

Pragmatic Pluralism and the Problem of God. By Sami Pihlström. New York: Fordham University Press, 2012. 264 pp. \$60

Generally speaking, pragmatic philosophers have not attended to the religious implications of their methodological frameworks as thoroughly as thinkers in the analytic and phenomenological traditions. Nevertheless, religion has always been an important topic for the classical pragmatists. For this reason, Sami Pihlström's *Pragmatic Pluralism and the Problem of God* is particularly valuable, for it attempts to show how the pragmatic methodological hypothesis can be fruitfully applied to the traditional problems in the philosophy of religion. Although Pihlström acknowledges the impossibility of a unified pragmatist's religious *Weltanschauung*, he applies the pragmatic method in order to build a metaphysics capable of going beyond the contradictions that undermine traditional or contemporary philosophical approaches to the problem of religion. His book's five chapters deal with the main problems of the field: the problem of evidentialism against fideism, of realism versus antirealism, the conflict between science and religion, the problem of evil and of the nature of God, and the relation of religion to metaphysics and ethics. For Pihlström, James's pluralistic approach is a better instrument to work out these problems than the monistic approach shared by most contemporary philosophers of religion. At the same time, the author admits that his aims are relatively modest: he is more concerned with trying to apply pragmatism to the challenges of the philosophy of religion rather than to take a historical and comprehensive approach to all one could say about the topic. That said, his book is full of historical information. The lengthy notes, moreover, are especially valuable for readers interested in delving deeper into the subject. In short, Pihlström's books how pragmatism at work as a mediator between extremes, and it not only does so by expanding the reflections of James and Dewey but also by putting them in dialogue with other philosophical approaches phenomenology and analytic thought.

A "JAMESIAN CUM KANTIAN" APPROACH

Pihlström's main hypothesis is that we can construct a pragmatist metaphysics of religion according to what he calls a "Jamesian-cum-Kantian" approach. The principle claim of this approach is that our metaphysical commitments regarding the reality and the existence of God should be more rooted in practical considerations than are done in traditional philosophy of religion. This is the case both because, for Kant, "practical reason" is "ethical" reason, and because Pihlström's reconstruction of a transcendental argument for a theistic metaphysics is grounded on ethical considerations.

The first and fourth chapters deal mainly with the Jamesian approach to the philosophy of religion and present most of the central arguments of the book on controversies such as theism/atheism, evidentialism/fideism, or realism/constructivism. Although the author's reflections demonstrate a deep knowledge of the secondary literature, his reflections are Jamesian, rather than a scholarly attempt to understand what James himself wrote on religious matters: for example, Pihlström considers neither James's religious psychology nor his epochal concept of religious experience. His Kantian reading of James, furthermore, seems to presuppose a clear cut separation between Jamesian philosophy and Jamesian psychology of religion. Although he notes that Jamesian approach is more empirical and psychological than the *a priori* method of Kant, he nevertheless maintains that, on his synthetic account of both, we can construct a transcendental argument for a theistic metaphysics as if our human interests and

needs were of a transcendental nature (p 33, p113). It is indeed true that James' philosophical anthropology, as Sergio Franzese has shown (2008: 55), is indebted to its reading of Kant's anthropology. Pihlström argues that the traditional issues in the philosophy of religion such as theism-atheism or evidentialism-fideism are partly misguided because they overlook the anthropological and ethical aspect of the question. Regarding atheism, the author thinks that the practical and ethical dimensions which are inherently attached to the question of God's existence are of such a high importance that any atheistic views can be rejected as unethical (this theological turn in William James's ethic is to be found in the last part of *The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life*, where it is argued that a Godless world doesn't give enough justification for the highest intensities of moral life). At the same time, for Pihlström, viewing the existence of God as something more than a hypothesis is also unethical, because it leads to intolerance. In the same manner, the author rejects evidentialism for being too narrowly intellectual (p21) and argues that the rational justifications of theism should be based on vital human needs and interests, as it is in Kant and James. Therefore, the traditional conflicts between science and religion need not be so radical: "the religious believer's faith in God need not be made scientifically acceptable, or warranted in terms of religiously natural criteria of reason (...); the important thing is to make it ethically acceptable in the face of evil and suffering that we, believers and unbelievers, experience in the world we live in (...)." (p 22). Pihlström does not see James's main work in the philosophy of religion as trying to make the idea of God's existence scientifically acceptable but as trying to turn the issue into an ethically relevant thesis. According to the author, every kind of evidentialist and fideist argument downplays this claim. Evidentialism is wrong because it discusses religious belief rationally and fideism is wrong because it does not consider religious belief capable of being discussed at all.

At the same time, the author shows that these fundamentally ethical considerations should not minimize the metaphysical implications of such questions, as is done in neo-pragmatist readings of James or in Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion (p67). On the contrary, Pihlström sees this pragmatist ethical approach to theism as an attempt to rethink the very relationship between ethics and metaphysics. This means that the ethical argument for the reality of God doesn't imply that we are just entitled to act "as if" there were a God. Rather, our ethical commitments and our metaphysical commitments to the existence of God are closely tied: God, on the basis of the practical postulates in Kant and James, is not simply a "useful fiction," but is metaphysically real.

Pihlström shows, furthermore, that the problem of theism is, in James's thought, connected with his pluralism, the metaphysical and ethical commitment to respect other individuals' conceptions of the good. It is rooted in an ethical need to acknowledge the otherness of others and is therefore meta-philosophical since it is also a need to acknowledge the otherness of other philosophies (106). Pihlström here agrees with Sergio Franzese when he tries to show that James does not provide an ethical theory *per se*, but instead offers a critical examination of the very project of theorizing about morality. In like fashion, James's theory of relation, the author argues, should be read as an emphasis on human relations.

THE METAPHYSICAL ASPECTS OF A PRAGMATIST PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

Chapters two, three, and five broadly deal with the indispensability a pragmatist metaphysic to any theory that aims to give a meaning to our religious

and ethical life. In chapter two, Pihlström focuses on Dewey's naturalistic metaphysics. Chapter three deals with what the author sees as the lack of proper metaphysical commitment in the neo-pragmatism of Rorty and Putnam. Chapter five, finally, deals with the problem of evil.

In chapter two, Pihlström provides a summary of the Dewey's book on religious naturalism. The author thinks that the fact that *A Common Faith* has been read in two different ways -- theistic or secular -- can be accounted for by a tension in Dewey's naturalism between realism and constructivism. In order to avoid inaccurate readings, we should generally address the question of knowing if the general object of human inquiry is either "constructed" or "found". This question amounts to the following one: is the pragmatist God only kind of human construction? According to the author, although there are some anti-realist dimensions in Dewey's instrumentalism, it is not to be read broadly as a kind of anti-realism. On the contrary, the practice of inquiry, and the theories that results are themselves real. The contextualism of practices on which Dewey's constructivism is grounded does not allow anti-realistic conclusions since it deals with an external environment that can never be entirely constructed. Finally, Pihlström suggests that even if Dewey's God is indeed partly constructed, there is creativity in men's activity and in religious experience that transcends men's own creativity. Indeed, humanity is continuous with nature, which contains forces beyond our power of manipulation. Hence, the passive as well as the active elements of religious experience can be accounted for. The author extends his analysis by exploring the various forms of religious naturalisms that have explicit ties with Dewey's but which are developing an anti-metaphysical view of religious experience, denying that religious statements refer to anything objective. However, there is no need to understand religious language as simply an expression of values since we can never split values from our ontological inquiries. In summary, through a subtle and fine reading of Dewey, and an impressive knowledge of the history of its commentators, the author argues for a pragmatist realism in Dewey's religious thoughts, showing that its metaphysic is committed to a recognition of our human capacities *and* limitations, not to mention our ultimate indebtedness to nature.

In chapter three, Pihlström aims to show that, in neopragmatists approaches to religion, religious assertion suffers from a lack of metaphysical background to support them. After reassessing Rorty's neopragmatism, the author shows how Rorty's hope is different from Jamesian hope. The latter is entitled to some metaphysical pursuits about how the world is, while Rorty famously disconnects hope and knowledge about the metaphysical structure of the universe. The author underlies how every Rortyan assertions about religion are, according to the classical pragmatists, non-pragmatist. The opposition Rorty makes between hope and knowledge, or the assertion according to which religion should always be considered as a private matter, are clearly aloof from the tradition instigated by James and Dewey. Comparatively, for Pihlström, Putnam's views are more genuinely pragmatist, although they are combined with some Kantian and Wittgensteinian insights. Indeed, Putnam's defense of internal realism is in agreement with the classical pragmatists, that scientific and religious perspectives must be evaluated pragmatically, in terms of how well they satisfy human purposes. Nevertheless, Pihlström shows that in Putnam's approach the fideistic idea according to which religious belief is a personal commitment prevails. We therefore cannot really see how religious beliefs could be publicly evaluated and criticized. Perhaps under the influence of Wittgenstein, Putnam seems to reduce religious belief to an attitude of the believer, rejecting any metaphysical theories to justify it (89). Pihlström suggests

that Putnam should not be afraid of any metaphysical statements that could justify his own religious beliefs, for otherwise religion would be entirely private.

In chapter 5, Pihlström addresses the problem of evil in light of his general claim that metaphysical and religious ideas have to be evaluated from an ethical perspective. This is also the chapter where the author's thinking is the most original, going far beyond James's concerns. Pihlström's main concern here is to dwell on the ethical limitations of our capacity to speak and theorize about evil. The problem is as follows: considering the impossibility of offering a philosophical justification of evil (which amounts to the impossibility of theodicy), how should we speak about evil? For the author, a pragmatist line of speaking about evil is similar to the pragmatist line of speaking about God: we are not able to give a rational meaning to it, but we also can't escape all forms of discourse about it. At the very least, we must give meaning to this absence of meaning, and this meaning could be "among the key potential source of meaning in our lives" (143), as with Albert Camus notion of "human revolt". A pragmatist's middle ground position regarding evil is understood by Pihlström as a "nonreligious form of anti-theodicism" (132). It should be nonreligious because the reasons for rejecting theodicism are mainly ethical and not religious. While theodicism comes from monistic conceptions of God and of the Universe, religious non-theodicism (like in Dostoyevsky's thought) runs the risk of mystifying evil. Therefore explaining why evil should not be explained is an ethical attitude towards evil and its victim.

Although the pragmatic anti-theodacist view is not religious, it also cannot escape being metaphysical. On this point, Pihlström claims that a pragmatist theory of evil, while not being based on religious grounds, is in a better position than many of its contemporary proposals. For example, the lack of a metaphysical or theological background in Rorty's neopragmatism makes it difficult to have a reason to fight or condemn evil. In that perspective, "the totalitarian practices (...) are simply among the many practices and "vocabulary" we may engage in or employ, none of which is objectively correct from a super-perspective beyond those practices and vocabularies" (149). Comparatively, a genuine pragmatist metaphysic should offer a ground on which one could live ethically. In a Jamesian spirit, we are not only entitled to have such a metaphysic, but we have a moral duty to commit ourselves to such a metaphysic, however minimalistic, that allow us to condemn totalitarian practices, for example. As Pihlström argues throughout the book, metaphysical inquiries should be governed by ethical norms, but ethics itself cannot be founded on any prior metaphysical concepts such as the concept of nature. We therefore cannot explain normativity as emerging from a purely naturalistic base. Pihlström agrees that this is a kind of a criticism of the form of emergentism that he has defended elsewhere (see Pihlström 2010, 323-352). Since he also seems to reject supernaturalism, however, it is not clear what kind of metaphysical engagement this entails. But such an inquiry goes beyond the scope of this book, whose more modest aims are clearly attained.

CONCLUSION

In sum, *Pragmatic Pluralism and the Problem of God* offers an excellent and deep analysis of how pragmatism remains so vital in our times. It calls upon many voices to support and expand the religious views of the classical pragmatists. It clearly demonstrates that religion is not just an application of their methods but is essentially connected with their ethical, epistemological and metaphysical arguments. However, the enrollment of Kant's practical reason to reinforce pragmatist philosophy of religion is not entirely unproblematic for

reasons that we can only briefly mention. After saying that God is a necessary postulate for morality, can we still distinguish between morality and religion? Aren't we missing all the emotionality that distinguishes the two for James? It is surely not the aim of Pihlström's book to inquire into the psychological dimensions of religious experience but the very idea of religious experience. As Wayne Proudfoot has argued, (Proudfoot 1985: 5), this entails the idea of a non-categorized immediate experience and is thus impossible to be accounted for in a Kantian epistemology. It could also be objected to Pihlström's approach that the epistemological conflict between science and religion was much more acute in James's consciousness than the author appreciates and that this conflict directed much of his later work on religion. Reconstructing James's philosophy of religion as a whole ultimately must confront serious dilemmas and even contradictions in his thought. While James's emphasis in *The Will to Believe* is on religious belief as a necessary condition of religious experience, for example, he suggests in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* that such experiences need not presuppose any previous religious belief – an aspect of James's thought on which Pihlström remains silent. Indeed, focusing solely on James's claim that belief in God is necessary for there to be moral objectivity risks downplaying James's metaphysics of experience – a metaphysics incompatible with the transcendental bases of Kant's own practical project. For better or worse, Pihlström's work is not concerned with such historical issues. It aims, rather, to reconstruct and strengthen pragmatist arguments in the contemporary philosophy of religion, and in this regard it succeeds admirably. .

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