Metaphysics, Politics, and Philosophy:  
George Grant’s Response to Pragmatism

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Abstract. The Canadian thinker George Grant offers a critique of modernity that tries to come to terms with the challenge of Heidegger to Plato. Against philosophical approaches which claim that any kind of metaphysics is obsolete and should be overcome, Grant attempted to think through what the rejection of metaphysics by important modern forms of philosophy means. Grant’s thought looked back to Plato for a conception of justice that he felt was endangered in the modern world. In particular, his philosophical thinking could be said to engage the various forms of pragmatism that he regarded as emblematic of modernity’s emphasis on making and creating in contrast to the older virtue of contemplation. However, the ontological concern about the priority of contemplation over action was, for Grant, also connected to problem of justice. Could one defend an understanding of justice that gives to man what is his due while accepting the pragmatism of modern philosophy? And does pragmatism succeed in eliminating the question concerning God from the concerns of the philosopher?

Keywords: pragmatism, metaphysics, William James, Richard Rorty, modernity, technology, justice, religion, Platonism.

1) The Pragmatist Challenge to Metaphysics
Pragmatism as a distinctively modern and in many ways characteristically American way of doing philosophy is, at least in some of its most important manifestations, a deeply antimetaphysical trend of thought. One of the foremost pragmatist philosophers, William James, gives expression to this “attitude of orientation”, as he calls it (James 1995, 22). James equates the pragmatist attitude with an empiricist one (James 1995, 20) when he rejects any notion of prima philosophia, of first philosophy in the traditional sense, and defines the pragmatic attitude thus: “The attitude of looking away from first things, principles, ‘categories,’ supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts” (James 1995, 22; emphasis in the original). Strictly speaking, this Jamesian sentence does not claim that there are no first things or principles or even categories but rather that it is fruitless to concern oneself with them. In James's description of what the pragmatist thinker does, there is
already a shift away from arguments about (the truth of) first things or transcendental categories to a whole new perspective on reality. Fruits, consequences, and facts are, of course, elements of reality that can be known for what they are, i.e. they necessarily fall into one category or other. The category of the practical is what has to be presupposed by pragmatism in this sense, because without this category it would not be possible to distinguish between the practical and the non-practical or ‘merely’ theoretical. The practical as well as rhetorical turn to last things as opposed to first things in James's kind of pragmatism takes its starting point from the traditional way of speaking about metaphysics but already foreshadows the later exhortations by a neo-pragmatist such as Richard Rorty to utterly forget about first philosophy.

The anti-metaphysical thrust of thinkers such as William James (however, for a contrary view, cf. Pihlström 2007) and John Dewey has been further elaborated, amplified, and even taken to extremes in our time by the neo-pragmatist Richard Rorty. (It should be noted, though, that this anti-metaphysical attitude cannot be attributed to Charles Sanders Peirce, despite Peirce's criticism of some aspects of metaphysical thinking which, in “its present condition” he regarded as “a puny, rickety, and scrofulous science”; see Peirce 1998, 375, cf. 338-339; and Oehler 1993, 43, 118-119.) Rorty, quite understandably reacting against the pure form of analytical philosophy, but still under the influence of the so-called “linguistic turn,” went on to reject any form of metaphysical language (Gross 2008, 21-22; 183-184). Rorty could be said to have experienced the “limits of analysis” (Stanley Rosen 1980)—possibly a somewhat refracted result of Rorty’s earlier acquaintance with some of Leo Strauss's students (cf. Gross 2008, 115-117). For Rorty’s thought—which is not, properly speaking, philosophy in the traditional sense and thus could be called “postphilosophy” (cf. Cusset 2008, 210)—aims at, and tries to practice, a complete abandonment of metaphysics of all kinds. Philosophy, for Rorty, seems to have a future only insofar as it proves to be able to do without metaphysics. The pragmatist philosopher should, according to this view, understand his activity as a non-metaphysical and ironic enterprise. The philosopher, according to the ironist’s self-interpretation, has turned (or, more precisely, should turn) from metaphysician to ironist (Rorty 1989, 73-75) and, as pragmatist, wants “to reduce objectivity to solidarity” which enables him to dispense with “either a metaphysics or an epistemology” (Rorty 1991, 22). Thus, “cultural politics should replace ontology” (Rorty 2007, 5).

This pragmatist vision, though, is torn by internal contradictions and is therefore exposed to fundamental moral as well as ontological objections. To illustrate this it must suffice here to mention Rorty’s practical defense of
human rights as what fits “us” on the one hand, his theoretical dismissal of these rights and the corresponding ontological framework of a human nature that distinguishes man as man on the other hand. Rorty (1998, 57) seems to deny the possibility of self-evident truths, especially in the realm of morals (cf. Zuckert 1996, 41-55), such as those put forth and drawn on in the American Declaration of Independence. This forces him to deny what is implied in these self-evident truths, namely that something is due to man as man by nature. Rorty here follows Dewey’s rejection of any belief in these clearly metaphysically grounded principles as an “ideology” and he likewise follows Dewey’s surrender of “belief in natural rights and natural law as the foundation of free government”, as James Nichols puts it (Nichols 1990, 371).

To ensure that what is due to man as man is not taken from or denied him is the object and aim of the virtue of justice, as Grant used to point out (Grant 1986, 54; Christian/Grant 1998, 474). But can justice be rendered without the metaphysical assumption that there is something in every individual human being that creates the moral obligation to treat him justly? For the pragmatist, as Rorty (1998, 211) makes clear, injustices cannot be interpreted “as so many instances of a general failure to treat equals equally”. There is, according to Rorty, nothing intrinsically evil or naturally just (1998, 207), so that it follows, on the basis of this view, that “the enslavement of one human tribe or race by another or of human females by human males, is not an intrinsic evil”. Since for Rorty (1998, 172) there “probably”—as he gingerly puts it—is no human nature, his human rights politics are based on a purely culturally relativistic notion of these so-called rights and of man as “the flexible, protean, self-shaping animal,” which, presumably, is somehow meant to be a true description of man. Consequently, Rorty (1998, 170) attacks “human rights foundationalism” as “the continuing attempt by Quasi-Platonists to win, at last, a final victory over their opponents.” Rorty rejects those self-evident truths that on another noteworthy interpretation are quite clear to the pre-philosophical consciousness of reality which, traditionally, serves as the starting point of any metaphysics. Already in 1952, e. g., Harry V. Jaffa made a remark that applies equally well to Rorty more than fifty years later, namely that a “merely pragmatic social science […] is by its own principles prevented either from laying claim to the truth of the principles upon which its practical teaching rests, or from effectively denying the truth of the claims of any teaching to which it is opposed” (Jaffa 1952, 3). In the name of pragmatism, Rorty explicitly rejects Leo Strauss’s claim in Natural Right and History that “(e)ven by proving that a certain view is indispensable to living well, one merely proves that the view in question is a salutary myth; one does not prove it to be true” (Strauss quoted in: Rorty 2007, 156 n. 19). Rorty objects to
Strauss's shorthand remark that “(u)tility and truth are two entirely different things” by pointing out that even though pragmatists do not think utility and truth are the same thing, “they do think that you cannot have the latter without the former” (Rorty 2007, 156 n. 19). In line with this reasoning, Rorty (2007, 34) collapses the distinction between “will to truth” and “will to happiness.” These two, he claims, are identical. This is another way of saying that there can be no salutary myths; what is salutary has to be true because of its practical efficacy. The question of whether pragmatism is a viable option is at least as open and doubtful as it was more than fifty years ago, and it is by no means as certain as Rorty urges that we should abandon metaphysics and realism tout court, merely because “we” allegedly have no pragmatic use for them—which strikes a peculiarly parochial note. Precisely by posing the quintessential pragmatist question, “What difference would it practically make to anyone if this notion rather than that notion were true?” (James 1995, 18), in the context of crucial political and ethical problems such as slavery, abortion and euthanasia, it would seem to be pretty clear that metaphysical questions are not as irrelevant to practical concerns as Rorty claims. This remains true even though metaphysics, in the traditional understanding, does not directly deal with man’s actions but with the ontological presuppositions of these (cf. Seidl 2006, 109-111).

2) George Grant and modern philosophy's pragmatism
In the light of this brief sketch of the pragmatist position in Rorty’s sense with its profound implications for its philosophical defensibility (cf. Strauss 1946, 327) and tenability it seems rewarding to consider some aspects of the thought of George Grant (1918-1988). This Canadian thinker who considered himself variously as a political philosopher and a Platonist within Christianity, attempted to develop, or rather articulate, a metaphysical way of philosophizing after pragmatism and pragmatism’s lack of interest in the great metaphysical questions of the tradition. Initially, in the 1940s, George Grant had been a partisan of John Dewey’s thinking and had claimed William James and John Dewey were his “favourite philosophers” (Grant 1996, 89; Christian 1993, 84, 104, 392; on Dewey see also Grant 1996, 88). At the time, Grant regarded himself as an “ambitious little pragmatist” (Christian 1993, 62; Christian 1996, 304-305) and confessed that his “whole mental being had been] caught up in that [North American] tradition” (Grant 1996, 89).

Not many years later, though, he became increasingly critical of pragmatism’s anthropology as well as its pedagogical consequences. This critical stance developed in the course of his gradual elaboration of a distressingly “Grantian” form of philosophy under the by no means congruent
influences of Hegel, Simone Weil, Leo Strauss, Nietzsche and Heidegger, as far as the moderns were concerned, and especially Plato on the side of the ancients (cf. Forbes 2007). This shift can already be seen in a revealing critical article on “Plato and Popper” (1954) that seeks to refute Popper's critique of Plato as a precursor of totalitarianism. A critique of Popper was necessary, Grant argued, because Popper essentially presented a “justification of that pragmatic tradition against the rationalism of Plato” (Grant 2002, 76). For Plato’s view of the world was the very opposite of what modern philosophers believed when they stressed the preponderance of effectual truth in order to make man into the lords and owners of nature.

The development of Grant's philosophical interests away from forms of analytic philosophy on the one hand and pragmatist philosophy on the other is further highlighted by the fact that in the 1950s Grant quarreled with his university over the philosophy textbook he was required to use in class, because the book did not even mention the name of Wittgenstein who was a major influence on English-speaking philosophy at the time (cf. Hacker 1996; Stroll 2000, 113-145). Later, there are only very rarely any references to Wittgenstein in Grant's works, as he does not seem to have featured prominently in his later thought. Likewise, there are relatively few discussions of pragmatist thinkers in Grant's writings. Nevertheless, by developing a metaphysically grounded philosophy Grant was implicitly criticizing pragmatism by explicitly criticizing the most basic assumptions of the historicist world view underlying pragmatism as well as many other main currents of twentieth-century thought. Grant did not treat pragmatism as a philosophy in its own right but only with reference to a particular historical situation. For he regarded pragmatism in the form of the philosophies of William James and Dewey as “a systematic presentation of the secularized Protestant moral language” (Grant 1995a, 82). For this reason, Grant believes that it is wrong to interpret pragmatism as a reaction against Protestantism, even though this is what James and Dewey themselves believed to be the case. Grant compares these pragmatists' attacks on Greek philosophy and especially Plato to the Reformers' attack on natural theology (Grant 1995a, 83). In spirit with their definition of truth, Grant claims, the pragmatists reject the traditional recognition of the superior dignity of contemplation compared to action. Grant acknowledges the half-truth in pragmatism that is implied in its recognition or affirmation of the undeniable fact “that man is free to build a society that eliminates the evils of the world” (Grant 1995a, 70). Yet this affirmation of freedom is deeply problematic, for if indeed in the pragmatist world view “man is entirely open to make the world as he chooses”, a serious question will arise. This question is the question whether there is “a reality that
cannot be manipulated” (Grant 1995a, 84). Pragmatism, as Grant notes, cannot give an affirmative answer to the great moral question, “Is there anything that one man can do to another that is categorically wrong?” (Grant 1995a, 84). Grant finally concludes with a “condemnation of pragmatism” that does not, however, close him to the difficulty of asserting that there is something which is categorically wrong to do (Grant 1995a, 85-86). Grant is deeply concerned about the relation between theory and practice: he aims to show how the theoretical propositions of pragmatism yield practically deplorable results or at least cannot provide a rationale for rejecting morally repugnant practices. “A philosophy the principles of which can give no reason why men should not judicially condemn the innocent, indeed whose principles would seem to encourage the powerful to that condemnation, is as morally reprehensible as the actual carrying out of the deed” (Grant 1995a, 87). It is characteristic of pragmatism, according to Grant, that there is in its philosophical anthropology a fuller account of freedom than of the law, i.e. the moral law.

This means that pragmatism so conceived invariably stresses the “creative” and self-founding aspects of human beings and especially the will in contrast to the role of law, especially the moral law. As the law in this sense functions as a limit to what can be legitimately willed by human beings, it has to be relegated to a lesser place in the scheme of things in order to protect and fulfill the promise of man’s freedom (Grant 1995a, 87). Grant’s main objection to pragmatism thus seems to hinge not so much on the epistemological as on the moral status of pragmatism; ironically, this is also true of Rorty’s moral as opposed to intellectual objections to fundamentalism (cf. Rorty 2007, 35).

It is surely true that moral concerns were of the utmost importance to Grant. However, these moral concerns were always bound up with the recognition of the close relation between morality and metaphysics, so that the moral critique of the pragmatist criticism of metaphysics implies, on Grant’s part, a metaphysical critique as well. However, there is also in Grant a strong affirmation of those activities of human beings that have nothing or not very much “to do with changing the world”, i.e. “personal relations, art, philosophy, and prayer” (Grant 2002a, 199). The freedom that these activities can give to man, Grant says, “is not the freedom to manipulate the world”, which is exactly why these activities are “in decay”. For Grant, it is “not surprising that the philosophy which has had the greatest influence on North America is pragmatism”, because pragmatism provides the theoretical justification of the “love of activity” characteristic of North American society.
as such (Grant 2002a, 199). “Love of activity” as the major paradigm of daily life, however, tends to put contemplation in utter jeopardy.

Grant singles out Dewey's philosophy as worth considering, because according to his view it has a much stronger popular appeal than the “linguistic positivism” of analytic philosophy. He writes: “Dewey's philosophy must be taken seriously, not as a system, but as it expresses the desire of the prospering democratic society to free itself from the transcendent and ironic elements of its Protestant heritage, without losing the old ethical ardour” (Grant 2002a, 199). Grant discerns what he regards as the American dream in Dewey's understanding of freedom as not pertaining to the freedom of will in a metaphysical sense. Grant expressly notes that Dewey's use of the word 'metaphysical' adds to the appeal of his statement because this “hated word,” as Grant calls it, “with all its aristocratic and impractical undertones,” implies that the practical life is infinitely superior to mere metaphysical things (Grant 2002a, 200). For Grant, searching for an opening for contemplation within the context of modern liberalism became of prime importance, because he was not satisfied with the place liberalism offered to contemplation. He regards the orientation towards contemplation as essential for maintaining a complete understanding of human nature. As human beings do have a longing for contemplation, for a non-practical relationship to the world, as Grant implies, the “pervasiveness of the pragmatic liberalism” in which he was educated was particularly difficult to overcome. This was especially true in North America with its dominant tradition of being cut off from “pure contemplation” (Grant 2005, 499). It was due to this “lack of contemplation” that “American intellectual patriots,” Grant claims in Technology and Empire, “have had to make the most of Emerson and Adams, James and Peirce”—implying, however, that this would not be enough (Grant 2005, 499). Setting aside the issue of whether Grant's remark can do justice to the complexities of Emerson, Adams, James, and Peirce (I would submit that they do not), he most likely thought that these thinkers were lacking in one particular thing. Presumably, Grant thought that the account of contemplation to be found in these thinkers cannot be regarded as adequate. For according to Grant philosophy cannot be truly philosophy if it is not at the same time affirmation of contemplation. The pragmatism of James and Dewey, by denying the primacy of contemplation, constitutes, as Grant charges, “nothing but a hidden attack on philosophy from within” (Grant 2002c, 67). Grant's argument for this serious charge can only be adequately understood in light of his classical understanding of philosophy as a theoretical activity:

That pragmatism is not philosophy at all but the denial of philosophy can, of course, be seen in its central contradiction, namely, its making of
theory subordinate to practice. For a theory which asserts the subordination of all theory to social usefulness has no way of knowing whether its own theory is true (Grant 2002, 67).

This attack on philosophy from within philosophy itself, as one might call it, is particularly dangerous if applied to issues of education. This is the case because the concept of man underlying the pragmatist educational ideas leads, if taken seriously, to a fundamental problem for the actual practice of education. Grant does not deny that at the level of practical techniques Dewey's theories may be valid to a certain extent. He does argue, though, that the pragmatist philosophy does not offer much more “than that worship of the lowest common denominator of appetite which Plato describes” (Grant 2002, 169). If reason is the instrument by which we adapt to the world, there is every reason to believe that this adaptation will proceed in the direction of “the lowest common denominator of desire” (Grant 2002, 170). The practical consequences of the anti-Platonic view of education would seem to lead to a form of moral democracy that no longer regards some desires as noble and others as base.

Dewey's philosophy is criticized by Grant with reference to Plato, for Dewey and Plato, as Grant recognizes, put forth diametrically opposing views on education. Grant argues that this fact may even lead one to the conclusion that there cannot be “true education” in a democracy. This, however, is a conclusion that Grant is not willing to accept:

What Plato sees as the tragedy of democracy, namely the gradual abdication by the higher faculties of their rule over man, Dewey accepts as the true end of education. About one thing I am absolutely crystal clear, if as the Deweyites claim their philosophy of education is the truly democratic view, then democracy is a state of society in which true education cannot flourish (Grant 2002, 170).

Grant's conclusion thus seems to be that in order to respond to the overwhelming onslaught of notions of the practical one needs to return to Plato or at least consider in all seriousness whether such a return would be possible.

Neopragmatism and postmodernism in general have liberated us from the need to look for a common human nature, or so it seems to some of the proponents of a liberal as well as ironical culture. Within the pragmatist paradigm it is no longer the metaphysician who counts as a hero but the ironist (cf. Rorty 1998, 272, 307). Whereas the ironist subscribes to the nominalist and historicist “values” of post-modernity, the metaphysician, according to Rorty, “believes that there is one right vocabulary of moral deliberation, one in touch with reality (and in particular, with our essential
humanity)” (Rorty 1998, 307). Yet it is important to understand that this Rortean view cannot, by definition, be accepted because the ironist's view is in any meaningful sense “truer”, i.e. more in touch with reality than the metaphysician’s. At best, it can be claimed that the ironist's perspective somehow serves “our” interests better than the metaphysical view. But how are we supposed to know this? For every claim as this rests on some kind of understanding or knowledge of what our interests in reality are. And clearly, all too much here depends on what we define as “our” interests, who “we” count as belonging to “us”. Contrary to what pragmatists believe, it surely makes a difference in practical and therefore ethical terms whether we believe that, e.g. a foetus ontologically belongs to the human species and therefore is entitled to legal protection against abortion and genetic experimentation. What we regard as ontologically relevant is also eminently ethically and politically relevant, as Grant tries to make clear in his analysis of the American Supreme court's ruling in Roe v. Wade (see Grant 1985, 69-89; cf. Mathie 1986). Grant is therefore right in bringing together in his thought the philosophical concerns for metaphysics (and even theology) with the moral, and in turn political, concern for right and just action as well as for just laws. In the case of pragmatism the necessary connection between the way the question of the political and moral good is interpreted and the issue of metaphysical presuppositions can be easily perceived. Thus, Rorty's antimetaphysical stance and his proposal “that we clean out the last remnants of metaphysical realism from our conversational and pedagogical practices” (Rorty 1998, 58) are deeply bound up with a political and pedagogical agenda the justice and goodness of which is not self-evident and cannot be shown to be true but merely urged as a social necessity. It is the peculiarity of the ironist’s rhetorical strategy that the ironist is the one to choose what to ironize and what to take seriously. Contrary to what the antimetaphysical ironical pragmatist asserts, the kind of metaphysics one adopts does in fact make a practical difference, as can be indicated further by briefly looking at Grant’s complex position on the question concerning technology.

3) Technology and the dilemmas of Grant’s theologico-political non-modernity
Grant’s critique of technology owes much to the work of Jacques Ellul, yet even more to Martin Heidegger, who may easily have been the most important critic of traditional metaphysics in the twentieth century. For Grant's enthusiasm for Ellul was short-lived, whereas Heidegger's philosophy of Technik would continue to engage him till the end of his life (Heidegger 2007; cf. Christian / Grant 1998, 394-398). This necessarily involves Grant in
all kinds of problems insofar as Heidegger is the most radical critic of humanism and the metaphysics that grounds it. He is also the thinker who most powerfully described and diagnosed technology as the ontology of our age, a diagnosis to which Grant fully subscribed. The trouble with this Heideggerian stance is that this leaves Grant in a dilemma in his quarrel with pragmatism. For it is at least problematic for Grant to accept Heidegger’s diagnosis and at the same time to reject Heidegger’s equally sweeping and radical criticism (Destruktion) of the very Western tradition that Grant seeks to affirm. Ian Angus (1997, 98) therefore correctly points out that Grant finally did not come up with a consistent account or reconciliation of this blatant contradiction. He therefore criticizes Grant for simply taking over Plato’s conception of justice while being fully aware of its philosophical inadequacy for our time. Grant never managed to rid himself of the highly problematic notions bound up with Heidegger’s critique of traditional metaphysics: “He wanted to have Heidegger’s critique of technology without the critique of Western metaphysics upon which it depends.” It is difficult to perceive how in light of this conundrum Grant could have managed to think a non-modern notion of justice as a sufficient antidote to the overwhelming thrust of modern technology as working against liberal humanism’s protection of individual rights. How can humanism with its political corollary of human and citizen rights be preserved if, as Heidegger maintains, “every humanism is either founded in a metaphysics or converted into the basis for a metaphysics” (Heidegger 1947, 63-64)? If there is no clear metaphysical understanding of man and his nature or essence, what is owed to man as man will also be unclear—whereas justice demands that there is something which cannot ever be right to do. Grant, strongly aware of this problem, opted for affirming the idea of a limit, in spite of his observation that the combined power of modern technology and modern capitalism had created a strong solvent in which traditional morality would not long endure. The idea of a limit to what man can and ought to do is wholly alien to the technological imperative that is immanent to modernity, and Grant for one could only think such a limit by drawing on a tradition of transcendence. To rely on Plato and Aristotle alone could not, for him, solve the problem of justice in the face of the combination of modern technology and the will to freedom. Ultimately, it seems safe to conclude, Grant failed to rise to the realism of the classical tradition of Plato and Aristotle with its acknowledgement of the priority of the real over the known. He thus was unable to provide an adequate response to the anti-realist and anti-metaphysical challenge of postmodernism in the wake of Nietzsche and Heidegger and the more down-to-earth rejection of metaphysics by pragmatism. In order to provide some support for his rejection of Nietzsche
and Heidegger, Grant saw only the option to open his philosophical reason to the guidance of faith which for him implied a transcendent standard that man could not arbitrarily remove.

4) George Grant’s “reason guided by faith”

William James (James 1995, 29) explicitly states that pragmatism “has no a priori prejudices against theology”. In fact, as Louis Menand (2001, 353) says, James’s pragmatism can be understood as a defense of religious belief “in what he regarded as an excessively scientistic and materialistic age”. This is true even though James clearly rejects notions such as the soul that are an important element of classical metaphysical and religious thinking (cf. Richardson 2007, 331). The notion of the soul, as Grant clearly saw, was bound up with the metaphysics of substance, for only within such an understanding of the “soul as substance” could one conceive of ethical limits to man’s actions, a notion, however, that was difficult, if not impossible to maintain after Kant (Grant 1995, 98-99).

In striking contrast to James’s positive attitude towards religion in general, Rorty’s position is one of dogmatic denial of God’s existence, a kind of “self-evident” atheism (Rorty 1998, 48-49, 54, 248-249, 321). Still, even Rorty defends the “tolerance for theism” evident in James and Dewey against Nietzsche’s anti-Christian attitude out of the spirit of anti-democratic resentment (cf. Rorty 2007, 34). George Grant’s philosophical position shares the democratic outlook with the pragmatists; however, he points to what he regards as the metaphysically inevitable ground of philosophy in God’s love of being. Rejection of metaphysics always implies, as Grant sees it, the rejection of (the possibility) of theology. Starting out from the Voegelinian view that eternal truths are revealed in Plato and in the Gospel (O’Donovan 1984, 130), Grant regarded philosophy as ultimately “the practice of the presence of God” (Christian/Grant 1998, 39, 157): “The study of philosophy is the analysis of the traditions of our society and the judgment of those traditions against our varying intuitions of the Perfection of God.” Thus, Grant’s most basic concern was the defense of the theoretical practice of contemplation against what he perceived as the dominance of a scientistic pragmatism and reductionism. His metaphysical Platonism may be hard enough to swallow for philosophers educated in the question-begging certainties of postmodernism. However, his insistence on the claim that philosophy be somehow dependent on faith is even more remote from contemporary pragmatist philosophizing. It would seem to be utterly inconceivable, e.g., that a pragmatist such as Hilary Putnam, who privately confesses to be a religious person “for whom the religious dimension of life has become increasingly important” (Putnam...
1992, 1), should agree with Grant’s claim: “Reason not guided by faith cannot but find itself in the position of destroying everything and establishing nothing” (Grant in: Christian/ Grant 1998, 161, cf. 172; Grant 2002b, 8). For whereas religion, in Putnam’s view, is something entirely distinct from his philosophy, or at least something that he does not “know how to philosophize about except by indirection” (Putnam 1992, 1), in Grant’s view religion simply cannot be relegated to the realm of privacy. Grant too holds that “the practice of religion and the practice of philosophy” are “two distinct human activities” (Grant 2005, 6). Religion, however, actually needs to be philosophized about in order to better understand the relative claims of philosophy and religion on one’s life. It is thus above all necessary to philosophize about religion because it concerns the right way of life. Still, even in their most deeply-rooted disagreement over the metaphysical status of contemplation, both ways of philosophizing—Grant’s and the pragmatists’—point to the one question they have to confront and which, according to an old tradition, is the question at the heart of philosophy, “although the philosophers do not frequently pronounce it—the question quid sit deus” (Strauss 1978, 241; Cicero, De natura deorum I 60). If reason without the guidance of faith is destructive, as Grant emphatically suggests, this still leaves open another question that would seem to be of particular relevance under the conditions of multiculturalism in the West. For the contact between various forms of liberalism and fundamentalism with their diverging claims to public and private recognition rekindles interest in the truth claims of divergent perspectives on the world implying different and possibly incommensurable ways of life. The question Grant’s theologically inspired philosophizing points to is whether all kinds of faith can be equally reliable guides to reason and therewith to a sound political morality. For William James, pragmatism cannot offer any clear answer to this question, because, as he argues, “we do not yet know certainly which type of religion is going to work best in the long run” (James 1995, 116; emphasis added). It seems clear, however, that James believed a “pragmatistic or melioristic type of theism” that provides the middle ground between “the two extremes of crude naturalism on the one hand and transcendental absolutism on the other” (James 1995, 116) would provide a kind of solution to the question quid sit deus that would be acceptable for pragmatists. For James the pragmatistic principle holds that “if the hypothesis of God works satisfactorily in the widest sense of the word, it is true” (James 1995, 115). One could say that James provides an updated version of Lessing’s parable of the rings in his play Nathan the Wise in which the question of the true revelation is shifted towards the pragmatic test of which religion should prove most conducive to moral behaviour and thus to social progress in Rorty’s sense. How one could
actually determine criteria for desirable God-talk as opposed to undesirable God-talk seems to remain an open question. For even if we should, as Rorty thinks we ought to, “substitute the question of the cultural desirability of God-talk for the ontological question about the existence of God” (Rorty 2007, 24-25), this can still be understood as the pragmatist version of quid sit deus. The questions of “old-time philosophy” (Rorty 1988) have not been replaced by pragmatism once and for all.

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