

**Ana-Maria Pascal, *Pragmatismul si 'sfarsitul' metafizicii (Pragmatism and 'the End' of Metaphysics)*, Al. I. Cuza University Press, 2009**

The book, which is based on Ana-Maria's PhD thesis, was published in 2009 and awarded the *Aurel Leon* debut prize in May 2010:

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<http://iasifun.ziaruldeiasi.ro/premiile-literare-ziarul-de-iasi/2398/>

<http://carteasoaptelor.ro/2010/04/20/cartea-soaptelor-nominalizata-la-premiul-national-de-proza-al-ziarului-de-iasi/>

This is a book about dialogue and about bridging the gap between philosophy and everyday life practices, such as reading and writing, listening to music and expressing one's socio-political views. It is about the dialogue between two philosophical traditions which most consider irreconcilable – pragmatism and metaphysics. It is also about applying a method of interpretation (the pragmatist one) in various areas of practical enquiry, such as literary criticism, aesthetics, and social policy.

In other fields, such as economics and finance, it often happens that different specialists have different ways of looking at the same situation. Economists, for example, recognize opportunity costs, while accountants do not; but they often collaborate during their analysis and evaluations. A similar dialogue may sometimes be achieved between pragmatists and metaphysicians. This book tells the story of how I have reached this conclusion.

I started from the general perception of pragmatism and metaphysics as mutually exclusive traditions. I decided to look into the background of this alleged conflict, to see whether any irreconcilable views were really there, or whether this was more of an imagined conflict. And since, more often than once, the pragmatists seemed to be the initiators of the 'attacks' (rather than their Continental opponents), I started with their camp, focusing on two contemporary critics of metaphysics: Richard Rorty and Richard Shusterman. I asked three questions:

- 1) What exactly are these critics denouncing, under the name of metaphysics?
- 2) How do they conduct their critique, with what kind of arguments?
- 3) What sort of effects, if any, does their critique have on metaphysics?

At the end of my four-year research, my findings are:

1) Pragmatists do not seem to operate with a precise definition of metaphysics. The latter is often taken for *ontology* – and criticized for being 'essentialist', sometimes even *epistemology* – and denounced as 'foundationalist' (the philosophical term for 'fundamentalist'). But most of the times, it is the name they give to any supposedly universal (i.e. non-situational and meta-theoretical) elements such as presuppositions, values, or criteria. Anything that claims to transcend in any way the boundaries of human condition and knowledge is labeled 'metaphysical' or 'transcendental' (hence – an awful confusion with the much more precise Kantian notion *transcendental*).

Although quite problematic because of how much room it allows for interpretation, this criterion for defining metaphysics has often been used by the pragmatists in a justified and meaningful way. Their justification is based on the fact that, pragmatically speaking, any idea or claim whose grounds are supposedly 'absolute' reasons (that is, undeniably true) is risky, if not dangerous, for it represents a potential weapon which can be used to oppress, exclude, and exterminate whoever and whatever opposes that would-be undeniable, non-contextual truth. Denouncing such risks is worth operating with simplifications, such as those used by pragmatists, when they summarize metaphysical theories. Their purpose, quite often, is to convince us to abandon all universal claims and criteria. This practical attitude – for it is practice which interests the pragmatists more than anything else – has a theoretical counterpart, which amounts to abandoning metaphysics altogether.

2) Both pragmatists whose theories I looked into use hermeneutical tools to conduct their critique of metaphysics. Only, they ascribe different meanings to 'hermeneutics' – hence, two different kinds of critical processes. For Shusterman, hermeneutics is, simply put, the theory of interpretation. Thus, what he does is theorize and apply a pragmatist method of interpretation, which consists in actively reacting to a text or an artwork (whatever the subject of interpretation), after having considered and evaluated its practical implications. When applied to metaphysics, this will amount to a critique of the potential risks mentioned above.

For Rorty, hermeneutics is a way of thinking – namely, in a non-systematic, rather narrative and ironic style, as opposed to the rigid, traditional one. Effectively, the main feature of Rorty's proposed kind of thinking is its non-metaphysical character. In other words, what Rorty suggests is that we put an end to classical philosophy and become all literates, writers, or cultural critics instead.

3) Richard Shusterman's critique is fruitful for both metaphysics and philosophy in general: the former gets 'cleaned up' of some of its risky elements, while the latter gains a sense of responsibility, when it is constantly subjected to pragmatic interpretations.

What Richard Rorty's proposed move from metaphysics to a literary culture achieves is very little, in terms of having an actual effect on the former. Simply put, one cannot become a non-metaphysician other than by being an anti-metaphysician first, which entails walking a metaphysical path. Alternatively, one can forget about metaphysics altogether – simply abandon it, the way one abandons the games one used to play in childhood, or better yet – the way one forgets 'dead metaphors'; but this would mean not being able to claim any effect on metaphysics whatsoever. Rorty is well aware of this conundrum, which is why at the end of the day he proposes that we give up the distinction between metaphysicians, anti-metaphysicians, and non-metaphysicians, so we don't turn 'the end' of metaphysics into yet another 'big theme'. Instead, we are to consider his critique merely as an experiment of thought. This actually sounds like the start of a genuine dialogue – which may be seen as pragmatist, metaphysical, neither or both, and which has very good chances of enhancing our understanding of things that interest us, and our sense of responsibility for our own opinions and ideas. Such an enhanced understanding can be gained, for instance, if we apply the very pragmatist method of interpretation that Shusterman uses (when trying to deconstruct metaphysics), to various other fields of enquiry – from art to literary criticism and social ethics.

In the first part of the book, after presenting the main elements of this interpretive theory (both epistemological and socio-cultural), I give two illustrations of how it can be applied in such practical fields of enquiry. These are pragmatist interpretations of a poem by T.S. Eliot (*Portrait of a Lady*) and a piece of rap music, *All That Jazz*, by Stetsasonic, respectively. In the last section, I also give an example of pragmatist interpretation applied to socio-political thinking – namely, to the notion of ‘public sphere’ and its concrete meaning in post-totalitarian societies.

The book ends with an exploration of where the two traditions meet, and why walking the path may sometimes be more important than where exactly it leads you.

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T. S. Eliot, *Portrait of a Lady*

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