

BOOK REVIEW

Creative Actualization: A Meliorist Theory of Values

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Hugh P. McDonald, *Creative Actualization: A Meliorist Theory of Values*. New York: Rodopi, 2011. xxvi + 361 pages. ISBN 978-90-420-3253-8. \$119.00 (hbk.)

In his recent book, *Creative Actualization: A Meliorist Theory of Values*, Hugh McDonald wades into the murky waters of value theory in order to develop a uniquely pragmatist theory of value. He ties value to what he calls “creative actualizations,” or the process of introducing novelties, conditions, norms and principles into our individual and collective experience. Creative actualization accommodates a plurality of independent values, resisting the temptation to embrace a monist framework, whether by making our diverse values instrumental to a final end or relative to a single (objective or subjective) source. Moreover, as McDonald argues, creative actualization has the theoretical resources to underpin a meliorist approach to pragmatist ethics. For McDonald, a pragmatist axiology must entertain commitments beyond those found in traditional theories, exploring the frontiers of value theory in, for instance, new areas of applied ethics (particularly environmental ethics). This exploratory element is one of the philosophical strengths of creative actualization compared to other more mainstream axiological theories. Readers looking for a Deweyan account of value theory should be pleased with the direction of McDonald’s project.

McDonald proceeds in three stages. First, he argues for a connection between *creative actualization* and values. Though not all values are creatively actualized, all are integrally related to the process of creative actualization. Second, in his account of ethics, creative actualization functions as a key source of value and morals. Finally, he criticizes traditional value theories, especially those that situate value in an objective realm, in the valuer or her subjective evaluations, or in some relation between a subject and object. The upshot of creative actualization is that it provides an alternative to value theories that rely on a sole source of value to serve as the ground of other goods or values. On McDonald’s account, traditional theories of value are hierarchical, or grounded on some singular value. There is a *summum bonum*, and all other values have worth in virtue of their relationship to that ultimate value. Creative actualization eschews this hierarchical structure in favor of a

plurality of goods and values. Instead of the traditional account, we might imagine a plurality of independent goods and values, the shared basis of which is their status as either outcomes of, or raw materials for, creative actualization.

In the first two chapters, McDonald outlines creative actualization as a theory of value. He specifies the exact relation between creative actualizations and inherent value. A creative actualization is the bringing about of a novelty. It is an activity directed at producing some novelty in the world, be it a piece of art, an invention, or a norm. In some instances, this bringing about involves evaluating some imagined good as worthwhile. If it is a success, this end of the activity constitutes a creative actualization. McDonald's opening example of the origins of an airplane is helpful here. While psychological factors such as the designer's wants and desires play a role in the process that leads to the existence of flying machines, these factors do not make a flying machine a good one (10). The working plane is the creative actualization. This creative actualization marks new possibilities; it changes the world and the way we are in it in some way.

On this view, the subtle (or maybe not so subtle) changes in the world reveal "practical possibilities" and newly emerging values (13). The process of bringing about a creative actualization resembles the process of inventing or improving a design, which involves an appreciation for the potential value of the actualization. At this point, two features of the theory come into focus. First, the relationship described between potentiality and actuality echoes Aristotle's arguments for the priority of actuality in *Metaphysics* (Trans. W.D. Ross, Book IX.8). Creative actualizations, actuality, disclose and limit possibility, and thereby have priority regarding value. However, the process of creative actualization can involve the consideration of other possibilities than those actualized, which are themselves grounded by creative actualizations. Thus the process of creative actualization involves the interplay of actualizations and the possibilities, though actualizations have priority. Second, even at this early stage in McDonald's account, one can feel the undercurrent of a meliorist approach to ethics. Value is tied to the activity of improvement, generally, which itself involves "worth, action, end and achieved good" (12). Together, the Aristotelian and meliorist characters of creative actualization makes one wonder about the extent to which other Aristotelian elements might be friendly to a pragmatist axiology.

Values as creative actualizations and the transformations we see in the world are interrelated. This emergent feature of the theory is important. One might wonder, "the invention of the flying machine opens up new possibilities, but it might well close just as many, so why should we think that a post-flying-machine world is an improvement?" The evaluation of some end or imagined design as worthwhile or potentially fruitful relies upon already actualized objects and norms. This account of the relation between potentiality and actuality anticipates the objection that the theory does not account for improvements, but different, equally valuable sets of

situations. Imagine world A with all and only goods 1 through 5. Who is to say that a creative actualization grounded on A does not yield world B with all and only goods 6 through 10, and that the value of A and B are not equal? While McDonald argues in chapter three that we have an obligation to improve the world, and that the value of improvement must be tied to creative actualization, I think his story is suggestive of a stronger defense against this objection. World B relies on the activities of actualization available in world A, and that actualization opened up new possibilities valued on standards available in A. Because the world plays a critical role in conditioning values, but is itself formed by past creative actualizations, McDonald's theory offers a picture of how improvement occurs. In this way, McDonald's work explores how meliorism invites a new way of thinking about value theory.

In chapters three and four, McDonald articulates the relationship between creative actualization and moral justification, offers an account of why the world has value, and through this lays the foundation for establishing obligations toward features of the environment. In this account, there is a wealth of material, including an overview of the principles of an ethics of creative actualization. McDonald is to be commended for exploring this vital relationship between ethics and axiology. I would encourage the reader to consider the principles of reciprocity, compossibility, pluralism and meliorism as McDonald defends them. However, my focus here is not on these principles, but on the relative weighting and prioritization of values. There are many different kinds of value (for instance, aesthetic, economic, and epistemic), and there is the question of how to adjudicate between them when they come into conflict. This question seems intuitively harder to answer if one does not have recourse to a *summum bonum*. In the book's preface, McDonald claims, "Morals do not provide a ground for value but a reciprocal limit. . . . Morals are regulative over creative actualization as a limit to value, while agents in turn creatively actualize moral values" (3). In other words, moral value is both a regulative ideal and an outcome of the process of creative actualization. In chapter three, the reader gets a fuller explanation of this conception of morals, and in chapter four, a defense of the value of life and the world.

McDonald re-casts the question of how morals are fundamental but not a ground of value in the question "Why be moral?" (123). He argues that morals are practically necessary in daily life. Particular norms and duties are the products of creative actualization in the face of this necessity. This necessity does the grounding work in answering the "why" question without positing normative foundations. But it leaves open the possibility that other goods "aim at" morality, which would seem to support a hierarchical conception of values. Instead, morals are the condition for other values insofar as other values are reciprocally related to morals, and are compossible with other values. Reciprocity follows from morality's practical necessity, since other values stand and fall with morals, and vice versa. Still, we might wonder if this answers the "why" question. This answer emerges in McDonald's

treatment of the problem of free-riders, whereby some seek to benefit from other moral agents' conformity to norms without bearing the costs associated with reciprocal compliance. Insofar as the world in which these riders reside is one where moral norms and principles are creatively actualized, these individuals are equally subject to moral evaluation. Given the condition of reciprocity, an ethic based on creative actualization requires compossibility of value (one value cannot preclude another, since they always stand in reciprocal relation to each other). This feature affords some direction as to how to adjudicate conflicts between value-kinds. In such cases, we can seek to promote values compatible with a wider array of other values, including instances of other value-types. The free-rider ethos, choosing some value over moral value, actually limits the extent to which different kinds of value can be realized. McDonald's proposal for an ethic of creative actualization gives rise to a plurality of values, since one value would not be capable of crowding others out of existence.

Those with specific interests in environmental ethics will find chapter four valuable, particularly the discussion of the value of the world and the relationship between cultural and environmental values. Similar to other non-anthropocentrists in environmental ethics (for instance, Arne Naess, Holmes Rolston, III, and J. Baird Callicott), McDonald defends the intrinsic value of organisms, arguing, "life creatively actualizes itself" (169). Flora, fauna, species and other living things creatively actualize their own lives under a variety of environmental conditions. Since life is a process of creative actualization, living organisms have value independent of their usefulness to human beings. McDonald has an interesting view of the value of species as opposed to individuals. In species that are not endangered or threatened, individual members may lack value compared to others belonging to endangered species. Why are some living beings more valuable than others? The more valued individuals are essential to the continuation of their species.

But what parts of the environment have value? Do rocks, water, mountains, rivers and the entire ecosystems of which they are a part possess intrinsic value? These are not creative actualizations. Those things (air of the right sort, water, and the other elements on which life depends) are valuable insofar as they are practically necessary for self-actualization. While water is not creatively actualized, there is room in the theory to account for its value. It is practically necessary for the creative actualizations of other living things. A possible objection to McDonald's account is that one can imagine that there could be biological systems without what we humans and other actually existing species would consider "good air." Suppose the existence of air suitable for thriving human, animal, and plant life precludes some set of practical possibilities. Does this feature speak against the intrinsic value of air necessary for human life? As is the case with most non-anthropocentric theories in environmental ethics, McDonald's affords little appreciation for the anthropocentrism at the core of our common-sense intuitions about why the natural environment is valuable.

In the final three chapters, McDonald employs creative actualization as a point of departure for critically examining other types of value theory. The reader will discover in this section a historically grounded critique of these theories. McDonald levels a number of arguments at these historically important theories, some of which are independent of his theory of creative actualization. The contrast between creative actualization and other, more traditional axiological theories complements McDonald's earlier articulation, and brings the pragmatist elements of his theory (emphasizing activity, process, pluralism and meliorism) into stark relief. However, readers looking for a thorough history of pragmatist value theory will not find what they are seeking in McDonald's work. This is not to say that McDonald's work wholly neglects the traditional movements in value theory and the major authors of the pragmatist tradition. His criticisms of diverse types of value theories demonstrate otherwise. However, the emphasis of the work is on articulating a new position, not defending an old one. Proving that creative actualization is a Deweyan or pragmatist view is not one of McDonald's central tasks. Still, he notes "Creative actualization is consistent with the value theory of historical pragmatism, especially John Dewey's. . . . Dewey has an essentially active theory of value in acts of prizing, caring for, and artistic creation" (12). The project of developing a robust argument for labeling the theory "Deweyan" is left to the reader.

Perhaps the greatest virtue of the book, insofar as teaching is concerned, is the work's breadth, providing points of entry into a variety of debates and questions in theoretical and practical philosophy. Educators introducing value theories and criticisms of them into their courses should find the lucid treatments compelling. Moreover, the discussion of hierarchical value theories provides a useful image for students trying to grasp how different modes of value relate. More advanced students puzzled about the relationship between different arenas of value (epistemic and ethical, for example) will find the book a helpful resource in their studies. On the side of practical philosophy, McDonald's work is an invitation for pragmatists and other philosophers to contemplate important axiological questions in the area of environmental ethics. The conditions of reciprocity and compossibility provide a framework for understanding the moral impact of our various interactions with the environment. While the central arguments of the book do not (for the most part) explicitly connect with Dewey studies, readers will nevertheless find a model for Deweyan engagement with contemporary issues in value theory.

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