

Pragmatic Pluralism and the Problem of God, by Sami Pihlström. Fordham University Press, 2013. 264pp. Hb., \$55.00. ISBN-13: 9780823251582.

Reviewed by Travis Dumsday, Concordia University College of Alberta,
travis.dumsday@concordia.ab.ca

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Philosophy of religion remains riven with divisions. The split between analytic and continental practitioners is best known, but Pihlström highlights a third, more neglected approach: pragmatism. Drawing on a deep knowledge of the major pragmatists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Pihlström sets out to showcase the unique contributions made available by them, contributions both to particular issues in the philosophy of religion and to meta-level questions concerning the discipline's methods.

Readers will appreciate the clarity of his writing; this is a well-structured work containing clear lines of argumentation, and even the occasional formalization of arguments in premise / conclusion form (always a helpful feature). The book is divided into five principal chapters. In "Pragmatic Aspects of Kantian Theism," Pihlström compares Kant's moral argument for theism and human immortality (from the idea that the demands of duty and happiness often conflict in this life and so require a just reconciliation in the next) and James' pragmatic argument for theism (genuine moral pursuit requires a commitment to real transcendent moral ideals, the reality of which in turn requires something like theism). Pihlström makes the case that such moral arguments are the only way properly to defend the rationality of theism. Traditional natural theology (cosmological arguments etc.), still pursued by evidentialists in analytic philosophy of religion, has long since been overthrown by Kant. Consequently, arguments that proceed on the basis of lived human experience (rather than unknowable metaphysical posits about the nature of causation etc.) are the only route left; yet from Pihlström's perspective this is by no means a pessimistic conclusion, since for James these are in any case *the most convincing sorts of arguments*: namely, those emerging from reflection on the ethical notions embedded in lived practice. Despite this, Pihlström's goal in this chapter is not so much to argue for theism as to illustrate the deep interconnection between metaphysics and ethics.

"Deweyan Pragmatic Religious Naturalism" is an examination of John Dewey's brand of naturalism, one that attempted to walk the line separating reductionist materialism from outright supernaturalism. Pihlström argues

that a Deweyan defence of scientific realism (according to which scientists can properly believe in the existence of unobservable entities posited by the best theories employed in scientific practice) can be imported to a defense of something akin to religious realism (according to which believers properly believe in the existence of an unobservable Deity on the basis of the best moral ideals presupposed in lived human experience).

In “Rorty Versus Putnam: Neopragmatist Philosophy of Religion” Pihlström critiques Rorty’s pragmatism on the ground that its relativism cannot sustain an ethical evaluation of philosophical theories. Putnam comes in for more favourable treatment; Pihlström is particularly supportive of his critique of evidentialist philosophers of religion.

“The Jamesian Pragmatic Method in the Philosophy of Religion” expands on James’ philosophical method, in particular the central role that ethical theses must play in evaluating metaphysical positions. For James, this procedure allows for a rational belief in God as a stopgap against moral nihilism. Pihlström then presses the idea further, suggesting that ethics not only opens up a route to rational theism, but that a theistic commitment could properly be seen as a duty, if indeed it proves necessary for perseverance in moral realism.

“The Problem of Evil and the Limits of Philosophy” supplies a challenge to standard approaches to theodicy in analytic philosophy of religion. Focusing his critique on the work of Peter van Inwagen, Pihlström argues that the very attempt to engage in theodicy is morally problematic, implying a view of God as a sort of computer, dispassionately deciding what forms of human agony can and cannot be permitted. For Pihlström, a better attitude is simply to view evil as a mystery, one not to be justified but simply acknowledged and combatted.

Naturally much more could be said by way of summary, and this reviewer has left out many nuances. By way of a thumbnail sketch of an evaluation: his argument that ethics can properly play a role in the evaluation of metaphysical theses is both plausible and important; however, his claim that this is the *only* sort of evaluation these ideas can properly be subjected to is more difficult to sustain. But then, this reviewer is a strong proponent of traditional natural theology and the sort of evidentialist philosophy of religion targeted by Pihlström. And in fairness, his central goal is not so much to prove the truth of the pragmatist approach as to explore its implications and consider it in contrast to the dominant schools of thought in current philosophy of religion. In that task, he amply succeeds.