

## Book Review

**Pihlström, Sami.** 2020. *Pragmatic Realism, Religious Truth, and Antitheodicy: On Viewing the World by Acknowledging the Other.* Helsinki University Press.

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The path of pragmatic realism runs through Kantian transcendentalism, according to the growing body of impressive work by Pihlström. Empiricism on the one side and naturalism on the other divert pragmatism away from its proper ontological project. His new work accordingly carries on this project in conversation with Kant, William James, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Richard Rorty, all of whom share a deep distrust of over-inflated Kantian metaphysics. Pragmatism realism should incorporate transcendentalist tenets of a more humble sort in order to preserve the ordinary empirical world and ontological truth while discarding pretensions to metaphysical truth.

After proper preliminaries to elaborate this position, well-covered by his previous books, chapters turn to the matter of theodicy in the Christian tradition. Pihlström's thesis is that theodicy needs to stop. It should be abandoned, not because it succeeds or fails, but because it never made proper sense in the first place. Its project is almost entirely the fault of metaphysical philosophy (Pihlström 2020, 74–75 – from here on reference simply to page number). If theology calculated that crafting a theodicy would aid religion then that effort has backfired badly. If philosophy thought that critiquing theodicy would reform (or reduce) religiosity, nothing of the sort has been or could be happening. Theology's original misstep lay in listening to metaphysical philosophy, so that metaphysical theology, especially in its format of theodicy, was similarly desensitized to religious experience.

Pihlström offers an illustration with the Old Testament book of Job, as a series of honest dialogues and not a theodicy. Its composition and cultural setting predates the arrival of Hellenistic philosophy and anything like academic theology. As a text it is classifiable among Wisdom Literature writings commonly found across the ancient world during the late Bronze Age and early Iron Age. Pihlström applauds Kant's recognition of the "anti-theodicy" character of Job, and recommends Kant's twin principles (58–59) behind that assessment: (1) the human mind should freely recognize and express what it is like to be a fragile and suffering human; and (2) the human intellect should honestly question the wider circumstances and causes for this human condition.

Pihlström concurs with Kant: Job rightly makes a *moral* protest against what he takes to be the primary responsible party, his God. Now, whether Job's protest is entirely *just* is the real question, a question answered in this text by God's appearance and reply to Job. Regardless of whether a reader wants to side with God or Job, to comprehend Job's tale is to comprehend what it like to be Job addressing his Lord.

Can't the entire "problem" of Job be dissolved by dismissing the premise, that humans have actually addressed a supreme deity? No God, no problem! In fact, according to Pihlström, that dismissal not only fails to take religion seriously, but worse, it completely fails to take humanity seriously. The "problem of evil" is manifestly not about mere unhappiness and discontent. Although Pihlström nowhere supplies a precise definition of evil, he evidently (with William James) is referring to unjustifiable and irredeemable horrors degrading and destroying what is most human within us (e.g. 53, 109, 114, 130). That meaninglessness, and not just disagreeableness, characterizes genuine evil. That is why Pihlström oft-uses the phrase "evil and suffering" not to dichotomize them, but to acknowledge how evil can be banal (139) as well as blatant. William James uses insanity as his primary example of evil, knowing full well how the insane can seem all-too-pleasantly distracted. Such troubles can happen to anyone, especially with the inevitabilities of senility and death.

With Kant and Pihlström, consider this hypothetical trilemma. If the atheist says in his heart, "There is no God so there is no evil," then that cruel heartlessness towards genuine human suffering is too inhuman to countenance. If the atheist says in his thought, "There is plenty of evil but no God," then that atheist is at least an objective realist about genuine evil occurring beyond human powers that is too evident to just "think away". If the atheist instead says with his voice, "Change your mind to think there is no God and no evil either," then that atheist turns a blind eye to the full reality of the hopeless suffering of other humans. The blindest cruelty may be that third horn of this trilemma. Denying God is one thing; denying the humanity of others is truly evil. Pihlström nowhere recommends atheism, and that is never the point of his book. Rather, he would commend the second sort of atheism for those determined to be nonbelievers: at least start with real humans and be a realist about the events of undeniable human experience.

Realism is at the heart of Pihlström's book before us. Different chapters discuss "realism" in quite different terms, even among sorts of realisms that Pihlström can endorse. For Pihlström, pragmatic realism disagrees with Rortyan nonrealism, because anti-representationalism need not give up the world. Many realisms survive this sharp anti-metaphysical razor.

Pihlström is comfortable with religious realism (5–6, 114–115). When people talk about their belief in God, for example, their language refers beyond human

ideas and conceptual structures, so that what really exists (or doesn't) is responsible for making it either true or false that "God is real." Now, this is no endorsement of old-fashioned representationalism or a correspondence view of semantics and truth. Who could know if any symbolic idea of the Ultimate could be "accurate" or "inaccurate"? Intention does not guarantee verification; pragmatism does insist on that point. No simplistic theory about the functionality of religious language is presumed by Pihlström. Nevertheless, religious language intends more, and achieves more, than expressing human matters since nonhuman matters are thereby engaged and involved. There is little unusual about this language-practice-world situation from the position of pragmatism; the same goes for science's theoretical language.

The un-pragmatist position by contrast would get complacent about non-human matters lacking any capacity to make us notice inadequacies in our ideas and beliefs. Our responsibility is to apply pragmatic conceptions of "God" enabling us to watch for those inadequacies. To deny that God is anything more than a human notion is to already be a pragmatic realist, if not also a straightforward objective realist. If there is no God, that is reality at work, not just humanity. To deny this approach is to simply fail to understand religion in the first place, either anthropologically, culturally, or linguistically.

With this pragmatic and religious realism in hand, there are two academic disciplines (at least) which overlook and override this plain realism with over-intellectualized realisms: philosophy and theology. What they have in common here is their regrettable susceptibility to metaphysics and metaphysical realism.

Pihlström repeatedly coordinates Kant's idealistic avoidance of metaphysical realism together with James's anti-metaphysical pragmatism (17, 32–33, 36–39, 44, 49–52, 85, 90, 113, 116). This book is replete with reassurances about this Kantian–Jamesian alliance (along with Wittgenstein as well). Since previous books expound Pihlström's thesis on this idealist-pragmatist overlap, this review cannot do justice to its exposition or adequacy. Suffice here to point out that "transcendental" for Pihlström is about a necessary precondition and presupposition permitting some realm of sensible discourse and practice (see e.g. 85). I happily leave it to enthusiasts of Kant to figure out where Pihlström falls on the continuum of Kantian interpretation. But the reader must be alerted to way that Pihlström easily (too easily perhaps) regards as transcendental any undeniable and irreducible factor in ordinary human experience. In other words, what William James finds to be a constant or inevitable factor of ordinary lived experience – what James assigned to his field for radical empiricism or neutral monism – is quite transcendental for Pihlström. On this view, as far as theodicy is concerned, James is an "anti-evidentialist" (78) because he refused to cast matters of lived experienced into metaphysical terms in order to contradict metaphysical propositions about God.

In short, the reader will be effectively told, what is most assuredly empirical for humanity is the most transcendental and the least metaphysical for philosophy. An example is evil. Evil (not the mere concept or idea of evil) is a transcendental matter organizing the possibility of ordinary lived human experience. Evil must not be treated as somehow metaphysically real. That sort of realism opens a chasm and obstacle between language and experience, preventing words from reaching worlds. The world of the religious life, for example, has no need whatsoever of metaphysical realism. God doesn't need to be metaphysically real either, to the relief of religion. When believers refer to God, they are genuinely referring to their deity. Atheists deny the referent, not the reference. Indeed, as theologians never tire of pointing out, atheism regards "God" with as much realistic regard as any creedal dogmatist.

There are far more philosophical twists and turns to this book's dialectical tale that this brief review can recount. Pihlström does conclude with good news. The good news for theology is that evil is at least as real as God. Religion never forgot. For philosophy, there is no reasonable argument from evil against the existence of God. A pragmatic conception of God does not expect a true God to prevent all evil, but a real God should be doing something about evil in a manner amenable to human participation and appreciation. Pragmatism offers no assured knowledge about God, but it does urge that the sort of God unworthy of reality would be one denying the reality of evil. Religious truth, for pragmatism, lies ahead on the unblocked road of inquiry into the compassionate improvement of our shared human condition.