BOOK REVIEWS

Reshaping Reason: Toward a New Philosophy
By John McCumber

There is much noise being made in philosophy faculties around the world about the state of philosophy and its direction. Indeed, to a large extent this concern is justified as the all-pervading monster of the natural sciences, its teeth sharpened with the apparent successes of its methods, devours up funds once preened for the lofty heights of the Geisteswissenschaften. It seems philosophers are increasingly being forced to defend their art on utilitarian grounds in order to garner the respect, and access the coffers, of their respective institutions. Much of philosophical debate is considered abstruse, whereby the uninitiated need to battle with terminologies just to understand the most basic of points. That said, philosophy is serious stuff, and there should be resistance to any ‘dumbing-down’ simply for the sake of the inverted intellectual snobberies so prevalent in the Anglophone sphere.

Nevertheless, apart from the now ubiquitous compendia of philosopher trivia and the endless introductory commentaries, there would appear to be very little in the way of popular philosophy which is not tainted with the gush of the New-Age/Self-Help movement. There is, in fact, a large hole in the commercial market for serious but popular philosophical writings. John McCumber’s Reshaping Reason is an attempt to fill this gap.

The full title of this work of 279 pages is Reshaping Reason: Toward a New Philosophy, and in it McCumber focuses on trying to establish a positive, revisionist view of reason and then practically applying it to various aspects of our personal, social, and political lives. Apart from the obvious concerns within the Human Sciences about the growing domination of their Natural cousins, he claims that “The events of September 11 had abruptly moved philosophy from the peripheries of the cultural landscape to its exact center, for the suicide attack on the technological symbol of America was ultimately an attack on critical thought itself” (p. ix). Academia needs to respond in times of such crises and appeal to humankind’s rational side. However, philosophy has lost this ability, and as a result, “philosophy is under threat and philosophers must explain themselves to non-philosophers or it will die out” (p. 4).

McCumber’s extensive knowledge of the canons of both so-called Continental and Analytic traditions has allowed him to present diverse
Strands of philosophical argument in simplified form. He uses this knowledge to argue that reason, as hitherto construed, is a shambles. We are, for McCumber, no closer to a definitive answer than when Western philosophy first flourished in ancient Hellas. To be sure, McCumber’s background in German philosophy has given him a belief in the power of reason to re-establish order and consensus within philosophy. However, the similarities with the absolutist architecstonics of the Aufklärer end here. The goal of Reshaping Reason is, no less, to rethink “epistemology, ontology, and ethics” and it will, according to McCumber’s preface, be useful to “critical theorists, feminists, queer theorists, and race theorists” and also “therapists and educators of all sorts” (p. xv).

There are three main parts to McCumber’s argument and the fourth chapter applies the findings of the previous three to our social and political spheres. In the first chapter, McCumber claims an aporia has developed which is undermining the explicatory goals of philosophy. By explaining the “…underlying agreement between the two sides of the aporia” he hopes to render it as “dubious” (p. 5). The first side is what he terms the domain of the “Fantasy Islanders” (p. 5). The inhabitants of Fantasy Island are said to be cut off from their original goal of searching for that Archimedean point: a point where an unchangeable universal realm of atemporal speculation could finally ground an apodictic philosophical system. Sadly, the years have not been good to the islanders and all they are left with are the uncomfortable memories of the goals they once pursued (p. 6-7). Truth chasing has lost its bling. Nevertheless, the Islanders continue to search and tangle themselves in ever more obscure philosophical knots, removing themselves ever farther from everyday discourse.

On the other side of the aporia lie the “Subversive Strugglers”. Their struggle is described as being a struggle to distance themselves from the Fantasy Islanders. The struggle itself has become their raison d’être (p. 6-8). Dissatisfied with the progress of the absolute-truth-chasers they give up the search for any truths, whatsoever. The Strugglers merely revel in the struggle and in doing so remove themselves from any rigorous argument, finding respite only in the opaque depths of their idiosyncratic quarrelling. He adds that it would be easy to view these distinctions as of those between the Analytic and Continental streams, however, “They are tendencies that wrestle within each of us” (p. 8). The problem, and the underlying agreement of the two sides, is their dogmatic take of what the nature of philosophy is. They are “…opposed on the issue of whether unaided argument can yield important truths about anything” (p. 10). The Islanders, of course, are convinced of their Platonic task to ground truth absolutely and, in contrast,
the Strugglers believe this to be impossible. This is the common agreement but as McCumber goes on to ask, “…who gave philosophy the job of establishing truths?” (p. 10). McCumber describes the search for eternal, ergo atemporal, truths as being a disaster for philosophy. Thinking, and by implication philosophy, cannot occur in a vacuum; even the most immediate of decisions requires deliberation, and so truth giving is a judgment which one makes and does not simply execute. McCumber argues that we need to replace the Kantian mind with a temporalized one, “one whose every single component and function has come to be and will pass away, and which has evolved rational tools to cope with the fact. The principles by which those tools operate constitute what I call ‘temporal reason’” (p. xi). So, rather than searching for atemporal truths we can assert things of the present as being true of the present:

The crux of the argument is that traditional philosophical thinking—ie, the philosophical use of various forms of inference—is conducted in the present tense. Its goal and medium is the true assertion (sentence, belief or proposition). True assertions, however, require the simultaneous availability—the “copresence”—of the assertions themselves and whatever it is that makes them true. (p. xii)

We conduct argument in the present tense, and, in lieu of the availability of ‘copresence,’ we cannot assert eternal truths of the here and now. McCumber spends very little time with this discussion and instead move quickly on with his thesis. The pillorying of truth-tracking as being related to atemporality ignores the great wealth of discussion in the Analytic world on the nature of truth and the relation of the objects [abstract/concrete] to the truth which is being asserted of them. McCumber’s argument focuses in on the subjective positing of truth. By avoiding a confrontation with realist or metatphysical realist arguments, arguments which would simply deny the level of subjectivity which McCumber assumes, McCumber risks simplifying truth to a question of Idealist semantics, rather than a true struggle between Idealist philosophies and those who maintain truth is both epistemological and metaphysical.

McCumber then turns to address the contortions of the Strugglers. He claims that there are two options for philosophy, either “…to articulate goals for philosophical thought that do not reduce to truth, or to reconceptualize truth itself in more temporal terms” (p. 23). The latter, according to McCumber, is Hegel’s and Heidegger’s course. That said, he believes them
to be “wrong,” nevertheless, he continues, they do have important lessons for those who wish to take the former path. For McCumber, we do have some notions of truth and of epistemological surety. When Continental philosophers try to “go beyond” sentence structure, they presuppose the structure they want to abolish (p. 33). McCumber does, however, agree with the Continentals that narrative plays an essential role in our epistemological make-up.

Temporalized reason, McCumber reminds us, is reason which actively incorporates a concocted past in order for us to understand the present, and thus move into the future. The past is read as a story; depending on the present conditions, the story will have different parameters, but we nevertheless construct a story in order to understand ourselves. As a story, thus subject to change (“change is continuous” [p. 45]), the story can only be said to be true as far as it relates to the sphere of my consciousness and within the scope of the situating terms and tropes of the language in which it is necessarily framed. Therewith, McCumber escapes the relativist trap, as he argues that language and the constraints it places on us rebuke the notion of a solipsistic agent, as they are external to the mind which uses them.

In chapter two McCumber discusses the notions of narrative and demarcation as he terms them. As he claims:

The argument is that the tools of narrative and demarcation… are necessary to a philosophy which seeks self knowledge while remaining faithful to the fact that we are all, in all respects, in time… since, the ways we inhabit time include narrative and demarcation, philosophy itself must not merely study these families of gestures but appropriate them and use them as its tools. (p. 89)

These are, in Kantian terms, McCumber’s Categories of the Understanding; categories which make the world reasonable, but are also necessary to us, as it is we who formulate them thus. We learn how to use them by looking to others to see how they are used; as McCumber claims, “…we can learn worthwhile things about thought by looking at how we can thoughtfully join in and belong to a human community” (p. 74). Our narrative is just one among many and they are all part of one big narrative, our perspective on the big narrative does not require a Panopticon but, citing Rawls, the view from eternity is not the view of a transcendent, “rather it is a certain form of thought and feeling that rational persons can adopt within the world” (p. 21). McCumber goes on to stress the existential
importance of this narrative framing, “…adopting a history and opening
up to the future are skills that go even beyond the very broad domain of
community formation and adherence in general. They are the main ways in
which we inhabit time” (p. 78).

In chapter 3 McCumber decries another tendency of philosophy, in
this case the tendency of seeking only one ontology to explain all that
is. He identifies seven ontologies which have been used in philosophy;
each one has mistakenly claimed to be a panacea for all epistemology
and metaphysics. The predominant form, as he sees it, is ‘ousia’ ontology,
which he apportions originally to Aristotle; ousia being an ontology where
form and matter are essentially linked and that those forms can have rigid,
atemporal essences. This rigidity, if we compare it with his version of
“temporalized reason”, as he terms it, cannot function within the world if
the world is construed as a rationally constructed and transient narrative.
The problem for these ontologies, as he sees it, is that: 1) There is a variety
of ontologies in the West; 2) There is no theoretical way to decide among
them; and 3) Such decisions get made (p. 126).

Situations change, things change, words change, extensions broaden
and intensions acquiesce; these are the realities of McCumber’s world
and thus any rigid definition of ontology is problematic. As he points out
throughout the chapter, some ontologies force us to apply them and others
we rather capriciously apportion to objects. Each situation always demands
a different response; each situation, in essence, is unique and transient. He
continues, “For to clarify and carry forward a situation is not only to locate
ourselves within it, but to change that situation itself; it is to construct our
situation” (p. 160).

In the final chapter McCumber seeks to apply his new thesis and tools
to the personal, social, and political spheres. He first of all attacks the
notion of an absolutely atomic self-determining agent. In a radical move,
he tries to circumvent classic Libertarian positions by arguing for a freedom
which does not “…require us to be aware of all the conditions of our acts,
and which does not conceive freedom as a kind of domination” (p. 182).
As we can never be aware of all our conditions, it would be fallacious to
build an ethics upon such an absolutist ontology. As a base for his quite
ambitious claims, McCumber refers to an essay from Tor Nørretranders
citing some empirical research, which claims that “decisions are actually
made about half a second before we are aware of making them” (p.182).
This is done in order for him to further characterize ethical decisions “…
as the mobilization of interior forces around a course of action” (ibid). He
then continues to ‘back this up’ with an even more baffling equivocation
of Kant and Freud when he claims that “both Kant and Freud have taught us, our psychic resources, and the ways they organize themselves, are not necessarily conscious” (ibid). He does this without any further breakdown of the so-called empirical research or an explanation of the differences between Freud and Kant. Sadly, McCumber simply pushes on and leaves us to accept these three disparate and unexplained sources as the foundation of his argument. Instead, he urges us to move away from the traditional poles of solely individual causation, perhaps de rigueur on the Island, and to an emphasis on society as negating any freedom for the individual, no doubt a maxim under the Strugglers. Ethics is after all not just a list of absolute laws, but “…it comprises the general principles by which life should be navigated, and in particular how individuals and communities should make their way through the human world” (ibid.).

After questioning the level of agency each individual possesses, he then goes on to position this ‘qualified’ individual in its social context. If the personal sphere is where the agent appropriates the narrative and demarcating tools of reason in order to understand itself; the social sphere is necessary as it presupposes the personal. No rational being can live in isolation, thus we are invariably constrained by the symbiotic relationships that dyadic (triadic and so on) encounters give to each agent. We learn, and learn how to learn from each other. Consequently, our narratives take on greater meaning in the nexus of the larger process of history as it unremittingly grinds forward, cruelly crushing our pasts, allowing them to dissipate into the shadows and therewith making way for an unknown-known future, dimly heralded into being by the contiguities of a fleeting present. McCumber goes on to argue, “The very structure of government must be reconceived, which means that a new ontology needs to be found for it” (p. 217). His solution is to argue for a greater public sphere and a more active citizenship. The ideal form of government, he argues, is the American Federal system with its famous ‘checks and balances’. Whereby, each branch has the power to scupper the other. McCumber offers very little argument as to why exactly he chooses this system as his ideal. He offers no comparisons, nor any substantial data to support his point. This is somewhat disappointing when one considers the time given to his critique of essentialist ontologies.

The American Federal system suffers, as many governmental systems do, under the threat of commercial faction, ochlocracy, demagoguery, and so on. The European Union, for instance, could provide an interesting comparison to the explicitly nationalist, thus partially essentialist, mandates given to the various democratic states and governments in the world. Whilst
his entire thesis has been about anti-essentialism, he claims the American system is “...far more responsive to time itself than any other governmental system the world has known” (p. 231). This is certainly a strong claim, and one that deserves far more considered debate than what McCumber has provided.

This is first and foremost a popular work, and so it must be on those terms that it is to be read and evaluated. As a philosophical text it simply cannot sustain itself. He skips over a number of important problems in far too flippant a manner, often dropping philosophers’ names into contexts in which they do not belong simply to invoke some kudos for his point, i.e. “poor Euthyphro” (p.3), “poor Plato” (p. 5), “poor Kant” (p. 4); Hume is said to have been “wrong on causality,” Heidegger was “wrong about Hegel” (p. 111), Plato is described as being Socrates’ “faithless young friend” (p. 9) and so on. This unfortunate invective can be read throughout the book and certainly compounds the popular nature of the text and the difficulty in giving it an unqualified recommendation to others in the field.

That said, his book is eminently readable as a light introduction to some of the issues surrounding the great chasms that have emerged between various philosophical tastes. He freely admits that no “single issue raised in this text had received any kind of adequate treatment” (p. 232). That is most certainly the case. Nonetheless, no book can ever fully cover any one question, a painful truism in the world of philosophy. McCumber’s work provokes debate about the nature and the direction of philosophy itself, and so, in that sense, it is something of a meta-critique of the quietism many philosophers have resigned themselves to in the face of the encroaching metaphysical-absolutism of the scientific world-view.

As agent-provocateur, McCumber’s text is indeed a worthy effort, and the popular tone opens up such debate to a wider audience, for this he should certainly be lauded. He offers an urbane and enviable knowledge of the subject matter and an argument which sustains itself at least up until the final chapter, where, as with many theses, it flounders on its practical application. This is, nevertheless, an interesting and engaging read, and if one can ignore some of his more egregiously popular indulgences it will, at very least, ask a number of questions of one’s position in relation to philosophy, and in which direction philosophy is headed. Questions we should perhaps be paying more attention to.

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