

# Resenha

## Book Review

PIHLSTROM, Sami. *Pragmatic realism, religious truth, and antitheodicy: on viewing the world by acknowledging the other*. Helsinki: Helsinki University, 2020. 223p.

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Inquiry is sometimes characterized by philosophical pragmatists as a form of problem-solving. On such an account, exigencies that arise in various concrete practical situations supply for inquiry its primary source of motivation. Ironically, Charles S. Peirce is frequently identified both as the founder of pragmatism and as the originator of this way of thinking. As he famously reported, inquiry is a response to the problem of doubt as it confronts us when old beliefs no longer appear adequate in the light of new knowledge or experiences. The purpose of inquiry is the resolution of doubt by means of the fixation of new and (at least for the moment) secure beliefs. The irony here is that Peirce, among all of the classical pragmatists, was perhaps least inclined to reduce inquiry to its practical, problem-solving function.

There is a second irony to consider. Despite this emphasis on the practical function of human thought, pragmatism has rarely been considered a valuable resource for theologians or philosophers wrestling with the classical “problem of evil.” Josiah Royce, alone among the pragmatists, took this problem seriously and gave it extended consideration. Despite his self-labeling as an “absolute pragmatist,” however, many of his readers are uncomfortable about placing Royce solidly within the circle of pragmatism. I have argued that Peirce’s philosophy is a treasure trove for theologians and scholars of religion, but on this particular issue he had little of value to say. Indeed, Peirce was blithe to announce with regard to the problem of evil that there really is no problem at all. John Dewey’s characteristically optimistic meliorism, along with his clear rejection of supernaturalism, did not inspire him to tackle the problem of evil and suffering insofar as it might represent a challenge to some general belief about a deity; if there is a “problem of evil” for Dewey, it is best conceived as local and determinate, and one that human intelligence should be expected to solve or at least mitigate if properly applied. Now, William James *did* recognize that there is a “real wrongness” in the world and that we have a duty to resist it. He also supplied a compelling portrayal, in his lectures on the

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varieties of religious experience, of those “sick souls” for whom the problem of evil and suffering in the world was so overwhelming as to obliterate virtually all other considerations from their tortured psyches. Yet, James’s deity, insofar as he vaguely conceived of one, was finite and limited in power so that the classical problem of evil could hardly arise within the context of his pragmatic philosophy.

Sami Pihlstrom’s important new book explores the significance of pragmatism as a resource for philosophers of religion confronted with the problem of evil. It is important to observe, however, that Pihlstrom is not recommending any kind of pragmatic “solution” to that problem. This observation will require further commentary here, but it explains why the proposal in his book is best regarded as an “antitheodicy.” After sketching that proposal in the overview supplied by his introductory remarks, the author directs his attention to other relevant issues, later returning to the topic of theodicy toward the end of the book. Crucial among these is the question about how best to understand pragmatism itself, indeed, how one might productively reconfigure traditional accounts of pragmatism by carefully exploring its roots in and links to Immanuel Kant’s transcendental philosophy. As a result, Pihlstrom has produced a book that, while somewhat modest in length, is by no means modest in its ambitions. He proposes here both to supply a fresh interpretation of pragmatism (although admittedly this is a task that he had begun to execute in numerous other publications) and to develop a new strategy and approach for philosophers and theologians contemplating the phenomenon of evil.

A few caveats are in order at this point. Pihlstrom is hardly the first scholar to observe the importance of the relation between Kant and the pragmatists. (Most notable among his predecessors, perhaps, is Murray G. Murphey in his classic 1968 article on “Kant’s Children, the Cambridge Pragmatists,” whom Pihlstrom cites in his book). Nevertheless, the precise sense in which he regards the pragmatists as being the heirs of Kant represents a creative insight, more *prospective* on his account than it is strictly historical. Moreover, Pihlstrom is not terribly interested in the problem of evil as it appears in its classical formulations. Among the “golden age” pragmatists, it is William James who exercises the greatest influence over the position that Pihlstrom is developing. As already indicated, James was hardly a traditional theist for whom the problem of evil could arise in its most typical form. James’s God, at most, was a deity who enables and inspires human beings in their own encounters and struggles with evil and suffering in the world, but one who is neither responsible for such suffering or capable of preventing it. Pihlstrom is not interested, then, in pragmatism as a philosophical resource for developing a theodicy. Once again, his philosophical response to the “problem of evil” takes the form of an “antitheodicy.” Evil and suffering are human problems to be sure, but not of the sort requiring explanations that traditional theodicies are intended to supply.

I want to discuss both of these topics in my review—that is, pragmatism’s links to Kant and the prospects for a pragmatic antitheodicy. But in my judgement, it is Pihlstrom’s treatment of the latter topic that makes this book especially valuable and important. Motivating that treatment is a deeply ethical concern (indeed, one shared with James, as Pihlstrom himself observes) that we have a responsibility to take both the suffering of others and the human encounter with evil most seriously. The difficulty with theodicies of any kind is that they tend to “explain evil away,” to vindicate the deity at the cost of trivializing such suffering. On Pihlstrom’s

account, this strategy must be evaluated as inducing a moral blindness of the most problematic sort. By way of contrast, Pihlstrom's pragmatic response to the problem of evil will take the form of an antitheodicy, a refusal to explain combined with an ethical mandate to bear witness.

This book has other facets not yet mentioned. (Indeed, the richness of its contents may derive in part from the fact that it gathers together and revises a number of essays previously published addressing a broad range of topics). For example, Pihlstrom seeks to buttress his Kant-inspired pragmatic realism by comparing it with the approach to theodicy articulated by certain contemporary Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion (especially in Chapter 5). This is an aspect of the book about which I will not have a great deal to say here. Another important feature of his argument, however, is the sharp critique of "metaphysical realism" that it embodies. Pragmatists should be realists of a sort, Pihlstrom confirms, but it is the embrace of metaphysical realism that entails the endorsement of just the sort of pernicious theodicy that he is eager to eschew. While I find this book to be laced with insight and an important contribution to contemporary thinking in the philosophy of religion, I am not convinced that this critique is a valid one. It is entirely consistent *both* to endorse some form of metaphysical realism *and* to reject the temptations of theodicy. Indeed, I want to suggest that Peirce was just such a realist who ought to have taken evil more seriously than he in fact did by aestheticizing it and just blinking it away.

Very early in the book, Pihlstrom defines antitheodicism as an "ethically motivated approach" to the human experience of evil and meaningless suffering that refuses to endorse the reframing of such experiences within "grand narratives of alleged meaningfulness or purposiveness" (p. vi). The inclination to formulate such a narrative is always one, Pihlstrom contends, that can be linked to the standpoint occupied by metaphysical realists. Leaving aside for a moment my question about whether or not such a claim is convincing, I wholeheartedly share Pihlstrom's ethical concerns and so have argued myself in a recent book for the proposal of a "theology without theodicy." Yet, we should note immediately that Pihlstrom's distaste for theodicy is not specifically theological in nature. Regarding the problem of evil, he announces that it concerns not just theists but "everyone engaging in serious thought about the moral and existential meaningfulness (vs. meaninglessness) of our lives" (p. vi). This is potentially confusing. The "problem of evil" for Pihlstrom is not limited to the question about why an omnipotent and benevolent deity would permit evil and suffering in the world; "theodicy" is not confined as a designation to justify those attempts to answer such a question. The latter refers to any line of thought intended to make meaningless human suffering somehow meaningful.

That line of thought *might* involve a story about God and God's purposes. At the same time, it need not involve any talk about God at all. Here, the "problem of evil" is being construed very broadly. There is nothing really wrong with Pihlstrom choosing to do so. It just seems odd to identify any strategy that addresses such a problem as a "theodicy," further, to designate the argument being developed by Pihlstrom in resistance to all of these strategies as "antitheodicism." (As Pihlstrom indicates toward the end of the book, his position is more explicitly "humanistic" than it is in any sense straightforwardly theological or religious; see p. 139). For someone who believes in the reality of a God who is infinite in power and wisdom,

as well as supremely benevolent, the human experience of suffering and evil in the world will represent a very special kind of theological dilemma. Atheism is the simplest solution to that puzzle (and one that Pihlstrom rejects precisely insofar as it shares with traditional theodicies a commitment to metaphysical realism). Belief in a finite God (like the God of process theology or even the God of William James) can appear like “halting atheism,” but it also works conceptually speaking; this God simply does the best that God can. Minus the belief of classical theists, suffering and evil may represent a *practical* problem, and there may also be a vague human tendency to “tidy up” the picture of the world that an encounter with evil leaves in its wake, to find meaning in suffering. But this does not seem like an issue of peculiar relevance to philosophical theology or the philosophy of religion.

This is just to say that the problem of evil with which Pihlstrom is concerned is the genus for which the formulations embodied in traditional theodicies represent one of the species. On my reading, his primary concerns in the book are with (1) the problematic consequences of accepting metaphysical realism and (2) our ethical responsibility not to attempt an explanation of meaningless suffering in order to render it meaningful, thus trivializing the experience of suffering human beings. As already indicated, I share the second concern but I am puzzled by the first. Let me say something more, then, about both of these issues.

As the title of this book indicates, Pihlstrom is committed to defending a version of realism that he designates as “pragmatic” and conceives as a middle path between metaphysical realism and philosophical positions that reject realism altogether. But the philosophical landscape is actually a good deal more cluttered than that, as Pihlstrom himself observes, with “realism” being a fuzzy label that can be applied to a broad range of perspectives. Fixing the meaning of the term in a more determinate way within the context of a particular discussion often depends a great deal on the sort of position against which realism is being defended as an alternative. “Nominalism,” “relativism,” “constructivism,” “skepticism,” and “idealism” can and have all served as contrast terms for realism (p. 4). The meaning of realism will shift accordingly, and Pihlstrom supplies a list of possible “realisms” in the book that include those designated as “ontological,” “semantic,” “epistemological,” “methodological,” “scientific,” and “axiological” (p. 30).

While acknowledging the vagueness of the word and dutifully supplying a brief survey of its possible meanings, the focus of Pihlstrom’s attention in this book is on metaphysical realism as intellectual disease, with pragmatic realism as its cure. He wants to avoid the rejection of realism altogether because with its loss goes any hope of maintaining any kind of “objectivity” or confidence in rational inquiry (p. xvi). Pihlstrom argues for a “liberal form” of naturalism, and also for a modest evidentialism, that preserve the integrity of the scientific method (p. xvii; p. 15). That method must not be conceived narrowly or rigidly, but rather broadly enough and nuanced in its application to differing objects of inquiry, so that all of life can be seen as its “laboratory.” This liberal view of science is clearly consistent with the spirit of pragmatism embodied by Peirce, James, and Dewey in their philosophies.

The liberal naturalism that Pihlstrom endorses is one that he also regards as being a “naturalized” version of Kant’s transcendental idealism (p. 37; p. 42). The label that he chooses for such a naturalism is “pragmatic contextualism.” It is a perspective less preoccupied with tracing pragmatism’s historical roots in Kantian

thought than it is in revisiting Kant's claim that our knowledge of the empirical world is scheme-dependent, a claim now to be understood in the light of certain "post-analytic neopragmatist" developments (p. 34). Beginning with ancient and medieval arguments, Pihlstrom supplies a history of realism that identifies seven "milestones" along the way, culminating in the prospect for such a pragmatic reading of Kant (p. 31-35). It is in this respect that I earlier identified his linking of Kant with pragmatism as "prospective" rather than simply historical.

Choosing to ignore the normative determinations of any particular context, metaphysical realists, on Pihlstrom's account, cling to the possibility of a "God's-eye view" of reality. This would necessarily be a scheme-independent view of reality, seeing it from all perspectives simultaneously or, even more preposterously, from no perspective at all. What could this possibly mean?

As a life-long student of Peirce, I am inclined to consider the matter from within the contours supplied by his philosophy. On the one hand, for Peirce "reality" is what it is independently of what any mind or collection of minds might conceive it to be. This mind-independent status of reality seems to suggest to me that Peirce was some kind of metaphysical realist. (It is well-known, as Pihlstrom himself reports, that Peirce described himself as an extreme scholastic realist.) Yet, Peirce was also an objective idealist for whom all of reality was mind, so his claim that the real does not depend on what you or I or any collection of individuals may think is not the same as saying that reality is independent of mind altogether. (Pihlstrom observes this idealistic dimension of Peirce's realism when he treats classical pragmatism as the "fifth milestone" in his general history of realism). He was also a thoroughgoing fallibilist; while an unlimited community of inquiry applying the scientific method with rigor may approach the truth about reality in the indefinite long-run, no one can claim to adopt a "God's-eye view" of reality along the way. Surely, anyone's conception of reality will be dramatically shaped by the semiotic context within which it is formulated. But this is an epistemological and not a properly metaphysical claim for Peirce. His position is very far removed from the neo-pragmatist perspective toward which Pihlstrom leans, one that views context as partially determinative of the reality conceived. (In a puzzling move, Pihlstrom even goes so far as to identify "contexts" with Peirce's "real generals," a claim that only makes sense to me if Pihlstrom also embraces Peirce's objective idealism.; p. 42). For Peirce, an object *determines* its sign, while a sign determines its interpretant, not the reverse. While the sign is not determined by its object in the sense of offering us a "picture" of it (this would be a naïve realism), the object does act as an "editor," saying "yes" or "no" to certain conceptions that we form, demanding that we "pay attention" to this or that. This is the element of "secondness" that Peirce argued was pervasive in human experience and explicitly associated with the dynamic object of any sign. Such an argument is a crucial feature of his realism.

Nothing about this sort of theoretical perspective, it seems to me, requires that one should be motivated to preserve its view of reality by "explaining" the presence of evil in the world or rendering human suffering meaningful. Nothing requires that one must adopt a God's-eye view in order to defend such a theory. Indeed, on Peirce's account, the very idea of God is and must always remain a *hypothesis*, no matter how firmly one might actually embrace it. Consequently, I do not share Pihlstrom's concerns about metaphysical realism, nor do I perceive a necessary link

between such a perspective and the trap of theodicy, and so do not feel inclined to argue with him for a “pragmatic realism” that moves further in the direction of contemporary neo-pragmatism (and its constructivist tendencies). Peirce’s realism is good enough for me.

The great significance of this book, as I have already maintained, is the antitheodist stance that it defends for specifically ethical reasons. Let me conclude this review then, with a few comments about such a stance.

Pihlstrom’s pragmatic realism incorporates a Jamesian conception of truth that emphasizes its normativity, “both epistemic and ethical” (p. 68). To honor the truth, especially in its ethical dimension, requires honoring the experiences of other persons, including their experiences of suffering. (At various points in the book, Pihlstrom reinforces these Jamesian insights about the moral normativity of truthfulness with an appeal to Levinas’s philosophy.) To insist that another person’s suffering can be explained as meaningful when, in fact, she is being crushed by the meaninglessness of that experience, is morally problematic in just the same way that it was for Job’s friends to assault him with their accounts of what was happening to him and why. This includes the sort of explanation associated with “skeptical theism” and “divine hiddenness” arguments, promoting confidence that there are reasons for suffering that we are simply unable to know (p. 79).

Interestingly, Pihlstrom suggests that when an argument for divine hiddenness is “*internal* to a religious way of life” it may in fact be legitimate (p. 79). While he does not expound on this suggestion at any great length, I think it is an intriguing one. It also dovetails nicely with his warning late in the book that “we must not violently impose meaninglessness on the suffering of someone” who, for whatever reasons, is able to construe it as meaningful (p. 127). Although I cannot develop my own suggestion at any great length here, I would propose that there is a subtle but profoundly important distinction to be made between the kind of skeptical theism that Pihlstrom eschews and what I would refer to as a theology of mystery, a pragmatic theology without theodicy. How best in the very short space remaining here to make that distinction?

In the first place, the latter theology can incorporate the hope but not the assumption that terrible suffering has meaning. A mystery is not the same thing as a puzzle, where if we only had the missing piece it would somehow suddenly be solved. Moreover, guided by Peirce’s semiotic theory, such a philosophical theology will regard the search for meaning more as a matter of *interpretation* than of *explanation*. The latter is restricted to only one very narrow sub-category within the capacious field of possible interpretations. On Peircean premises, what we *feel* and what we *do* in response to some thing or situation can also be regarded as interpretants, especially insofar as they are not episodic but form patterns or *habits* of feeling and conduct. In the encounter with some evil, one might feel motivated, with William James, strenuously to resist it. Confronted by a suffering person one might be moved, like the Good Samaritan, to feel compassion and provide assistance. Pragmatically speaking, these feelings and actions are now to be regarded as interpretive responses to such evil and suffering; but they explain nothing.

Since every self is a living symbol, feelings shared and actions displayed can embody the gift of meaning for another person who is suffering. To be sure, there is no controlling how it will be received, how it will be read or interpreted by the

suffering other. Nevertheless, agreeing with Pihlstrom that such a gift should never take the form of a theodicy—of an explanation intended to dissolve the mystery of suffering—does not preclude the possibility, even the obligation, to extend it in these other forms. Anyone who has ever sat in silence bedside and held the hand of a dying loved one knows how meaningful both silence and human touch can be for both persons involved in this type of situation. Unless one defends an impoverished theory that reduces semiosis to the use of words and the search for reasons, it makes no sense to reject such a possibility.

These comments focus on the possibilities for how one person might be motivated to act in response to someone else. I want to end my review by reinforcing Pihlstrom's profound insight concerning the sacredness (he does not use this word and I do not use it in any technically religious sense) of each individual's personal experience. A theology without theodicy that rejects explanations of evil from a third person perspective should never refuse to the suffering person the right to inquiry and interpretation, even belief, in response to the paradox of a love experienced simultaneously as crucifixion and gift. Obviously, this is not the only or even the most typical way that intense suffering is likely to be interpreted. Yet, even the barest possibility of its occurrence should serve as a check on our antitheodictic impulses, however they are to be regarded as ethically praiseworthy more generally speaking.