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by Acknowledging the Other*

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Ana Honnacker

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Review of Sami PIHLSTRÖHM, *Pragmatic Realism, Religious Truth, and Antitheodicy. On Viewing the World by Acknowledging the Other*

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- 1 Why do bad things happen, why is there suffering in the world? The problem of evil poses a serious threat to the idea of God as an omnipotent, omniscient and absolutely good being since it had been first articulated. The existence of horrible natural disasters and moral abominations continues to be one of the strongest arguments for atheism. Consequently, attempts of absolving God of the charge are legion: theodicies belong to the essential repertoire of traditional Christian theology and philosophy of religion. These attempts have been subject of criticism and mockery from the very beginning, perhaps most prominently and amusingly manifested in Voltaire's Professor Pangloss, who cannot help but insist that "everything is best," no matter the catastrophes happening around him.
- 2 Though the philosophical refinements of Leibniz' thesis of "the best of all possible worlds" may well be said to be defrauded by Voltaire and his depiction of Pangloss, the overall charge articulates an intuition well beyond Leibniz' particular argument: Must not any attempt of justifying the obvious atrocities of our world lead to cynicism? Isn't it actually an inability to take evil seriously, a peculiar, if not to say vicious blindness

towards suffering? Doesn't a morally sensitive and engaged standpoint demand for a determined anti-theodicism?

- 3 In *Pragmatic Realism, Religious Truth, and Antitheodicy*, pragmatist philosopher Sami Pihlström follows this line of criticism and tackles the underlying metaphysical presumptions. Pihlström, who already elaborated on the topic of evil, most extensively in his *Taking Evil Seriously* (2014), carries forward and deepens his previous work on pragmatic realism and the question of theodicy in the book at hand, connecting both issues adeptly and with general implications for the still prevalent separation of theoretical and practical questions in philosophy of religion (and, it may be added, in academic philosophy at large). Worldviews, whether religious or secular, do not remain abstract, but have practical and existential relevance. Theory matters, so to speak, and Pihlström makes this original pragmatist insight highly visible when he marks the “excessive theorization when it comes to reacting to others’ suffering” (vii) as ethically problematic.
- 4 In the introduction, Pihlström discusses and defends a general account of pragmatism as an important philosophical approach today. What is more, he outlines its special promise in the study of religion, drawing mainly on James, namely his pragmatic pluralism, but also on other (neo-)pragmatist contributions as well as Kant, who is presented as a key thinker and a pragmatist *avant la lettre*. In short, the pragmatic reconceptualization of the ideas of rationality, truth and objectivity as practice-embedded opens up a middle path between the major positions of evidentialism and fideism, rejecting both pseudo-objectivity and the evasion of objectivity. With this liberal, context-sensitive, practice-focused version of evidentialism, the pragmatic approach also mediates between realism and antirealism. Over and above this promise for the epistemic battleground, Pihlström argues, the inherent meliorism helps to deal fruitfully with the existential challenge of living in a world full of evil.
- 5 In Chapter 1, Pihlström outlines the conceptual context of the realism vs. antirealism debate before applying the standard positions to the field of philosophy of religion and theology. Followingly, the pragmatic rearticulation of realism in terms of practice is introduced, which seeks to solve the tension between realist and antirealist positions by way of a reconciliatory move: “the world is (empirically) independent of us, but its independence is itself a human construct within our purposive practices and may receive different forms within different practices.” (10). The pragmatist position avoids scientism and reductionist naturalism on the one hand as well as a full-blown relativism on the other hand, Pihlström emphasizes. Rather, it leads to a conception of “objectivity without objects” (15) that “lies in our practices of engagement and commitment themselves” (17). This transcendental-pragmatic and processual conception of objectivity is deeply intertwined with the concepts of (Hegelian) recognition and (Kantian) limit. It is not only the recognition of different persons or groups that matters, but also the recognition of how (and why) they set their epistemic boundaries, for example for reason, or scientific evidence. Objectivity, then, becomes visible as a dynamic process in which different subjects co-construct and co-interpret common normative standards. The recognition of others as fellow inquirers, Pihlström claims, is fundamental to understand the pragmatist core concept of inquiry. Moreover, from a pragmatist perspective, acts of recognition are based on the idea of common projects of inquiry in a shared world.

- 6 Chapter 2 further elaborates on the suggested pragmatic realism that mediates between metaphysical realist and relativist positions. After giving a *tour de force* through two-and-a-half millennia of the problem of realism in seven milestones, Pihlström arrives at the “post-Putnam phase,” which demands to go “back to Kant, but through the classical pragmatists” (34). The second part of the chapter is devoted to showing one way of integrating Kantian and pragmatist perspectives. Pihlström brings forward the idea of the “contextuality of scheme (in)dependence,” arguing in the line of thinkers who advocate the “dependence thesis” against metaphysical realism, that is against the idea of a world *an sich*. Whereas the distinction between scheme-independent and scheme-dependent entities can be maintained, Pihlström suggests, it has to be continuously redescribed and contextualized. There is nothing non-contextual to refer to in this world-constituting activity, which makes the process not only indefinite, but also circular. Yet this very circularity, Pihlström maintains, prevents his “pragmatic, naturalized version of transcendental idealism from collapsing into a full-blown metaphysical idealism” (38). Though this version knows only relative a priori and no universal structures, a “touch of Kantian transcendentalism” remains, since “it is only within a given context that we are so much as able to experience or categorize reality in any meaningful matter” (39). These contexts, however, are themselves practice-embedded and thus subject to change, without a super-perspective or super-practice to judge them. Following Putnam, Pihlström points to the role of values in our dealings with the world. Its entanglement with facts does not allow for a “clean” distinction and shapes contextual schemes. That, Pihlström concludes, amounts to a conditional necessity, a pragmatic transcendental: “Without a valuational context, there could be no things – and no facts – at all for us.” (43).
- 7 In Chapter 3 Pihlström explicates the connection between metaphysical realism and theodicism, problematizing it on “pragmatist-cum-Kantian grounds.” Kantian critical philosophy, Pihlström argues, is a background of the “pragmatist protest” (48), and pragmatist, especially Jamesian, philosophy of religion further develops and reinterprets Kant’s postulates of practical reason. This becomes apparent in the criticism of theodicies, both Kantian and pragmatist, which is neatly examined by Pihlström in what follows. The primacy of ethics to metaphysics leads, in short, to the demand of acknowledging the reality of evil as a necessary, even transcendental condition of an ethically meaningful life, including any religious meaning. Engaging Richard Rorty’s reflections on Orwell’s 1984, Pihlström furthermore points to the “fragility of antitheodicy” and the moral point of view in general (60): a minimal understanding of truth must be maintained in order to keep the possibility of sincerity. We need to contrast reality “with something like unreality,” truth and truthfulness “with falsity but also with lying and self-deception” (60) as a precondition of not only antitheodicism but of an ethical stance at all.
- 8 Therefore, the value of (objective) truth and truthfulness has to be defended. This is one of the objectives of Chapter 4, which addresses religious pluralism and its connection to the question of truth. Religious exclusivism, Pihlström argues, rests on metaphysical realism, a realism that comes with a “non-human – theocentric – pursuit of objectivity” (65). In a religious diverse society, in which questions of recognition are a crucial and at the same time delicate issue, “a sound version of religious inclusivism” (65) may be highly relevant and helpful with regard to responding to the challenge of

otherness. Jamesian pragmatic truth is conceptually tied with truthfulness as well as acknowledgment: “One cannot really pursue truth in the Jamesian sense unless one acknowledges, or at least truthfully seeks to acknowledge, others’ perspectives on reality – especially those structured by suffering.” (69). Metaphysical realism, as Pihlström shows in the remaining part of the chapter, fails to acknowledge the perspectival plurality and diversity of others’ suffering. This ethical criticism aims at realism and “its (typical) consequence, theodicism,” which “will then ultimately collapse hand in hand” (75). The basic problem, according to Pihlström, lies in the “essentially detached view” (78) that metaphysical realism proposes, and its tendency to reductive objectification with regard to God, others’s suffering, and otherness itself, which must not be objectified. However, the failure to acknowledge the irreducibility of otherness is a tendency *in ourselves* which has to be reflected on and criticized, Pihlström remarks, so that the “moral criticism of theodicism (and realism) ought to be primarily *self-criticism*, a criticism of our temptation to theodicy” (83).

- 9 With Wittgenstein and other philosophers of religion in this tradition, another approach to rejecting theodicism is employed in Chapter 5. D.Z. Phillips and others have suggested that theodicies are confused ethically as well as conceptually. Due to their insensitive and pseudo-religious use of language, they would amount to blasphemy. Pihlström turns to the early Wittgenstein in order to further elaborate on a Wittgensteinian antitheodicism which usually focuses on the later works. After examining the role of harmony and happiness and their relation, especially referring to the *Notebooks 1914-1916* and the *Tractatus*, Pihlström points out how evil and suffering lead to a fundamental disharmony that has to be acknowledged though “Live happily!” is the highest moral command, leading to a transcendental, rather than empirical, happiness. This happiness cannot be found *in the world* (nor outside of it). Actually, it is a kind of “meta-level harmony or happiness” (99) that never really gets rid of disharmonious spots caused by the suffering of others – or at least, Pihlström reminds the reader, should not get rid of if it is not to collapse into a theodictic harmonious total worldview. Then, Pihlström provides a closer look at the Wittgensteinian idea of the limits of language and its use in the philosophy of religion, arguing against the common charge of “Wittgensteinian fideism,” or an “easy language-game relativism” (108). Rather, Pihlström defends his Kantian transcendental reading of Wittgenstein that allows for religion and ethics to provide a fundamental framework, a structure for the empirical world, being itself not part of it but “at the limit.” Yet this is not to “set up any metaphysical barrier between our language games and the reality in which we live and act and use language” (108). Rather, language (and its limits) depends on our forms of lives, and it is changeable. This leads to the idea of the contingency of necessity: “Clearly, when we are engaged in a certain language game, the rules governing our operations within that game are necessary, but whenever we take a step out of the game, we realize that our playing the game in the first place is itself contingent.” (111).
- 10 That is to say that the problem of evil itself is historically contingent and mutable, and so are the (philosophical) responses to it. In Chapter 6, Pihlström first marks the existential dimension of the problem of evil as specifically modern, in contrast, for example, to the “scholastics’ problem of securing the coherence of Christian theism” (119). That we live – and think – after the Holocaust, is crucial to our present situational context. It is in the face of this situation, that our philosophical dealings with suffering have to be judged. As an outstanding example of addressing evil without

giving any meaning to it, that is, without rendering the inflicted harms justified or acceptable, Pihlström draws to Primo Levi's writings. Levi, Pihlström observes, "argues against a certain morally reprehensible practice of theodicism manifested by even merely theoretical commitment to a theodicy" (127). A principled dichotomy between theory and practice cannot be drawn, and the refusal to do so is at the ground of pragmatic antitheodicism. Yet, as Pihlström concedes, the philosophical defense of that antitheodicism "may itself be detached from the recognizing practice it seeks to defend," doing "little to practically alleviate any meaningless suffering actually taking place in the world" (131). Even more, it bears on being in the privileged position of taking a theoretical stance towards the concrete evil – a fact philosophers should include in their reflections.

- 11 In his concluding remarks, Pihlström drives the demand to resist any attempts of giving meaning even further and extends it to goodness. The pursuit of meaningfulness may be transversal to morality if it seeks to create meaning by good deeds and thereby instrumentalizes our actions. Ultimate meaningfulness, thus, has to be rejected in any form. Instead, it remains an ongoing existential task to live meaningful lives without any grand narratives, religious or otherwise – and a philosophical task to critically reflect on these attempts, including self-reflection.
- 12 Pihlström's well-written book is a major contribution to that very task. It offers not only a careful examination of the problem of evil and thereby adds to a particular debate in the philosophy of religion, but aims at a fundamental change of perspective with regard to its grounds. With analyzing the connection between metaphysical realism and theodicism, Pihlström convincingly reveals the problematic preconditions of theodicism. At the same time, the (practical) relevance of metaphysical premises becomes apparent. Considering other classical metaphysical problems with the suggested Kantian-pragmatist "tools" seems to be a promising challenge. However, Pihlström takes pragmatic pluralism seriously and does not advocate a single philosophical approach as universal remedy. On the methodological level, he seeks to show how pragmatism and the theory of recognition could be fruitfully connected. Furthermore, with employing Wittgenstein and Levi, diverse roads to antitheodicism are illustrated, also pointing out the relevance of other-than-philosophical dealings with suffering.
- 13 What is more, the pluralist stance manifests on the performative level, that is, in the manner of philosophizing itself. Though Pihlström holds undeniably strong positions, he constantly and unapologetically reflects on the limits of the proposed perspectives. Being fully aware of the existential relevance of metaphysical beliefs, this includes pointing out the challenge of living in the face of the "constant possibility of meaninglessness" (86). The humanism of antitheodicism comes not only with conceptual tensions that have to be addressed. It also needs to be articulated as a viable worldview, that is, a worldview that meets its own demands of enabling an ethical life.
- 14 Beyond discussing objections and caveats, Pihlström thematizes his very own situation as a thinker, unfolding the contextuality of (philosophical) theorizing performatively. Whereas underlining the importance of self-examination is a common move in philosophical statements, the critical impetus all too often stops at the doorstep of one's own position. Pihlström incorporates self-criticism in his overall project of defending a moral point of view. The book, thus, is not only of interest for philosophers

of religion or those interested in pragmatist research. It is an example of how philosophy today could wrestle with “the problem of life.”

AUTHORS

ANA HONNACKER

Universität Hildesheim
post[at]ana-honnacker.de