

Georgia State University

ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University

Philosophy Faculty Publications

Department of Philosophy

2002

Review of "Time in the Ditch: American Philosophy and the McCarthy Era," and "Philosophy and Freedom", by John McCumber

Sebastian Rand

Georgia State University, srand@gsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/philosophy_facpub



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rand, Sebastian, "Review of "Time in the Ditch: American Philosophy and the McCarthy Era," and "Philosophy and Freedom", by John McCumber" (2002). *Philosophy Faculty Publications*. 6.
https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/philosophy_facpub/6

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Philosophy at ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gsu.edu.

will, it can solve the problem of overdetermined actions, that is, whether the presence of inclination defeats moral worth. While he argues that both the traditional and the counterfactual solutions to this problem are inadequate, it is not entirely clear how his interpretation provides a solution.

Regarding the second doctrine, he argues that sensibility contributes the feeling of respect, which he claims, contrary to prominent commentators, is identical to the moral motive, thereby expanding the role of feeling in Kant's theory. Both intellectual cognition of the law and the *sui generis* feeling of respect are representations of the same moral reality. Guevara's interpretation is original and worth serious consideration. S. J. F.

McCumber, John. *Philosophy and Freedom: Derrida, Rorty, Habermas, Foucault*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000. Pp. 200. \$39.95 (cloth); \$18.95 (paper).

McCumber, John. *Time in the Ditch: American Philosophy and the McCarthy Era*. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2001. Pp. 213. \$29.95 (cloth).

With *Time in the Ditch: American Philosophy and the McCarthy Era*, John McCumber takes us on a much-needed first step toward confronting the effect of American politics on American philosophy. Specifically, he traces the connection between the rise to dominance of analytic philosophy and the rise of Cold War anticommunism and conformism. In the opening two chapters, McCumber examines the historical record of, among other institutions, the American Philosophical Association, in an attempt to determine the influence of McCarthyism on the discipline. He then goes on to describe what he takes to be the lasting effects of McCarthyism on American culture, closing his survey with a "Post-McCarthy Paradigm" (p. 127) for philosophy.

Whether or not one finds this last chapter entirely satisfactory, the preceding four chapters, and especially the first two, deserve serious attention. They raise uncomfortable questions about a subject seldom broached in philosophy departments in America; they stand as a call to further discussion on all sides about a crucial period in our recent past. This book should be read by all philosophers and especially by those not accustomed to taking seriously the influence of society on their work.

In *Philosophy and Freedom: Derrida, Rorty, Habermas, Foucault*, McCumber presents in more detail the argument given at the end of *Time in the Ditch*. This argument brings together readings of Derrida, Rorty, Habermas, and Foucault under two organizing principles. The first, which organizes criticisms of the four thinkers, is based on the concept of "ousioidic structure" as McCumber presents it in his *Metaphysics and Oppression: Heidegger's Challenge to Western Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999). The second, which organizes his appropriation and recuperation of certain strains from each thinker's work, is based on the structures of "poetic interaction" (see his *Poetic Interaction: Language, Freedom, Reason* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989]).

While McCumber's specific criticisms of Derrida, Rorty, Habermas, and

Foucault may, by and large, be familiar to those versed in the secondary literature on those authors, the extending and organizing of those criticisms under the rubric of ousiodic structure is a penetrating refinement. Articulating the emancipatory promise of their work under the rubric of poetic interaction is also most enlightening. McCumber has a singular talent for discussing these very heterogeneous thinkers in a straightforward style; he never falls into the parrot-pitfalls that trap so many sympathetic commentators. Anyone drawn to the last sections of *Time in the Ditch*, along with anyone drawn to ethically and socially oriented thinkers working from the insights of their contemporaries, should read this instructive and accessible book. S. G. R.

O'Connor, Timothy. *Persons and Causes: The Metaphysics of Free Will*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. Pp. 135. \$35.00 (cloth).

Timothy O'Connor aims in this ambitious book to provide a metaphysical analysis of causation that will support the common picture we have of ourselves as freely acting. That picture, according to O'Connor, is incompatibilist but yet demands that the agent's acts be determined (by the agent). To explain how an agent can produce actions that are free but nevertheless controlled and intentional, O'Connor attempts a detailed and careful conception of agent causation.

O'Connor recognizes that legitimization of agent causation requires a hospitable theory of causation in general. He reverts to the idea that both agent and event causation rest on "causal powers" possessed by particulars. In event causation, a thing's causal powers are "automatically" exercised in appropriate circumstances to produce their regular effect. In agent causation, by contrast, the agent's causal powers are exercised in the manner the agent freely determines in accord with the agent's reasons. The effect is an executive intention to perform a particular kind of action for given reasons.

O'Connor concludes by arguing (unconvincingly) that his picture of agent causation fits contemporary scientific views of humans as part of the natural world. For those interested in agent causation, this book is must reading.

K. F. M.

Sarat, Austin. *When the State Kills: Capital Punishment and the American Condition*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001. Pp. xii+324. \$29.95 (cloth).

Austin Sarat examines the death penalty in America's political, legal, and popular culture, arguing that state killing is subversive of democracy and insidious to the very legal system that sanctions it. Sarat critiques such morally relevant issues as the role of narrative in death penalty lawyering, jury decisions about who is worthy to die, and the Supreme Court's legal reconfiguring of vengeance to allow punishment to assess harms rather than address wrongs (*Payne v. Tennessee*). Of particular moral importance is Sarat's analysis of the peculiar diffusing of a