

God, Freedom and Nature

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Without God, Truth or Nature: Richard Rorty on the Primacy of Freedom

By
John F. Owens

Rorty's General Project

One of the more interesting debates in contemporary philosophy concerns the status of the thesis the Medievals called "the truth of things", the view that not only are there things in the world, but there is also a preferred view of them, a way they should be seen if they are to be seen rightly. The thesis connects with the Aristotelian position that some things are examples of natural kinds, having an intelligible identity which is in principle independent of humans and their ways of classification. In recent decades Richard Rorty has mounted a significant challenge to these views, seeing them as fundamentally dependent on a belief in God, and losing their force and plausibility once this belief declines. In his view, Western culture should aim at a certain kind of hope, rather than the sort of knowledge which has preoccupied philosophers (Rorty, 1999, p.24). This paper will examine the main lines of this controversy, suggesting that Rorty's position overlooks the key place of teleology in the Aristotelian account, and that the older tradition looks more promising once this notion is recovered.

Rorty's ultimate aim is to get rid of a certain sort of religious attitude, along with its metaphysical adjuncts. Surprisingly, this does not mean that he is necessarily against belief in God. In his later writings he finds ways to accommodate a qualified theistic belief, which he views as a particular narrative according to which religious-minded people can usefully arrange their lives. For such a belief, the theistic question no longer concerns God's existence, but rather asks "whether it is a good idea for us to continue talking about Him..." (Rorty, 2007, p.16). Within this understanding, a religious narrative can perhaps be justified pragmatically, as giving an interesting shape and purpose to human endeavours. What Rorty is against is a further aspect of religious belief which has traditionally loomed very large, the view that there is something large and non-human that bears in on us immediately, in such a way that we are beholden to it, owing it something like obedience. The object of Rorty's dislike here is broadly defined, so that it also takes in various metaphysical attitudes, which Rorty sees as ultimately religious in inspiration. Kant's ethics offers a prime example of the sort of tendency Rorty has in his sights. In an essay on William James published in 1997, (Rorty, 1999, p.148; James, 1979, p.148) Rorty says that James

deplored the fact that philosophers still followed Kant rather than Mill, still thought of validity as raining down upon a claim 'from some sublime dimension of being, which the moral law inhabits, much as upon the steel of the compass-needle the influence of the Pole rains down from out of the starry heavens'.

Rorty's dislike of religious attempts to correspond to something large and non-human, places him in a line of thought which goes back to Nietzsche. Thinkers in this line are unhappy with the tendency to see time as an offshoot or by-product of eternity, so that it is always beholden to something beyond it. Nietzsche's portrayal of the philosophical journey away from such obedience is large and dramatic. Rorty's version is more low-key, and merely tries to persuade us that the religious-metaphysical view of the world is not very interesting, and we will not lose anything if we let it go (Rorty, 1982, pp.3-18). So far as overt religious positions are concerned, the battle is largely won, with such positions banished from the public sphere. But Rorty thinks the religious urge to obedience lingers on in philosophical views which still appeal to a call to be discerned in the order of the world, or in human nature, or in the idea of goodness, or in the command which reason necessarily gives to itself. Along with these, strong correspondence notions of truth fall under Rorty's ban. All these positions see humans as beholden to something large and non-human, which requires a sort of obedience. The alternative that Rorty promotes is a kind of pragmatism, though it departs considerably from most classical statements of pragmatism. It gives up the aspiration to a strong correspondence, and settles for what he calls "coping", adopting a "hopeful, melioristic, experimental frame of mind" (1999, p.24). While we have to take note of the causal effects of things in the world, we do this as a mere tactical decision, which gets its value from interests of ours, and does not go back to any requirement of correspondence that we owe something or someone. Even Rorty's own approach is not put forward as "corresponding" better to the permanent structure of human life than other approaches (1989, p.8).

He wants to encourage a frame of mind in which such questions no longer move us. We leave them behind not because we have resolved them, or defeated them, but simply because we have lost interest in them.

The Theoretical Situation

Rorty holds that while there are things in the world in the ordinary sense, there is nothing out there that tells us how we are to think about them or conceive them. Whatever there is in the world, there is no truth out there as such. The world does not tell us what we are to make of it, what connections or disconnections we should affirm. As Rorty says, the world does not split up on its own initiative into sentence-shaped chunks called “facts” (Rorty, 1989, p.5). It first gets its contours in light of the words we use and the life-practices behind them. A cosmology that works with concepts of heavenly bodies administers a different set of similarities and differences from a cosmology that has a modern concept of planets. Rorty is happy with contemporary planet-talk, which works well. But we should not give it any large justification, as though it does not just work better, but also represents reality more adequately (1998, p.86). We should see a way of talking as getting us ahead, and proving useful to us, albeit in a somewhat problematic sense of “useful”. When viewed like this, vocabularies cannot appeal to conclusive arguments that would justify them. The only criteria they could use come with the vocabulary that is in question, and cannot therefore justify the vocabulary itself (Rorty, 1989, p.9). Aristotle thought that his ethics articulated a general ideal against which humans can be judged. Rorty thinks he just generalizes the best habits of a fourth-century Athenian gentleman, and that criteria are never more than “the platitudes which contextually define the terms of the final vocabulary currently in use” (1989, p.75).

Rorty has a useful example here, which concerns our identification of an animal like a giraffe. He insists that needs and interests of ours always lie behind our projection of a world in which giraffes can appear. Use of the word “giraffe” gets us ahead in some way, more or less as our adoption of vocabularies involving words like “organ”, or “cell”, or “atom” gets us ahead in other contexts. We should resist the Aristotelian temptation to go further, to where we say that such advances are advances in correspondence, progress towards descriptions which pick out natural kinds, and “cut nature at the joints” as Rorty says (1999, p.xxvi). The line between a giraffe and the surrounding air is clear enough for a human hunter. But it would look quite different to a language-using ant or amoeba, or to a space voyager looking from space. Probably none of these would include the word “giraffe” in a vocabulary. The argument is designed to show that calling a piece of space-time a “giraffe” is no closer to the way things are in themselves than is any other description. Rorty does not want to put the argument forward as an alternative theoretical position. Rather it is designed to show that it is pointless even to set about asking questions about the ultimate correspondence of our vocabularies with the world, because there is nothing to be gained here. Our interest should be limited to asking whether a competing description might be more useful for our purposes (Rorty 1999, p.xxvi). Questions about ultimate correspondence should remain not only unanswered but also unasked. Rorty agrees that there were giraffes long before the human race talked about them. But such talk presupposes our use of the word. What he denies is that this radical use corresponds to something that already was that way, so that we finally get part of reality “right” when we come up with this word. We cannot give any sense to “rightness” here, for the reason that correspondence arises only within language, once the word is already in use. Our choice to use the vocabulary in the first place does not correspond to anything. Rorty (1998, p.90) describes the view that he wants to criticize in terms which paraphrase the ontology developed by Aristotle. It holds that “there was a world, consisting of a multiplicity of objects differentiated by intrinsic, non-descriptive-relative features, waiting for somebody to come along and develop a language that cut it at the joints by assigning a word to each object...”

Rorty sees the world that is being farewellled here as ultimately *religious*. He says that we want to hold there is a language out there because we think that in the last analysis reality is personal. There is someone behind it who named the things so that they carry their names within them, and show themselves as already having an identity, an essence perhaps, so that they are constructed according to an intelligible blueprint of some kind. Someone has set up in advance a right way of knowing these things, and our knowledge has to correspond with this. Rorty thinks such commitments to “correspondence” go back to an original religious intuition. He says (1989, p.21): “For as long as we think that ‘the world’ names something we ought to respect as well as cope with, something person like in that it has a preferred description of itself, we shall insist that any philosophical account of truth save the ‘intuition’ that truth is ‘out there’.”

Rather unexpectedly, Rorty agrees here with Thomas Aquinas, who also holds that the ideal of correspondence connects with the belief in an eye of God, the thesis of the *veritas rerum*, the view that

reality itself is “true” in some deep sense. Aquinas suggests a parallel between the eye of an artisan determining the measure of an artefact like a table or chair, and the eye of God which is the measure of a natural object. Where Rorty says that human needs and interests offer the ultimate measure of things, Aquinas agrees that this is true of artificial things like tables and chairs, but not of natural things like giraffes. Here the determining mind is the mind of God. Aquinas (1952, p.11) puts it this way: “things are themselves measured by the divine intellect, in which are all created things – just as all works of art find their origin in the intellect of an artist.” Our knowledge does not correspond, as in the Kantian view, to a set of materials which it has formed into objects of knowledge, but to an original identity that has been inscribed in things by a creative knowing glance. And for Aquinas (1952, p.58), “the forms of things are the impressing of the divine knowledge in things,” a position that presumably expresses the New Testament doctrine of “creation through the Word”. Rorty helps show what this familiar thesis really means. The objects of our knowledge should not be seen as materials that have been formed into objects by the conceptual frameworks or vocabularies which are brought to bear on them, but rather there is a way that they are, to which our knowledge should correspond. Rorty agrees with Aquinas on the major premise that natures, or natural kinds, depend on an effective concept of God. But the paths of the two thinkers then diverge radically, with Aquinas developing an ontology based on the connection between correspondence and divine knowledge, and Rorty wanting to banish both terms from philosophy.

A Peculiar Freedom

This view of things opens up a peculiar heady freedom, in that whatever constraints apply within a vocabulary, there are no constraints on the choice of the vocabulary itself. At a philosophical level, all final vocabularies, and the worlds whose emergence they facilitate, are equal. Rorty calls the people who exercise the freedom to engineer new final vocabularies “strong poets” (1989 p28). The activity of forging a new vocabulary is mysterious, because it is not governed by everyday criteria, but brings into being ways of associating and dissociating we had never thought of before, and with this, the possibility of living in a new world. Copernicus and Galileo forged a vocabulary which showed it was possible to associate Mars with earth, and not with the sun or moon, as the previous vocabulary had insisted. Freud instituted a vocabulary which challenged the traditional dissociation of rational convictions and convictions brought about by causes (Rorty, 1989, p.47).

It is important that the appearance of new vocabularies is not part of a teleological process that fulfils some larger goal. Rorty thinks that such vocabularies are the product of a peculiar moment of dissociation, which arises when someone says “maybe we don’t have to talk the way we do” (Rorty, 1991, p.43), and says this not for any particular reason, but simply because they sense boundaries to their language, even though they cannot yet articulate what lies beyond them, because they are still situated in their current vocabulary, which of its nature suppresses the other possibilities. For a certain kind of person, whom Rorty calls the “ironist”, this arouses an urge to explore other worlds. Rorty insists that this process has no *telos*, so that there is no deeper reality behind the vocabularies which they are all trying to uncover, and which some of them uncover better than others. This does not mean we cannot be strongly committed to certain forms of life, and the vocabularies that go with them, and even commend them to others. But such commendations are always to some degree circular. A Westerner might relish the freedom of the West, and want to commend it to others, along with its vocabulary. But such freedom could well look decadent unless a person first exists within the kind of world it creates, at least to some degree. The circularity of such commendations looks more respectable once we give up the thought that there might be a possibility of metaphysical grounding, and accept that everybody who is arguing on fundamental matters is doing this sort of thing, presenting a circular argument that tries to jolt others into an appreciation of a different world. Rorty usefully compares the process whereby strong poetry produces new final vocabularies to the process of emergence of new species or life-forms, which bring their own new standards of excellence. He says (1999, p.27):

Pragmatists – both classical and ‘neo-’ – do not believe that there is a way things really are. So they want to replace the appearance-reality distinction by that between descriptions of the world and of ourselves which are less useful and those which are more useful. When the question ‘useful for what?’ is pressed, they have nothing to say except ‘useful to create a better future’. When they are asked, ‘Better by what criterion?’, they have no detailed answer, anymore than the first mammals could specify in what respects they were better than the dying dinosaurs.

Rorty’s Criticism of Aristotle

Rorty can be seen as attacking two key Aristotelian positions. The first is the view that there are natural kinds. Rorty sees this as the thesis that there is a kind of language inscribed in things

themselves, giving them a privileged description, as though it were the description they somehow use of themselves. He regards the thesis as nonsense, given that nothing talks outside of human beings. Given that the only vocabularies are human ones, objects spring up as a result of the connections and disconnections such vocabularies bring into play. It is striking that for this view, an object like a giraffe emerges in much the same way as does an object like a mountain, rising out of cognitive materials viewed from a set of human interests (e.g. an interest in climbing). Rorty proposes that we try a broad pragmatic description for all of our knowledge. After we have determined the part that a concept plays in our coping, there is no interesting further question to ask, about whether it might be “true” in some larger sense. Rorty says (1998, p.72) that “(w)hat people like Kuhn, Derrida, and I believe is that it is pointless to ask whether there really are mountains or whether it is merely convenient for us to talk about mountains.” He says more or less the same about an animal like a giraffe, whose concept belongs in a taxonomy, a grid that situates the animal in relation to what is around it, telling us that a giraffe is a mammal, to be associated more with a zebra than with an emu. Rorty insists there is nothing behind such connections except the accidents and interests of history, which arise as humans cope with the world around them. We gain nothing by asking whether a particular vocabulary cuts reality at the joints, and grasps the way “things really are”, beyond the connections and dissociations which our vocabularies bring into play. We have to forget the old theological or philosophical ideal of corresponding with the things, and to get down to coping with them, putting a narrative round their causal impact.

The second Aristotelian position that Rorty attacks is the view that choice is always a choice of means, and that fundamental ends are always already given, so that freedom is a secondary thing, beholden to the primary notion of the “end” or “good”, and liable to be judged according to whether it attains the good or not. In other words the concept of freedom brings a duty of conformity or correspondence. By contrast, Rorty proposes that the most interesting choices, the ones that make human history, are radical, putting together new forms of human life that bring their own goals with them. The Aristotelian Pope John Paul II (1993) wrote an encyclical defending the traditional view that truth has primacy over freedom. Rorty (2006) has a volume of interviews called *Take Care of Freedom and Truth Will Take Care of Itself*.

An Aristotelian Response: the Place of Teleology

Rorty’s position is surely stronger than is usually acknowledged, once it is seen as offering not just criticisms of the tradition, but a whole alternative way of seeing the world, that includes its own checks and balances. Even people who are well acquainted with the detail of the position often feel however that it is deeply awry, denying a powerful intuition that holds most of us in its grip, the view that there is a way that things are, and that our knowledge should try radically to correspond to this. I want to suggest a defence of the older ontology developed by Aristotle, which can confront Rorty’s argument that there are things out there, but there is no truth out there, so that there is nothing to which knowledge could correspond. I think an Aristotelian reply should focus on the area of teleology, and the strangeness of our interactions with living things, especially our interactions with other people.

The first move is to question the easy transition which Rorty and like-minded thinkers make from discussion of things like mountains to discussion of things like giraffes. Aristotle sees a significant difference here. A mountain is not really an entity at all, but rather a collection or heap of entities, given that its constituents are preserved as small particles (Aristot. *de Gen. et Corr.* 328a8). Similarly, artefacts, the familiar tables and chairs of many a plodding Aristotelian student introduction, are not entities for Aristotle, but collections of things. Considered as wholes, they are not really there as things with a nature of their own (Aristot. *Phys.* 192b9-22), at least not in the way a thing like a giraffe is there, a point which has been interestingly made in an analytic setting, by Peter van Inwagen (1990). When heaps or artefacts are in question, Aristotle agrees with Rorty, that they are bound together into objects by our concepts, and are constituted as what they are only in relation to these. Our concepts do not cut such things “at the joints”, but rather bind them into things that acquire joints through the act of binding. It is quite otherwise with things like giraffes. The joints we identify in a giraffe are not just joints formed by our concepts, but are, significantly, joints for the giraffe itself. For Aristotle, this is the beginning of a way that an entity in a certain sense “speaks”. Of course it does not actually speak, but it has the beginnings of something which can eventually issue in speech, namely a stance on the world. This does not mean that the animal adopts a sort of mental posture, but simply that its very existence is a striving for certain ends (above all, for more life). The animal therefore comes at us not as materials to be arranged by our concepts or languages, but as something that is already arranging itself, embedding a kind of understanding which humans can articulate and draw out into a word.

Part of the problem in dealing with this philosophically is that we are never forced to acknowledge the life of an animal in the way we are forced to acknowledge its height or colour. Kant (1952, p.376) makes a distinction here, between concepts that are “constitutive” of the basics of a world, and concepts that “regulate” ways we think of some of the basics once they are constituted. He places the attribution of teleology, or life, in the second category. Certainly the life of a thing is strangely elusive, when we try to get it in focus. While it is the central object of our gaze when we identify an animal as an animal, and not just as a collection of parts, we never observe the life as such, as though it were some further qualification alongside the colour and smell of the animal. When faced by the thought that an animal “understands” itself like this in a certain way, and faces us with the beginnings of a word about itself, our epistemological instincts tell us that this cannot be, and that our registration of the animal as alive must go back to some regulative cognitive function of ours. Once we move in this direction, we lose the sense that there is anything more in the world than materials, which various languages form into objects. Our awareness of a living thing tends to collapse to the same level as our awareness of an object in a painting, which arises from suitably “regulated” colours. Does this really describe the passage that goes on when we suddenly realize that something is alive, which we had thought inanimate, and experience a kind of awakening, as in the moment when we suddenly feel a tug on the end of a fishing-line, or realize that what we thought was a telephone answering-machine is in fact a live speaker. We do not so much arrange a set of materials into a picture as realize that there is another agent out there, who has quite different interests from ours, and who is moving in relation to us. This takes us well beyond our dealing with causal impacts by developing more or less useful vocabularies, which is the way Rorty wants to put it. Rather we recognize that there is something in front of us that has its own contours, having already understood itself in a particular way, so that it is not simply a silhouette that is formed from materials framed by our interests.

We are never forced to acknowledge such a thing, and can remain at the level of arranging materials into objects for the sake of our coping, if we want. Some choose to stand off and regard the antics of an animal, or another human being, in the same way as we regard an avalanche on a mountain, something we approach merely tactically. Mary Midgley (1994, pp.96-100) refers dismissively to scientific approaches which see an animal more or less as a complicated volcano, a procession of materials through a stable frame which the materials themselves form for a time. A person who carried through such an attitude in the everyday would admittedly be a very strange person. Before we know it, most of us consent to acknowledge the reality (that is, the life) of the animal that looks back at us from a set of interests that are not ours, accepting that there is a way the animal is, so that it is not just an object formed by our interests. We can see mice as “vermin”, and can at least imagine them as “food”. Here we are forming materials of the world into objects that are put together by ourselves along with our interests and vocabularies. But we are also capable of approaching the mouse in a different way, where we come to acknowledge its reality, as a small animal with interests oddly like ours, and which can look at us from out of those interests. This is to start to come to the reality of the mouse, and not just to an object constituted by our interests. It is to see the mouse, as the Christian creation tradition has it, as formed by a kind of “word”, so that being a mouse is already a sort of interpretation that human words can pick up and articulate. Some such attitude is probably presupposed by the peculiar human possibility of making friends with the mouse.

As an example of the contrast between framing materials to form an object, and coming to articulate a word which the object itself in a sense “speaks”, we could think of the example of a small child who is in a bad mood with his or her parents, and is in a certain sense enjoying the bad mood, and the feelings that go with it. They frame the parents within a hostile discourse, saying things like “I hate you”, “you don’t love me”, “you don’t care about me”, and so on, using a concept to articulate a heap of materials, the sort of thing we do when we put together a mountain. The parents are allowed to appear only as they appear within and for this discourse. But there is a strategy that parents sometimes develop for dealing with this sort of thing – to try to make the child laugh. The child is then faced with an interesting kind of choice, between holding the parents within the frame of reference created by the rage, so that the parents remain correlates, or giving in and laughing, and somehow coming into another world, where the life of the parents is acknowledged and recognized as an independent reality. Again, the child is not forced one way or the other. It is always possible to remain within the rage and keep the frame in place, so that the humorous remarks are seen as mocking, confirming the point that “they hate me”. And yet there is an almost irresistible compulsion to laugh, which brings the child into a world where he or she accepts that the objects of knowledge are not just objects of knowledge. They emerge from the half-light where they exist as subjects that have certain objects present to them, and consent to come into a common world. I think this moment is important for understanding Aristotelian views of reality and the world.

The teleological direction of a living thing is a kind of implicit preferred description or self-understanding existing in the world, the sort of thing that Rorty thought we could not have. Such a description is oddly present, even before it is formulated, as though it is waiting to be put into words by humans. Another human or animal looks at us as something, as it confronts us in the world. This was the sense perhaps in which Aristotle thought that things had a deep nature, the beginnings of a language, not in the sense that animals speak, but that they have already implicitly understood themselves, so that they *are* in a certain way. In this respect at least, they can look at us in a way that almost forces us, yet also appeals to our freedom, to bring this to articulation.

MacIntyre (1985) argues that the philosophical choice facing the Western ethical tradition is one between Aristotle and Nietzsche. I think Rorty gives us a clear example of this sort of choice in a broader context, showing that traditional ideas of God, nature and freedom belong together, and that if we want to think one of them, we have to think the others as well. He of course does not want to have any of them, and is fascinated by the exploration of one of them (freedom) when it is uncoupled from the others. Those who still want to have all of them have their work cut out, if they are to develop a plausible account of how it is possible. It seems to me that an understanding of teleology is crucial for the attempt.

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