

McDermott: A Life in Philosophy

James Campbell

John J. McDermott was born on 5 January 1932 in Richmond Hill, Queens, New York City, and died on 30 September 2018 in College Station, Texas.

McDermott received his undergraduate education at St. Francis College in Brooklyn, graduating *cum laude* in philosophy in January 1953. His graduate study in philosophy was at Fordham University in the Bronx, from which he received his M.A. in June 1954 and his Ph.D. “with Great Distinction” in January 1959. His dissertation—“Experience Is Pedagogical: The Genesis and Essence of the American Nineteenth Century Notion of Experience”—was completed under the guidance of his Doktorvater, Robert Channon Pollock. In 1964-65, McDermott held a post-doctoral fellowship in American Studies at the Union Theological Graduate School.

McDermott’s teaching experience in higher education began in 1954 at St. Francis College. In 1956 he joined the philosophy faculty of Queens College, CUNY, where he taught until June 1977. Later that year, he moved to Texas A&M University, where he was still teaching at his death. At TAMU, McDermott was University Distinguished Professor of Philosophy and Humanities in Medicine, Regents Professor, and Presidential Professor of Teaching Excellence. Throughout his career he also served on numerous departmental, college, and university committees. He received an E. Harris Harbison National Award for Gifted Teaching from the Danforth Foundation in 1969; and an LL.D., *honoris causa*, from the University of Hartford in 1970. He held additional teaching positions at: Fordham University, Manhattanville College, the University of San Francisco, Russell Sage College, and Stony Brook University.

McDermott also worked closely with such academic associations as the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy, of which he was a co-founder, the American Montessori Society, the American Council of Learned Societies, the National Humanities Faculty, and the American Philosophical Association.

McDermott’s major publications were: *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition* (1967); *The Basic Writings of Josiah Royce*, two volumes (1969); *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, two volumes (1973); *The Culture of Experience: Philosophical Essays in the American Grain* (1976); *A Cultural Introduction to Philosophy: Volume One - From Antiquity to Descartes* (1985); *Streams of Experience: Reflections on the History and*

Philosophy of American Culture (1987); and *The Drama of Possibility: Experience as Philosophy of Culture*, ed. Douglas R. Anderson (2007). Two further volumes were planned but never completed: *A Cultural Introduction to Philosophy: Volume Two - From Descartes to the Twentieth Century*, and *A Cultural Introduction to American Philosophy*. McDermott was a co-founder and advisory editor of the nineteen volume edition of *THE WORKS OF WILLIAM JAMES* (1975-88); and the general editor of *The Correspondence of William James*, twelve volumes (1992-2004). A volume of essays exploring McDermott's ideas and importance appeared in 2006: *Experience as Philosophy: On the Work of John J. McDermott* (ed. James Campbell and Richard E. Hart). This volume also contains a complete bibliography of his writings up to that point.

Those are the cold facts of the career of John McDermott; but they tell us little of his presence, his personality, his soul. This vital information was gained most easily via his direct pedagogy—in his classrooms for the truly blessed, in occasional lecture halls for the less fortunate. Most people who have become familiar with his message have done so indirectly, although still very profitably, through his work as a prolific and wide-ranging writer. Those who will learn of his work in the future similarly must do so through his written work.

In any number of places McDermott articulated aspects of his philosophical vision for us; but I would suggest beginning with his 2006 essay “You Are Really Able” (in *Experience as Philosophy*). This essay was his response to a conference at which nine of his colleagues and students offered papers on aspects of his thought. In this essay, in addition to his direct response to those papers, McDermott lays out in careful detail four “working philosophical assumptions.” The first of these is his recognition that our existence does not come with “a canopy of ultimate explanation or . . . of ultimate intelligibility.” Rather, we must make our own meanings. “A canopy of transient explanation has to be built by each of us,” he writes, “in concert with others.” He sees this work of making and remaking our canopy as ultimately “liberating,” in large part because it forces every individual, including himself, to “take full responsibility for what I think, what I say, and what I do.”

McDermott's second assumption is that our existence does not represent an exile from a prior paradisaical state or a fall from prior grace: we are ultimately just as we find ourselves here and now. As he writes, “we do not belong and as such are ontologically disconnected.” That is, we represent “an androcentric intrusion on a cosmic ecosystem” that does not share “our aspirations.” What we must do in response to our situation is to try to make connections, realizing full well that no permanent resolution to our situation will ever be possible. “Being in

the world is to forge, suture, loop, tie, fold, embrace,” by means of which we work to coordinate the inchoate products “that emerge from whatever we think, do, or hope.”

Third, McDermott follows the insights of William James, John Dewey, Alfred North Whitehead, and Robert Pollock, to work for “a shift in the major metaphor for philosophical inquiry, from substance to process.” As processive beings in a processive web of realities, “we have no fixed place, no fixed self, and no Archimedean point” from which to survey “an external world.” Hence we must remain “alert to every nuance in the flow” and keep ourselves “ever transforming as well.

McDermott’s fourth working philosophical assumption is that we should not fall into the trap of believing “that philosophical inquiry is exclusively a function of the mind.” Avoidance of this mentalizing trap requires that our philosophizing turn away from “the domination of the a priori,” from the general blanketing of the here and now by traditional “categorical schema and inherited assumptions” that incline us to read our experience “in terms, under labels and brackets hatched elsewhere, beyond our experiential province.” Instead, we must provide our own grounds for meaning and action, to triumph over cynicism through imagination, and to recognize that, as he often wrote, “the nectar is in the journey.”

Elsewhere in this essay, McDermott points to “two major lodestones” of his career. “The first is the sacred calling of pedagogy, namely, I am a teacher.” For an individual like him, and for us when we can achieve it, “pedagogy is a delicate, profound, and mysterious form of reaching, of helping, even though most often it is unsung.” The second lodestone to which he points is that “I carry on within the exhilarating, frustrating, and deeply pockmarked cultural context, known to me as America,” within which he saw himself as an “urban, proletarian ethnic.” In part, this placement impelled McDermott to locate his efforts within the tradition of American Philosophy, drawing especially on the work of William James, Josiah Royce, and John Dewey. This placement also impelled him to advance philosophical themes and questions that are prominent within our contemporary American situation. Among these are: the nature and importance of American culture, our understanding of embodiment and death, our natural and social environment, the trans-generational aspects of a naturalized religion, and the ever-present need for aesthetic renewal. For McDermott, to mention just one more theme, the goal of ethics “is to enhance experiential nutrition and to avoid ways of life whose outcome is the systemic spreading of inanition.” His pedagogy aimed to help us recognize that for advancing all of these tasks, all of us are really able.