern Arctic region of Canada, with additional stations along the North Coast and Aleutian Islands of Alaska that was set up to detect incoming Soviet bombers during the Cold War, a task which quickly became outdated when intercontinental ballistic missiles became the main delivery system for nuclear weapons, encourages a wary outlook on anything that has to be imposed by autocratic means. The codification of normative behavior silences society when suddenly there are metal detectors in courthouses, hospitals, and even schools. According to McDermott, these forms of constant vigilance are not for outside terrorists, but rather they are directed to control what they perceive as local violence, including crimes committed by children. Like Foucault, McDermott perceives the watchful eye of the ever-present panopticon. Given the power of such a system, McDermott urges the reader to be aware of that control and that instead of feeding the fire through more regulation, society should instead seek to create acceptance by compassion, rather than by legislation.

Having established the present challenge for the United States, McDermott moves from a description of the lurking enemy of Democratic society to an overview of the American philosophical heritage. He begins by noting the lack of overall unity that characterizes philosophical pursuit in the United States. In fact, theoretical and abstract endeavors have given way to experience instead of thought. Why is an empirical approach now favored over a contemplative outlook? According to Daniel Boorstin, the New World was more than just a place that provided new discoveries for the early pioneers. It was not the awe-inspiring geography or the diversity of the new flora and fauna that led to such revolutionary changes in the epistemology that came to characterize American philosophy. What changed was the sensibility of how knowledge was acquired. Faced with a horizon that seemed to stretch infinitely westward and confronted with what could sometimes be a promising environment and sometimes a menacing terrain, the newly-arrived pilgrims had

to choose action over the meditative philosophy of Europe. With that approach, the new Americans made the westward movement an experience that permeated their very core and shaped how they saw the world. "The wending of the West is an attitude, a reflection of what Karl Jaspers calls an 'epochal consciousness'..." (47)

Prior to the American genesis there were decisive changes in the Western world, such as "the cartographical revolution brought on by the awareness of the new continent, Protestantism, and Copernicanism." (44) All of the changes brought about significant developments for the American way of life as opposed to the historical and philosophical continuity that characterized European existence. McDermott regards the novel American approach as simply the continued transformation that began in sixteenth-century Europe with the geographical upheaval. Given the task of creating a new society, emphasis was placed on growth and change. Pragmatism took precedence over the lofty endeavors that could easily be enjoyed by society in Europe, which had already reached ripeness and maturity. As a result, the settlers of New England were more interested in the new landscape and the possibilities that it offered than in reestablishing the weary systems of the past. McDermott explains that

they opened themselves to new experience and, in so doing, saw the full continuity of their doctrine, in time, beget the historical event that is America. If this fundamental approach to experience is of critical religious import, as Protestantism holds – or as John Dewey thought, as witness his plea for an 'intellectual piety towards experience' – then in the most profound sense, the marrow of the American tradition is religious in implication. (52)

McDermott reiterates the idea that the Protestant tradition of individual understanding of the divine allows the American individual to interpret the creation of a new society as a religious calling that then characterizes daily life with constant activity that is necessary for survival and also as a fulfillment of God's plan. American life thus became imbued with enterprise and gave people little time to spare. Even though the nation's forefathers lacked time, they did enjoy the expanse of "space – organic, pragmatic space – the space of action." (72) In this territorial frontier, the emerging American both perceived the landscape as an "Edenic garden" and at times as a hostile wilderness. As a result, there arises an "anthropocentric approach to nature." Both metaphors place the individual squarely in the center of importance, either easily yielding to dreams and desires or as a place to be tamed and dominated. This inevitably, as McDermott highlights, leads to "a systematic destruction of natural resources under the press of an aggressive and collective adolescence in which liberation from feudal and antique political patterns generated a hostility to any structure, even the rhythm of forests." (74) If nature itself is seen as a tyrannical authority that needs to be overthrown, then it should come as no surprise that American sentiment has a general "disrespect for tradition and history." (74) In closing this section of the book, McDermott acknowledges the anti-intellectual attitude in American culture, but he does not

wallow in the negative aspects of the situation. Instead, he quickly moves into a detailed account of what does constitute the American philosophical tradition.

Provided that experience is the element that establishes the epistemological paradigm in the American landscape, the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Josiah Royce, William James, and John Dewey help to reconcile the empirical with the philosophical. Both Emerson and James believed words created a “world of meaning.” The lexicon of a society is more than grammatical links. Words are a manifestation of relations that proved more than just a definition of a particular concept. For a community, existence is experience through words as well and thus becomes emblematic in nature. “Parts of speech are metaphors, because the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind.” (95) The idea that language evolves into a metaphoric expression that separates itself from the object it seeks to define is not entirely different from what Foucault expresses in *The Order of Things*, where he states that “...the primacy of the written word went into abeyance. And that uniform layer in which the seen and the read, the visible and the expressible were endlessly interwoven, vanished too. Things and words were to be separated from one another...”¹ As language unfolds and unravels, there is a certain amount of distrust in language itself. For this reason, it is not surprising then for McDermott to establish Emerson as an incipient radical empiricist within the expanding landscape. For American thinkers like Emerson, the territory itself escapes the classifications of old Europe, given that the flora and fauna are outside what has been known until then. More importantly, however, the very spirit of the new inhabitants resists the limitations of history and language and in turn creates a distinctly new relation to the land itself and with the rest of the world.

McDermott, however, is clear in making a distinction between the forging of new relations and the isolationism that often characterizes the United States. He does not think it is salutary for Americans to be isolated from other cultures, beliefs, or ideologies if Americans are to create a society in the most complete sense. In 1908, Royce, in his collection of sermonic essays entitled *Race Questions, Provincialism and other American Problems*, envisioned a “beloved” or “great” community that certainly would not thrive through reclusiveness; only through the fomenting of a communal relationship would new links and relations be established and serve to cultivate in society a new alliance of the knowledge of the past and the experiences of the future. Just a year later, William James in *The Meaning of Truth* states that “Experience, as such, is potentially pedagogical, if we but pay attention.” (147) Each observation and step forward allows the formation of new relational leads as the individual connects ideas and experiences to create meaning. With each new association, the previously diminished capacity that had been constricted by the “self-defining, circular character of our inherited conceptual schema” expands with new

¹ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books 1994), 43.

possibilities. The very idea that we must name, define, or catalogue knowledge should be seen as a task of last resort for the purposes of organization. Experience should provide the vagueness that allows questioning and a constant reconceptualization of knowledge. With this assertion, McDermott explains how James subverts the supremacy of the Aristotelian conceptual framework that had been inculcated and internalized in Western scholarship for more than two thousand years.

This break with tradition paves the way for modern science as well as modern art, both of which are no longer descriptive in nature but essentially relational. Movement, possibility, and events are essential to the understanding of a variety of recent developments in human learning such as modern painting, jazz, modern dance, and even modern physics. Knowledge, according to McDermott, can no longer fit neatly into schemata because nothing can be understood in isolation. Rather it is through relations and the experience of those connections that new meanings are constantly created. Reaching for definitive conclusions, naming, and defining are simply ways to provide the individual with workable solutions within what McDermott terms as an "infinite abyss." There is no single approach or angle that will allow for a complete and total experience. Rather each person bestows his or her contribution to the developing narrative "as to how it is with the world." Furthermore, each individual view of his or her surroundings is in direct relation to how that world is perceived by the Other.

Such ideas are not entirely different from Foucault's pronouncement at the end of *The Order of Things* in which thought is a "certain mode of action." In fact, Foucault states that thought both "attracts and repels." Knowledge or thought both draws in and resists definition at the same time. "...thought both for itself and in the density of its workings, should be both knowledge and a modification of what it knows, reflection and a transformation of the mode of being of that on which it reflects. Whatever it touches it immediately causes to move: it cannot discover the unthought nearer to itself – or even, perhaps, without pushing it further away..."² Similarly, James, through his pragmatism, creates the idea of pluralism. He establishes an obligation towards ambiguity and the idea that there is no set definition or even a concordance between an object and the ideas that attempt to describe and circumscribe it. A common thread could then be established as being one of experience and of formulating links that create a new but constantly changing system of knowledge. John Dewey announces that he wants to write about "knowing" not as having access to concrete facts, but as a method that allows language to interact with material objects, machines, and tools for the purpose of an "experimental transaction." McDermott acknowledges, implicitly for James and explicitly for Dewey, that knowing becomes a series of processes and not an awareness of certain concrete concepts.

² Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 327.

After the first three sections of essays that explain the philosophy of experience and the forging of new relations in the American landscape, McDermott embarks in what could be termed as a shift to dramatic possibility. The last two sections, "Bequeathing" and "Teaching," invite the reader to "live at the edge" and to find "surprises" and "relational novelty everywhere." McDermott emphasizes through the ideas developed by James that nothing can be clear until each and every person expresses their own experience and every possible relation has been made, which in a sense is a continuous and infinite task. With this in mind, McDermott shifts to a collection of essays that focus on modern aesthetics. He demythifies modern art by explaining how this new approach to painting seeks to fashion novel ways of looking in order to articulate aesthetic values. What is innovative in modern art is not what could be termed as something entirely different or the discovery of an innovative painting technique, for example, but rather that modern art is a "metaphysics of relations." Being, substance, time and space, causation, change, and identity all then have implications when viewing and creating modern art. The duality between the subject and the object loses its significance in modern art because ultimately they are both abstract formulations in what is really a "dynamic process."

Modern art is not only important for its relational quality, but it serves McDermott as a springboard for both discussing the philosophy of aesthetics and for rendering concrete the idea of forging relations. With respect to traditional art, "...Michel Foucault criticizes the supposed one-to-one correspondence between our language and the object, and the proper name, in this context, is merely an artifice: it gives us a finger to point with, in other words, to pass surreptitiously from the space where one speaks to the space where one looks; in other words, to fold one over the other as if they were equivalents." (381) The criticism made by Foucault resonates as well when McDermott acknowledges that the multiplicity of meanings extends beyond art and into language itself. Often when words seem to hinder expression, one looks for metaphoric forms of discourse. One employs jokes, fiction, and poetry to express what one truly means because set definitions leave gaps of possible meaning. At times, words themselves fail to convey the desired message and the artist must turn to even more symbolic forms such as music, painting, and sculpture, which allow for a different sort of rich relational experience. Out of this necessity for meaningful participation in the creation and communication of knowledge, McDermott establishes that philosophy and the arts are paramount in the creation of relations and that if the American experiment is to have continued success, then as a society we must recognize the value that these afford to us.

In the final section, McDermott concretizes philosophical discourse. His last essays take on a very pragmatic approach. He laments that "...children are doomed to living second-hand lives" (463) if they are not allowed to make their own meaningful relations. The educational system has mostly failed American students as they grapple through a system that seems to expect them to have a certain amount of cultural literacy, but does not provide them with the resources for achieving such cultural literacy. In fact, critical

thinking seems to have virtually disappeared in favor of standardized testing at every level. McDermott adds that the purpose of education is not to establish definitions that “exhaust the meaning, texture, tone, or implication of that which is defined,” (465) but, instead, teaching should involve the creation of an environment where ambiguity is permissible and where doubt and questioning become part of the learning process. This seems very idealistic given that many teachers are also victims of a skewed pedagogical training that fails to show them the way towards creating relations of their own and focuses on teaching them classroom management.

Even with such a grim scenario, McDermott does not bemoan the current status of the philosopher, but instead clarifies the purpose of the philosopher, which is to provide meaningful experience for the creation of relations. The philosopher and the teacher are one, and philosophical discourse should reach beyond established academic circles to mentor young philosophers and the general population. Though philosophy’s position is in a precarious state in terms of it being regarded as useful and necessary, McDermott believes that “somehow the philosophy crowd thinks that I’m less if I’m understood.” (480) McDermott’s overall message suggests without pretense or condescension that American society needs “a turning of the heart,” a *teshuvah* in order to redirect our efforts, not only at understanding our tradition, but in keeping it alive.

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