

REVIEW ESSAY

**John Owens, *Rorty, Religion, and Metaphysics*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019. (221 pp.)
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The famous American pragmatist philosopher, Richard Rorty (1931-2007), was no friend of confessional faith, and yet this book, by John Owens, a philosopher/priest of the Society of Mary, is a brilliant and sympathetic reading of the American's work. It is as though Owens has identified Rorty as a worthy opponent, the foil against which faith is shown in relief, and the enormity of what is at stake is elucidated.

As Owens says on the last page (spoiler alert):

In reading Rorty, it is possible perhaps to glimpse the supposed religious-metaphysical enemy for the first time in the way that it presents itself to late twentieth-century Western eyes, and to realize that, like most positions, it has its reasons. Ironically, there are few who enable us to see them as vividly, while also encouraging us resolutely to renounce them, as Richard Rorty (p. 206).

Peter Berger long ago coined the term “heretical imperative”, meaning that we all have to choose what we believe, or do not believe.¹ Any easy inheritance of faith is long since gone, if it ever existed, along with a unified agreed upon worldview. Today the territory is even more muddled, and the choice more pronounced. There are those who are Christians, finding the common language and ritual of the Church comforting and community enhancing, but they don't believe in God. Examples are the New Zealand theologian Lloyd Geering, and the English priest, Don Cupitt.² Christians can find themselves out of step theologically, but attached to the people and culture of a church, as described by Mike McHargue in *Finding God in the Wave*.³ Jennifer Dawn Watts described her post church existence as meaning that when she steps back into church she feels she has to regress psychologically compared to the 12 steps community.⁴ Brian McLaren, the great defender of a broad post-evangelical faith has come out ambivalent about most of the institutional Church in his latest book, *Do I Stay Christian?*⁵ The world is a very confusing place as Christianity is increasingly identified with sex scandals and unholy political alliances. We find ourselves with

¹ Peter L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (New York: Doubleday, 1980).

² See Lloyd Geering, *Reimagining God: The Faith Journey of a Modern Heretic* (Polebridge Press, 2014); Don Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith* (Cambridge University Press, 1988).

³ Mike McHargue, *Finding God in the Waves: How I lost my faith and found it again Through Science*. (Hodder & Stoughton, 2016).

⁴ The Liturgists Podcast, 18 March, 2022, theliturgists.com.

⁵ Brian D. McLaren, *Do I Stay Christian* (John Murray, 2023).

choices. Try to define yourself and your small brand against the greater whole. Model a different kind of faith, or abandon faith altogether because claiming to be a Christian in today's world is uncomfortable.

Rorty has another and more drastic alternative. Abandon the idea of *anything* at all out there, which might have a claim on us. Rorty's project intends to put a wedge between religion and metaphysics, and in particular around the idea that there is a God, or indeed anything, outside of us. Rorty has one idea, says Owens. "We know how it will turn out but it still grips us. . . In a word, he wants us to lose the age-old fascination with something large and holy that stands over against us and demands our respect. It does not matter whether it is called God, or Reality, or Truth, or Goodness, or whether it falls under the category of religion or metaphysics." For Rorty, all hints of transcendence, of something more, of a higher allegiance, are best left behind (p. 1). He wants us to rid ourselves of metaphysics in all our language. He acknowledges this is hard. Like the thoughts that enter unbidden into meditation, we should be always checking our metaphysical assumptions and scaling them down as much as we can.

How do we do this? We do it by resisting the deceptions of language. For most of us, most of the time, and in most periods of human history, humans proceed as though reality "says something about itself" (p. 9). Language tricks us into thinking this way, argues Rorty, and it would be best if we saw through the deception. The unmasking of the metaphysical is human progress, he thinks. Naturally, it is not only religion, but science that has this sense in its everyday practice. Rorty does not have science in his sights, though, and he is content that the "grids" of meaning around science continue, and dominate our society (p. 82). Not so with religion, which he wishes would just disappear, and which he asserts has imposed a sadistic influence on our world. One suspects that without knowing it, many of today's Universities have become Rortyan without ever having read him. Rorty is not the only one saying these sorts of things, but he is one of the most consistent. And Owens is brilliantly clear in his exposition.

Rorty has had quite a helpful lead-up to his radical theories. Think of Marx for whom all religious faith was a way of controlling the proletariat and giving them heaven in return for servitude in the here and now; Feuerbach, who accentuated the idea that God was a projection; Freud, who continued in a similar fashion, regarding religion as a wish-fulfilment. Evolution's Central Dogma insisted that there is no purpose, no design and nothing personal out there and outside of us. The discipline of the Evolution of Religion explains the ubiquity of religion on Darwinian grounds—it helped us once to have hyperactive agency detection abilities; better to see agents that are not there-like God-- than not to see them at all and get eaten.⁶ All of these have dug an oar into the river of anti-metaphysics, explaining away the natural tendencies to defer to things and especially to a higher God. And God *is* the subject at stake, because metaphysics does make most sense, as Rorty understands better than most religious adherents, within a creation narrative. If the world is created it has been given purposes and distinctions by God and it has a

⁶ See for instance, Stuart E. Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

derivative status; we come along behind, acquiescing to what is given, even if that process of knowing what is out there is also creative and constructive.

Even scientists, Rorty argues, should be less metaphysical, less realist in their claims, but he acknowledges this makes little difference in practice. Science works, and works for human flourishing and therefore it is to be encouraged even where there is an unnecessary harking back to the world as though it were signaling to us. We might ask why does it work? Perhaps because it does teach on deep truth about what is out there. Is Carlo Rovelli who spends his life delving into black holes, for instance, just creating playful grids, even though he thinks he is responding to the signals from what is there? I would guess that very few scientists are pragmatists.

Immediately, though, we have to admit that we are all Rortyan to some extent. And Owens, too, is mostly very mild in his retort to Rorty. At the very least language *can* work this way. We have little sayings and verbal tics as well as stories we tell ourselves over and over. We don't always mean what we say, and the more we listen to one another, the truer this seems to be, especially in political spheres. Confabulation is all too easy. A pragmatist argues that this is how *all* language works. They try to eliminate the "illusion" that there is a reality with "joints" that can be described and that has a point of view (p. 31). Language doesn't work that way, Rorty argues. Owens says, "In this [Rorty] tries to help readers to break imaginatively from the picture that holds them captive, encouraging them to try out alternatives and that the original sense of necessity was an illusion" (p. 40). Interestingly though, Rorty does distinguish between 'things made and things found' (p. 49). Without language there would still be giraffes, but no bank accounts. He doesn't think the distinction matters to his program. Even giraffes are only giraffes because of their relationship to us, their utility and so on.

Owens shows us why we might sometimes despair as believers in a secular world. The world really has moved on without us. It doesn't mind if we bury our heads in the realist sand, just so long as we don't have enough leash to create any more "sadistic effect". The Rortyan programme, then, goes much deeper than the heretical imperative. We also have to decide whether our liturgies, our theologies, and our creeds, are a response to what is there, or just convenient and comforting ways of speaking. We have to acknowledge the subtlety of language which pushes towards the truth, but does not mirror it is a hard concept in a black and white world. Owens thinks that that decision might be being made for us, the realist stance being eroded slowly. One knows many people who have realized suddenly that what they say in church is no longer about anything outside or transcendent to what they say. That was the case for 'Science Mike' before he was converted back to faith again. For the newly doubting, the Rortyan program is adopted, as a loss of faith, a waking up, a trauma. In Aotearoa, our most famous theologian and only public theological voice, Lloyd Geering, is a Christian atheist, as is our most well-known hymn writer, the late Colin Gibson. Owens says:

for all that, it cannot be denied that large numbers of believers have more or less accepted Rorty's offer, and have internalized a description of their religious belief as a choice they have made. And there is perhaps a suspicion that attaches to more traditional believers who hold out for a stronger form of revealed religion: that they are simply nervous that should they give Rorty's recommendations a try, they too might be converted and come to accept the pragmatist interpretations he proposes (p. 97).

SCIENCE AND FAITH

There are radical repercussions for science and faith discourse. Science and theology are only thought to be in conflict where it is admitted that they have the "same purpose," (p. 99) that of understanding the present and predicting the future. For Rorty, there is no doubt that religion is so bad at any of this that there is no conflict because there is no equivalence. The grids that dominate our society and science are all-powerful. They work. They don't have to have complicated conversations about nature's point of view, because the technological extensions of the grid create the kind of life we want to live in, Rorty argues, while all we hear about religion is fundamentalist excess and historic and current sexual abuse.

From a theological perspective, Rorty does have use, as Owens argues, in the same way that breathing out and suspending the mind in meditation are of use. They enable us to breathe in and to think with a certain freshness. The believer does need to be wary of over-seeing, claiming that the glass darkly is completely clear, objectifying God, and of overreach in dogmatic pursuit. Can we really distinguish, for instance between the movements of the trinitarian God? Is there a real-life difference between sanctification and deification? Sometimes we can fine-tune the words more than Scripture or experience allows.

At the same time, both in religious life and in scientific discovery, Rorty points out that to be discovering is different from creating grids that work. I would argue that in almost every case the scientist is relating to what is out there, albeit in culturally and constructed modes of discourse. Similarly for the believer, though we are more vulnerable to creating idols out of our words. The religious stance is one of wonder, and wonder can be incited by worship or by scientific discovery. It does expect the universe to have a point of view, odd though that may seem. It isn't all about going to Scripture and working it out. Ironically, Rorty helps us to see what both religion and science are really about. They are metaphysical allies.

Nevertheless, we cannot help but think that language is more convergent with "reality" than it really is. Language does make thinking possible, it makes exploration possible, and culture, but it does also "hold us captive." We do need a constant dose of something like Rorty. Don't take your language too seriously. Do attend, as Rowan Williams entreats us, to the gaps between the words,⁷ to what language is trying to say but finding seriously difficult. We should feel that language is pressured under our metaphysical assumptions. And fundamentalism is dangerous because it takes the correspondence of words and reality

⁷ Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

to an extreme. No pressure, no humility, there. But once we see all this, it is all too easy to go all the way with Rorty. The help that Rorty might give us is costly.

GOING BEYOND RORTY AND OWENS

There is one puzzling aspect to this book. Owens does not push back very hard. At the end he has a section on the way in which “recognition” of the other in personal relationships demands something of us that Rorty cannot acknowledge. In recognition of the other, we can no longer be the individual judge of everything. Near the beginning he says: “I suspect that the price of such accommodation (to pragmatism) is the loss of most of what made religion interesting in the first place” (p. 8).

As a theologian, I was waiting and expecting another chapter in which he more clearly pointed to the theological calamity, and even scientific disaster that would ensue if we really all gave in to Rorty, or gave in to the more subtle cultural movements which seem to channel him. There are a few hints of this at the end. I want to round out this review, then, with a few directions in which I think we might go theologically when faced with the Rortyan critique of our metaphysics.

The Individual Human Person

The first is that both Rorty and Owens assume a somewhat individualistic isolated person as the default position in which humans are in the world. This is in spite of claiming to favour the social over the individual.

A person might come to themselves or come to recognition of the other as they encounter someone in childhood or infancy who drags them out of this solipsistic state. For Rorty it is language which comes with grids and frameworks of interpretation, providing a way ahead, a vision of a better world and so on. But anthropologists would claim that the community goes much deeper for the individual than this. Humans achieved our exalted planetary state by intense communal imprinting.⁸ We are obligatory cooperators, obligatory pro-social animals.⁹ Cooperation in food gathering, tool making and child rearing enabled language, cultural/symbolic development and transmission of knowledge, and the precocious dominion we have over other creatures.¹⁰ We have ‘theory of mind’ and ‘agency detection’ which go way beyond other creatures, who nevertheless have these to some extent.¹¹ Both the sense of self and the communal selves are formed together in shared attention and action. All of this happened in the ancestral crucible of lives that were being tested by something very real that did indeed stand over and above us – the need for food, the climate and the presence of predatory megafauna with much larger and stronger bodies and with scales, mouths, and claws that could instantly kill us. Of course, even as one says all this

⁸ Agustín Fuentes, “Human Niche, Human Behavior, Human Nature,” *Interface Focus* 7 (2017).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

one realizes that for Rorty this particular anthropological framework or grid can be accepted or not as we feel fit. And that throws light on the very unusual situation we are almost all in today, where we are untethered from the means of food production, and even, as Vaclav Smil has argued, from basic knowledge about modern tool making, the growing of food, steel production, and energy distribution.¹² One is tempted to say that only in such a context can one have the luxury of discounting reality. Anthropologists would say that we do indeed move into different levels of recognition of the other, but we do so within a communal niche, and evolved bodies that have everything ready to meet and nurture that new insight. Philosophers might say they have no need of anthropology. But they all come with sometimes unexamined counterfactual anthropological assumptions.

Where Anti-realism takes Us

Another argument: One suspects that Rorty believes that were we to give up on metaphysics the world would become more rational, less superstitious and less violent. And yet we now live in a world in which people attack 5G towers, they disbelieve in COVID-19 even while 15 million have now died, they believe that the Clintons are paedophiles and that the COVID-19 vaccine will make you magnetic. John Owens (and Rorty) can possibly shed some light on these phenomena, though they are not mentioned. In the fifteen years since Rorty died an anti-realism has indeed taken over in all sorts of surprising ways, not the ones that Rorty might have predicted or desired. From Rorty (and Owens) we might say that speaking a certain way *works* for these people and for those in their groups. They have very little sense that their statements could be tested, and should be, that there is a reality out there “with a point of view.” Some of them believe in God but their language around God is also not scrutinized. Their God language also works for them and those in their bubbles. It reminds me of my teacher friend who told me that her primary school pupils tell her that their answer to a math problem is just as good as hers. How did we get to his point?

The outworkings of a Rortyan view of the world, therefore, are not to be found primarily in liberal academia but in the now viral raging of conspiracy theories that are untamable, and spreading as though they need no warrant, and no basis in reality. They piggy back on our dense networks of communication and relationality but they deny at the end of the day, that there is a reality that could be tested by any form of evidence at all. They do in fact act much like viruses which also require healthy living tissue in which to replicate and divide. The lawlessness inherent in conspiracy movements also depends upon the residue of law and order still present in the world they deplore. Rorty would be surprised and saddened by this outcome, but perhaps that is the danger of thinking that takes place too far from the forces of nature and the means of production. For myself, I would hope that, as Rorty remarks, ‘any millennium now,’ the

¹² Vaclav Smil, *How the World Really Works: A Scientist's Guide to Our Past, Present and Future*, (Penguin, 2022).

religious-metaphysical position can show that it represents a kind of openness, by contrast with which pragmatism looks like an obstinate narrowing or closing of the years” (p. 206).

Creation

Owens reminds us that belief in creation is “the conviction that things were made by someone who had something in mind” (p. 6). Rorty disagrees. And Owens describes where all this leads, to the mechanical view of everything. “The nice things about purely mechanical accounts of nature, from an atheist’s point of view, is that they tell us that there are no purposes to be served save our own, and that we serve no purposes except those we dream up as we go along.” (Rorty, in Owens) Rorty says flatly that “the world does not speak,” echoing Foucault on the intuitions that underpin knowledge in the contemporary age. “We should not imagine that the world presents us with a legible face” (p. 22).

Whereas, says Owens, the other point of view is that “nature turns its face to us” (p. 56). This is a profound point. The philosopher of nature, Bruce Foltz, on the other hand insists:

In the Psalter, that classic anthology of Hebrew poetry and song, is to be found an aesthetic appreciation of the inner life –and, indeed, inner voice –of nature as a whole that is almost entirely lacking in Greek poetry. . . That is nature presents a face here, expresses an inner life, only because it is at the same time disclosed as being turned radically and ecstatically toward a distance unto which all the resonance of that life is directed, and from which that life is itself derived.¹³

This discussion helps us to see exactly where we stand. As Christians we do believe that nature has a face. Most scientists also believe that nature has joints, and these joints are like signals, albeit signs that require enormous ingenuity to read (p. 31). Christians and science have a radical point of confluence and agreement. It is a scandal that science and faith are so often at odds.

But this raises a further point. Is the mechanical view of nature and of everything really liberating? Rorty would claim that there is no end to the vocabularies and new directions we can take when we free ourselves from the Holy Other. But is this so? Arguably the lack of inherent purpose and the mechanization of everything has a chilling and depressing effect at all levels of human society. The church may have failed us in many dramatic and documentable ways, but we need its core message. The lack of a theological worldview contributes to silent despair that is hard to articulate and hard to document. We need to get taken out of our own narcissism rather than inventing ways of escape, as Rorty claims we can. We need to face our collusion with evil, rather than steering a way around it in a god-like fashion. We have to ask, can

¹³ Bruce Foltz, “Nature’s Other Side: The Demise of Nature and the Phenomenology of Givenness.” In *Rethinking Nature: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, edited by Bruce V Foltz and Robert Frodeman (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), 334.

Rorty's programme fund the new creation, or do we need to look beyond human proclivities and passions for that? Arguably the new vocabularies that do rule our lives are those of science, which has largely interacted with reality as though it is standing over and above and beyond us, delivering us up to its mysteries and surprises, and the surprise that we might be up to the task of understanding these mysteries.

All of this takes us to theology. The chapter on theology is interesting because it interacts only with theologians very much on the fringes of the mainstream, theologians who for the most part are sympathetic themselves to the Rortyan agenda. But as Owens himself would agree, the Rortyan program is hostile to faith.

Marilyn Robinson says, in this context:

to the great degree that theology has accommodated the parascientific world view, it too has tended to forget the beauty and strangeness of the individual soul, that is, of the world as perceived in the course of a human life, of the mind as it exists in time. But the beauty and strangeness persist just the same. And theology persists, even when it has absorbed as truth theories and interpretations that could reasonably be expected to kill it off. This suggests that its real life is elsewhere....¹⁴

This is surely a warning that too much pragmatism like Rorty's will kill the soul and faith as well. While the word 'religion' has a variety of meanings, it surely often comes down to the view that the ultimate significance of things does *not* simply come back to ourselves and our interests, but is centered mysteriously beyond us (p. 67). Robinson reminds us of this fact, and that theology cannot swim forever in a pragmatist current without relinquishing its soul.

CONCLUSION

Owens is careful not to go beyond his disciplinary boundaries. This makes the book perfect and complete in its own well-formed way. It is impeccably argued, beautifully written, and gives Rorty all the benefit of the doubt, as one may well do within the bounds of philosophical discourse. But from a theological perspective it is crying out for something more, for the messy interface with everything else—life, human purposes, economics, history, anthropology, physics, chemistry and biology. Not to mention the Christian discourse and Christian scriptures. If a book is to be judged by its fruitfulness and its wide applicability, though, Owen's book is superb. There are few books I have found which stay with me, about which I find I am still thinking six months, or now years later, where I see the world in a different way for having read it.

¹⁴ Marilyn Robinson, Robinson, *Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self* (Yale University Press, 2011), 13.