



Surviving the Twenty-First Century: Essays by William Eaton

William Eaton

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Review by David Sonenschein

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A scholar's output is not necessarily limited to the denser texts of professional papers meant for the closed circles of institutionalized peers. What one learns from one's discipline—masses of factual data and theoretical concerns of analysis—can also be channeled through more popular presentations to become available for non-specialist audiences. Scholars who follow this route have often been referred to as “public intellectuals” and they have found satisfaction and appreciation by engaging listeners and readers with information and a way of looking at the world. Such is the case of a recent book of essays by William Eaton.

Coming from the discipline of philosophy, in the course of twenty-two essays, Eaton takes people, events, relationships, and even artifacts as encountered in everyday life and runs them through an intellectual lens that brings the smaller things into an inquiring realm of larger things. The language is plain but not shallow, readable and understandable by a wide variety of people without sinking to a patronizing level. Because the essays can have a stream-of-consciousness flow to them, sometimes the implications of his perceptions and experiences have a disjointed, almost random inventory feel to them. Quotations by classic thinkers are often brought to bear on an issue being examined, but these too appear planted in the narrative in a cut-and-paste way, lacking a fuller explanation.

Logic is the glue of philosophical discourse, and its formal demands all too often fetishized in professional works to the point where one may actually lose the train of thought and analysis. If Eaton's output of speculation seems undisciplined, it is largely because of his format and platform. The essays come from his popular blog, *Montaignbakhtinian.com*, and the texts are necessarily short and informal, aimed at a wide readership. And such multilinear explorations have always been the curse of a rich and speculative intelligence. The writing is reflective of the way the human mind goes.

It becomes up to the reader, as it should be, to exert some effort at coherence and understanding, and through this engagement to take the implications of Eaton's offerings out along even further and newer paths. To this extent, the essays can be provocative and enabling. Adding to this are the many ethical issues of his musings on people and encounters; it is another way in which the author joins with a reader by implicating them at the level of more deeply felt moral principles.

One example is essay number 8, “Warmth's truth” (pp. 31-37). Eaton's impetus is Christmas, 2012, which he sees as an occasion to raise two subjects which “perhaps” he will explore further at a later date. But for now, his first concern is “the troubled subject of love.” To begin, he cites a speech by President Obama, occasioned by the Newton shootings, whom he feels speaks philosophically

about love for our children. He then pulls in a speech by Lyndon Johnson about The Great Society, then adds "snippets" by classical philosophers Descartes and Merleau-Ponty, and Marcel. The latter philosopher provides a bridge to his second subject, "animal rights," the initiator here being a news item about injecting contraceptives into a New Jersey deer population. This bit of news reminds him of two other items, one a story by Tzvetan Todorov, and the other some lines from David Riesman. He returns to the deer and to animal rights with thoughts on feelings and "otherness." As these thoughts are spun out, snippets again are entered by Kant, Jonathan Edwards, and Zbigniew Herbert, and the essay concludes with a reflection based on his relationship with his son, Jonah, a theme that runs throughout many of the essays and which Eaton describes as "the stealth weapon that delivers structure and binds the book". Now, I have been deliberately superficial in my skimming of this essay. One purpose is to show the danger of a too-quick scan of the essays, and another purpose is to show the dangers of writing in a cramped space in which transitions can become jagged and abrupt, and in which analysis can be compromised by urgency and name-dropping.

I recommend that the reader take a more careful look at this and the other essays, knowing I have been unfair, and do the thoughtful work readers are less and less called upon to do these days. The book can be read sporadically and non-sequentially, enjoyed over a period of time. Eaton, a former member of NCIS, also edits the online essay journal, zeteojournal.com, itself a respectable venue for scholars of all sorts.

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