

RATIONALITY, RECOGNITION, AND ANTI-THEODICY:

THE PROMISE OF PRAGMATIST PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

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Introduction

Why is pragmatism an increasingly important philosophical approach today and, possibly, tomorrow – not only in philosophy generally but in a specific field such as the philosophy of religion as well? I will try to offer *an* answer to this question by considering, as a case study, the very special – almost unique – “promise” I see pragmatism as making in the study of religion, especially regarding the complex issue of the rationality (vs. irrationality) of religious belief. I won’t try to extrapolate this promise to other fields of philosophy here, although I do believe that the pragmatist perspective is, for analogous reasons, highly promising elsewhere, too.

My articulation of the “promise of pragmatist philosophy of religion” may have something to do with the “promise of pragmatism” Patrick Diggins discussed – rather critically – in his book with that title almost two decades ago,¹ although I would definitely not view these two ways of articulating the pragmatist promise as identical, or view the one I will identify as a version of Diggins’s. Yet, in both cases the promise is related to our need to adjust our ethical, political, religious, and other “higher” views and ideals to a world largely explained and accounted for by scientific means. This is an unavoidable problem for us *modern* thinkers (however “postmodern”, or perhaps rather “post-postmodern”, we believe we are).²

What I will have to say about pragmatist philosophy of religion is partly based on my new monograph, *Pragmatic Pluralism and the Problem of God*.³ Furthermore, I should note that my (re)articulation of the pragmatist promise in terms of theories of recognition (see below) is partly grounded in a highly stimulating process of planning a new research project together with colleagues *not* focusing on pragmatism. Such attempts to promote dialogue between pragmatism and other scholarly and/or intellectual orientations – both in the philosophy of religion and elsewhere – are highly important to keep pragmatism alive as an innovative philosophical tradition.

The epistemic interest and the existential interest

I will begin by discussing the situation in the philosophy of religion today from two quite different angles, or, as we may say, regarding *two different philosophical interests in the study of religion*. Let us call these the “epistemic interest” and the “existential interest”.

First, it is extremely important, for a thinking person in a modern (or “post-postmodern”) society largely based on scientific rationality and its various applications, to examine the perennial *epistemic* problem of *the rationality (or irrationality) of religious belief*. This epistemic problem arises from the – real or apparent – conflicts between science and religion, or reason and faith, in particular. Here pragmatism can offer us a very interesting middle ground. As William James argued, in *Pragmatism* (1907) and elsewhere, pragmatism is often a middle path option for those who do not want to give up either their scientific worldview or their possible religious sensibilities. Defending the pragmatist option, or seeing a deep promise in pragmatism regarding this

¹ Patrick Diggins, *The Promise of Pragmatism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

² I find Larry Hickman to be right when he observes that pragmatism, especially John Dewey’s pragmatism, is a “post-postmodernist” way of thinking. See Hickman, *Pragmatism as Post-Postmodernism: Lessons from John Dewey* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).

³ Sami Pihlström, *Pragmatic Pluralism and the Problem of God* (New York: Fordham University Press, forthcoming 2013). More generally, my views on the current state and future possibilities of pragmatism are available, for example, in a collection of articles I recently edited, *The Continuum Companion to Pragmatism* (London: Continuum, 2011).

epistemic interest, does not entail that one actually defends or embraces any particular religious views; what is at issue here is the *potential philosophical legitimacy* of such views, which leaves room for either embracement or, ultimately, rejection. Thus, pragmatism clearly avoids both fundamentalist religious views and equally fundamentalist and dogmatic (and anti-philosophical) versions of “New Atheism”. By so doing, pragmatism in my view does not simply argue for the simplified idea that the “rationality” of religious thought might be some kind of practical rationality instead of theoretical rationality comparable to the rationality of scientific inquiry. On the contrary, pragmatism seeks to reconceptualize the very idea of rationality in terms of practice.

We may formulate this suggestion in a manner familiar from the mainstream debates of contemporary philosophy of religion by saying that pragmatism proposes a middle path not just between reason and faith but between the positions known as *evidentialism* and *fideism*: we should not simply assess religious beliefs and ideas on the basis of religiously neutral evidence (in the way we would generally assess beliefs in science or everyday life), because we do need to understand religion as a special set of practices or language-games; on the other hand, we should not, when rejecting the simplifying evidentialist categorization of religion as little more than poor science, step on a slippery slope ending at the other extreme of fideism, which advances faith in the absence of evidence or reason and consequently in the end hardly leaves any room for a critical rational discussion of religion at all. We might say that pragmatism advances a *liberal form of evidentialism*, proposing to broaden the scope of evidence from the relatively narrowly conceived scientific evidence (which is something that religious beliefs generally, rather obviously, lack) to a richer conception of evidence as something that can be had, or may be lacking, in the “laboratory of life” (to use Hilary Putnam’s apt

expression).⁴ Pragmatism thereby resurrects a reasonable – extended and enriched – form of evidentialism from the extremely implausible, or even ridiculous, form it takes in strongly evidentialist thinkers like Richard Swinburne, without succumbing to a pseudo-Wittgensteinian fideism, or “form of life” relativism. This is one way in which pragmatism seeks, or promises, to widen the concept of rationality itself by taking seriously the embeddedness of all humanly possible reason-use in practices or forms of life guided by various human interests. To take that seriously is to take seriously the suggestion that in some cases religious beliefs may be a “rational” response to certain life situations.

It is extremely important to understand the broadened notion of evidence (and, hence, rationality) in a correct way here. What is crucial is a certain kind of *sensitivity to the practical contexts* within which it is (or is not) appropriate – or, indeed, rational – to ask for evidence for our beliefs. This must, furthermore, be connected with a pragmatist understanding of beliefs as *habits of action*: the relevant kind of evidence is something based on our practices and hence inevitably interest-driven. Evidence, or the need to find evidence, may play an importantly different role in these different contexts; moreover, it would be flatly irrational for us to ignore such context-sensitivity. Thus, the pragmatic question must always be how (or whether) evidential considerations *work* and/or satisfy our needs and interests within particular contexts of inquiry. Insofar as such contextuality is not taken into account, the notion of evidence is actually disconnected from any genuine inquiry. This notion, when rationally employed, always needs to respond to a specific problematic situation in order to play a role that makes a pragmatic difference in our inquiries.

⁴ On Putnam’s pragmatist philosophy of religion, see Niek Brunsveld, *The Many Faces of Religious Truth* (Ph.D. Diss., Utrecht University, 2012); as well as Pihlström, *Pragmatic Pluralism and the Problem of God*, chapter 3.

It might be objected that, according to pragmatism, religious thought ought to remain *arational* rather than being either rational or irrational. For instance, some of Putnam's views on religion might be understood in this Wittgensteinian fashion,⁵ and certainly "Wittgensteinians" like D.Z. Phillips have often been read in this fashion. However, it seems to me that the distinction between arationality, on the one hand, and the rationality vs. irrationality dimension, on the other, is itself based on a prior non-pragmatist understanding of rationality (and, hence, irrationality). If we do not begin from such a non-pragmatist (purely theoretical) conception of rationality but, rather, view rationality itself as practice-involving and practice-embedded all the way from the start, I do not think that we need to resort to the account of religion as "arational". On the contrary, we can understand religious responses to reality as potentially rational – and, therefore, also potentially irrational – in terms of the broader, practice-sensitive account of rationality that pragmatism cherishes.

Secondly, along with serving the epistemic interest in the philosophy of religion and the need to understand better the rationality (vs. irrationality) of religious belief, it is at least equally important, or possibly even more important, to study the *existential* problem of how to live with (or without) religious views or a religious identity in a world in which there is so much evil and suffering. When dealing with this set of questions, we end up discussing serious and "negative" concepts such as evil, guilt, sin, and death (or mortality). Here, I see pragmatism as proposing a fruitful form of *meliorism* reducible neither to naively optimistic views according to which the good will ultimately inevitably prevail nor to dark pessimism according to which everything will finally go down the road of destruction. It is as essential to mediate between these two unpromising extremes as it is to mediate between the epistemic extremes of

evidentialism and fideism. And again, I would argue that such a project of mediation is *rational* (and, conversely, that it would therefore be pragmatically irrational to seek a fully "rational", or better, rationalizing or in Jamesian terms "viciously intellectualistic", response to the problem of evil). Accordingly, pragmatist meliorism must – as it certainly does in James's *Pragmatism*, for instance – take very seriously the irreducible reality of evil and (unnecessary) suffering. Pragmatism, in this sense, is a profoundly *anti-theodicy* approach in the philosophy of religion: it is, or should be, very critical of all attempts to explain away the reality of evil, or to offer a rationalized theodicy allegedly justifying the presence of evil in the world. On the contrary, evil must be acknowledged, understood (if possible),⁶ and fought against.

Pragmatists, then, should join those who find it morally unacceptable or even obscene to ask for God's reasons for "allowing", say, Auschwitz. Pragmatism, when emphasizing the fight against evil instead of theodicy speculations about the possible reasons God may have had for creating and maintaining a world in which there is evil, is also opposed to the currently fashionable skeptical theism, according to which our cognitive capacities are insufficient to reach the hidden reasons for apparently avoidable evil. Such speculations about God's possible reasons for allowing evil, or about evil being a necessary part of a completely rational system of creation and world-order, are, from the pragmatist perspective, as foreign to genuine religious practices as evidentialist arguments about, e.g., the a priori and a posteriori probabilities of theologically conceptualized events such as Christ's resurrection.⁷

⁶ I am not saying that evil actions and events (or people) can always be understood; nor am I saying, however, that evil necessarily escapes understanding. For a pragmatist account of evil, see Pihlström, *Pragmatic Pluralism and the Problem of God*, chapter 5.

⁷ I am obviously referring to Richard Swinburne's ideas here – ideas that come close to being a parody of genuine religiosity.

⁵ See also Hilary Putnam, *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

“A new name for some old ways of thinking”

When dealing with these two challenges, or interests – the epistemic one and the existential one – pragmatism does not and must not claim that it is an absolutely novel approach never before proposed in any form by anyone. On the contrary, pragmatists (who, in James’s memorable words, are only offering a “new name for some old ways of thinking”) should clearly recognize their historical predecessors. One of those predecessors is undoubtedly Immanuel Kant, whose great insight in the philosophy of religion was that the religious and theological questions must be considered primarily on the basis of “practical philosophy”, that is, ethics.⁸ I see pragmatism as sharing this basically Kantian approach while not denying the epistemic and metaphysical significance of the philosophical study of religion. We are interested in the metaphysical (and epistemic) problems concerning the nature of reality, the possible existence or non-existence of the divinity, and our epistemic access to such matters, but as human beings embedded in our practices of life we are dealing with all this from an ethically loaded, value-laden, standpoint. For us as the kind of creatures we are, there simply is no non-interested standpoint to occupy in such matters.

Insofar as this Kantian-inspired *entanglement of ethics and metaphysics* is taken seriously, we may also say that pragmatism incorporates a modern, relaxed version of Kantian *transcendental philosophy*. The philosophical issues of religion are examined by paying attention to the ethical context within which they are so much as possible as objects of philosophically interested study for beings like us. This is, in a way, transcendental philosophy “naturalized”. Therefore, it also may be suggested that pragmatism simultaneously proposes a *liberal form of naturalism*, distinguishing between a narrow (or “hard”) scientific naturalism from a more

pluralistic (and “softer”) form of naturalism according to which even religious qualities in experience can be humanly natural.⁹

Furthermore, the two interests I have distinguished are not dichotomously separable but, rather, deeply entangled (just like ethics and metaphysics are). The pragmatist philosopher of religion, and the pragmatist philosopher more generally, can and should make distinctions wherever and whenever they serve useful pragmatic purposes; what s/he should avoid is turning those distinctions that really make a difference to our inquiries into essentialistic and ahistorical fixed structures and dichotomies, dualisms that cannot possibly be bridged. Even so, there are problematic and even deeply wrong ways of entangling the two “interests” I have spoken about. For instance, when the problem of evil, which I have categorized under the “existential interest”, is seen as a *purely* or even *primarily* epistemic and/or evidential issue having to do with the rationality of religious faith within an evidentialist context,¹⁰ things go seriously wrong.

It is, in short, unbelievable that there are philosophers who can speak about evil and suffering and use examples such as the Holocaust merely, or even primarily, in order to investigate an intellectual (or should I say, “rationalized”) puzzle about the compatibility of divine omnipotence and benevolence with the existence of apparently avoidable suffering. These are intellectual exercises so cold that, in James’s memorable words, “even hell-fire can’t warm” them.

⁸ See Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason (Kritik der praktischen Vernunft, 1788)* for details.

⁹ This comes close to the picture sketched by John Dewey in *A Common Faith* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991; first published 1934).

¹⁰ As it is, e.g., in Peter van Inwagen’s remarkable book, *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008).

Inquiry and mutual recognition

One way of cashing out the special pragmatist promise I have been talking about is by formulating the issues concerning the rationality of religious belief and the appropriate reactions to the problem of evil in terms of the concept of *(mutual) recognition*, which must be rooted in not only the Hegelian discourse on *Anerkennung* but also the underlying Kantian idea of there being limits or boundaries that shape human cognitive and ethical life and need to be recognized by people (and groups) engaging in common projects of inquiry, understanding, and moral deliberation. Let me explain.

Since Hume and Kant, philosophers of religion have generally acknowledged that it is problematic, or even impossible, to ground theological and/or religious beliefs in rational demonstrations, such as the traditional “proofs” of God’s existence. Kant, as was already noted above, drew a particularly sharp boundary between our cognitive capacities (that is, human reason and understanding), on the one hand, and matters of religious faith, on the other. Yet, while attempts to demonstrate the reality of God inevitably fail, according to Kant, God’s existence and the immortality of the soul must (along with the freedom of the will) be accepted as “postulates of practical reason”. Religious faith can only be grounded in what needs to be postulated to make sense of moral duty, not the other way round. Even so, theological issues are not beyond reason and rationality; they just require the *practical use* of reason, instead of theoretical or speculative use.

The concept of a *limit* is crucial for the entire post-Kantian paradigm in the philosophy of religion, and post-Kantian philosophy more generally. Kantian transcendental philosophy examines the necessary conditions for the possibility of, and thereby also the limits of, cognitive experience. Concepts and beliefs reaching out for the transcendent do not fall within

those limits. According to Kant’s famous dictum, he had to limit the scope of knowledge in order to make room for faith. This creates challenges for acts of recognition across boundaries constituted by the transcendental features of human capacities.

The central role played by notions such as limit, boundary, and reason opens up a number of fundamental issues in post-Kantian philosophy of religion (not only pragmatism) that can be approached in terms of theories of recognition. Most importantly, the boundary between religious belief and non-belief – or believers and non-believers – marks an intellectual, cultural, and political division that needs to be examined from the perspective of *(mutual) recognition*. In particular, such an examination may lead to novel ways of approaching the highly controversial issues of science vs. religion (or reason vs. faith) and thereby also the methodological debates within religious studies today.

The relevant issue of recognition here relates not only to the challenges of *recognizing different groups of people* (e.g., believers and non-believers) but also to the need to *recognize the relevant kind of limits dividing them*, as well as the reasons why those limits are taken to be there. These are often based on whether and how the relevant groups are recognized, or refused recognition, as certain specific kinds of groups or in some specific capacity. Accordingly, examinations of the limits of reason are, or contribute to, specifications of the *content* of the relevant act(s) of recognition. One must understand how “the other” – a person or a group “on the other side of the boundary” – employs certain concepts, especially normative concepts such as reason and rationality, in order to engage in any acts of recognition at all. Furthermore, one must realize that different people or groups may recognize the same limits (and each others’ ways of recognizing them) or quite different limits.

For example, from the point of view of atheism, theists simply fail to recognize certain limitations of human reason, or intellectually responsible thought more generally: they postulate an immaterial spiritual being without having adequate evidence for its existence (and in many cases even without seeking or evaluating evidence in appropriate ways). As Kant already argued, no rational demonstration of God's existence is possible, and as Hume and many others have noted, the traditional "design" argument is highly implausible as well (although it continues to flourish in contemporary "intelligent design" theories). Conversely, theists may accuse atheists for a failure to respect another kind of limitation or boundary: scientifically-oriented atheists may believe in the unrestricted capacities of scientific research, or human reason-use more generally, in providing explanations to all phenomena and thus solving the mysteries of the universe. Believers often find it important to acknowledge that there may be "more things between heaven and earth" than rationalizing philosophy – or science – can ever demonstrate. Accordingly, there is a very important boundary between these two groups – theists and atheists, or believers and non-believers, or their respective ways of thinking – and both groups emphasize certain humanly inevitable limits that according to them should not be overstepped.

Issues of recognition, then, are not restricted to the mutual recognition among persons or groups (e.g., representing different religious or non-religious outlooks) as being epistemically or rationally entitled to their (religious or non-religious) views, but extend to the need to recognize (from the perspective of certain intellectual and/or ethical outlooks) certain limitations or boundaries that define the proper sphere of human experience, cognition, or reason-use, and even to the need to recognize different groups and people as actual or potential "recognizers" of quite different boundaries. The diverging ways in which theists and atheists recognize something as a boundary limiting human

capacities should themselves be recognized by both groups – in a way that not merely tolerates these different boundary-drawings but acknowledges that there may be legitimately different ways of drawing them, without simply agreeing with the other party, either.

Various acts of recognition across the boundary dividing believers and non-believers may have as their content at least the following different types of recognition: one party may recognize the other as (i) human beings (e.g., with certain inviolable human rights), as (ii) thinkers capable of formulating thoughts and/or judgments with intelligible content, as (iii) actual or potential participants in political discussion and deliberation, and/or as (iv) "fellow inquirers" (e.g., possibly, philosophers) seeking the truth about the matter at issue (e.g., about God's existence or non-existence). These different specifications and qualifications of the content of the act of recognition involve quite different factual and normative commitments and expectations. For example, recognizing someone as a (fellow) inquirer in the pursuit of truth yields expectations significantly stronger than "merely" recognizing the same person or group as (a) member(s) of the human species, or even as sharing a common humanity in some stronger sense invoking, say, fundamental human rights. The different contents of acts of recognition may be crucially related to the concept of rationality: we may recognize someone as rational (as an inquirer, etc.) while disagreeing with her/him on fundamental issues – but can we also consistently disagree about the criteria of rationality itself?

A key meta-level issue in contemporary philosophy of religion is, therefore, *the very possibility of critical discussion of religious beliefs*. In order for such discussion to be possible across the boundary dividing believers and non-believers, both groups must in some sense recognize each other *as members of the same intellectual (and, presumably, ethical) community* – as

rational discussion partners – and thus in a sense overcome or at least reconsider the boundaries dividing them from each other. In order for such discussion to extend to ethical and political matters related to religion, the rival groups must also recognize each other as belonging to the same moral and political community. (However, again we should avoid drawing another sharp limit between intellectual matters, on the one side, and moral or political ones, on the other; this division plays only a heuristic role here.) The issues of recognition arising in this situation can again be philosophically analyzed by means of the model of recognition developed by scholars of recognition following Hegel, Axel Honneth, and others.¹¹ The pragmatist philosopher's job in this situation is to examine critically the conceptual presuppositions for the possibility of the relevant kind of mutual recognition acts. For a pragmatist philosopher, such presuppositions are always inevitably practice-embedded – in short, habits of action.

The actual or potential acts of recognition occurring between, say, Christians and scientific atheists (or “new atheists”) are highly contextual (that is, in need of various specifications and qualifications), and interpretations of their exact content will remain at these groups' and their members' own responsibility in the specific historical and cultural situations they find themselves in. The occasionally heated discussion around new atheism today may, however, benefit from an enhanced understanding of the general structures and practices of recognition. The role that religious considerations might play in public debates, including political discourse, is obviously also an issue for which theories of recognition are quite explicitly relevant.¹²

¹¹ In addition to contemporary classics such as Axel Honneth's *Kampf um Anerkennung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995), recent works by scholars like Arto Laitinen and Risto Saarinen should be consulted. (In this essay I cannot provide adequate references to this growing literature, but I do hope to address the relations between pragmatist philosophy of religion and theories of recognition on another occasion in more detail.)

¹² Recent contributions to this discussion include, e.g.,

If Christian believers and “new atheists” are able to recognize each other ethically, politically, and/or intellectually, can they also recognize each others' belonging to the same community of inquirers (a community that is, arguably, constituted by mutual acts of recognition)? That is, can they recognize each other as “fellow inquirers” committed to the pursuit of truth? Could they do this even while maintaining very different normative conceptions of the role of reason and evidence in the evaluation of religious thought and beliefs, recognizing quite different (both factual and normative) limits for human thought and capacities? Examining these questions pragmatically, from the point of view of the theory of recognition, can again be expected to lead to rearticulations of the traditional issues of, say, evidentialism vs. fideism in the philosophy of religion. Thus, it will also be necessary to pragmatically re-evaluate the mainstream methods of contemporary philosophy of religion, seeking to critically transform the methodology of the field from the perspective of the theory of recognition. In brief, the different ways in which evidence can and ought to be taken into account in the evaluation of the rationality of religious belief must themselves be subjected to a critical examination in terms of actual and potential structures of recognition: an evidentialist (or anti-evidentialist, for that matter) methodology in the philosophy of religion must be grounded in (potential) acts of recognition across the post-Kantian boundaries identified above.

Jürgen Habermas's, Martha Nussbaum's, Thomas Schmidt's, Juha Sihvola's, and many others' attempts to define the legitimate area of religious beliefs in political discourse. Let me here just refer to Schmidt, “Reflexionsgleichgewicht: Die Rechtfertigung von Gerechtigkeit in einer pluralen Welt”, in Thomas Schmidt *et al.* (eds.), *Herausforderungen der Modernität* (Würzburg: Echter, 2012), pp. 137-158.

Science and religion (again)

What *is* it to recognize someone or some group as belonging to the same intellectual community of inquirers? What is it to be committed to a membership in such a community? Is this ultimately a matter of recognizing certain *people* (“fellow inquirers”) as rational (or attributing some other normative properties to them) or of recognizing certain *methodological norms or criteria* as valid or binding?¹³ Are these acts of recognition essentially different from the corresponding acts required for one’s being able to live in a moral, political, and/or religious community? One research hypothesis that a pragmatist could examine further is that the structures of recognition at work in these various cases can be used to clarify and evaluate certain important cases of conflict, e.g., situations in which one’s intellectual duties seem to run into conflict with one’s religious (or, possibly, ethical) commitments. The very notion of an intellectual duty, investigated in what is often called the “ethics of belief”, could thereby also be analyzed and redefined.¹⁴

Moreover, it may be asked why the relatively heterogeneous “scientific worldview” is usually regarded as a single and unified picture of the world maintained by a single, unified community of inquirers based on relations of mutual recognition, even though that worldview is itself undeniably full of tensions and disagreements (and so arguably *fails* to be a unified worldview at all).¹⁵ Why should religious views be

automatically excluded from such a worldview? This is again a question addressing our practices of recognition. It is not immediately obvious why, for instance, the different philosophical interpretations of basic ontological structures of reality – regarding, e.g., universals (realism vs. nominalism) or modalities – would be any less dramatic conflicts of reason or rationality than the opposition between theism and atheism. Why do, say, realists and nominalists belong to the same community of rational inquirers committed to a scientific worldview and to the same rational methods of inquiry, while theists (according to new atheists, at least) do not? Analyzing these relations of recognition, or the lack thereof, is a key task for both pragmatists and non-pragmatists today, regarding both philosophy of religion and interdisciplinary religious studies.¹⁶

In cases of extreme intellectual conflict (between, say, conservative Christian fundamentalism and militant new atheism), there is little hope for mutual recognition or even tolerance. In some other cases, including the much narrower gap between liberal Christianity and, say, philosophical agnosticism based on some version of non-reductive naturalism rather than eliminative scientism, it is possible to aim not only at tolerance but at deep mutual respect grounded in acts of recognition. Even then, the somewhat conflicting accounts of reason and its role in religion and theology must be considered, though. It might be suggested that a kind of *intolerance* may already be built into the Enlightenment project of reason-use itself, if the latter is understood as being committed to the idea that the “best argument” necessarily “wins” and that argumentative and/or

¹³ Such as, e.g., Charles S. Peirce’s characterization of the scientific method in his famous 1877 essay, “The Fixation of Belief”, reprinted in *The Essential Peirce*, vol. 1, eds. Nathan Houser *et al.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

¹⁴ For novel pragmatist contributions to the ethics of belief discussion, inspired by James, see Henrik Rydenfelt and Sami Pihlström (eds.), *William James on Religion* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, forthcoming 2013).

¹⁵ Compare this to the discussion of the “disunity of science”, e.g., in John Dupré, *The Disorder of Things: The Disunity of Science as a Working Hypothesis* (Chicago:

University of Chicago Press, 1993).

¹⁶ Furthermore, the challenges posed by “postmodern” trends in the philosophy of religion – e.g., attempts to “save” religion from “onto-theological” doctrines postulating divine reality beyond language – may also be re-examined from this perspective. How does the postmodern project of deliberately blurring all rational, normative, and other boundaries change this problem framework?

intellectual considerations always ought to be followed “wherever they lead”. Philosophical argumentation may itself have (e.g., ethical) limitations that again need to be duly recognized.¹⁷ The pragmatist will therefore also need to consider models of recognition that can be employed in a self-critical examination of one’s ethical limitations, and those of the groups and social practices one engages in: it should be possible to recognize (while disagreeing with) a perspective from which one’s argumentation, however intellectually sound, leads to ethically problematic conclusions.

Religious believers may also maintain that the scientific and explanatory discourse manifested in, e.g., cognitive study of religion today fails to appreciate yet another kind of limit that must be recognized. This could be called *the limits of scientific explanation*. Religious practices or forms of life, some believers may argue, can only be adequately understood “from within”; to attempt to explain them causally and/or with reference to, e.g., evolutionary history from an external non-religious point of view sets a serious limitation for the adequate understanding of religious life *qua* religious. Here the critical discussion of the recently influential cognitive paradigm in religious studies could be connected with the Wittgensteinian orientation in the philosophy of religion, which emphasizes understanding rule-governed practices and/or forms of life from within them – and comes in that respect close to pragmatism. Again, the limits between these two groups – not identical to the groups of atheists and believers – may be crossed by means of mutual recognition. And again the same kind of questions arise: can, e.g., a cognitive scholar of religion and a Wittgensteinian philosopher emphasizing the fundamental differences between religious forms of life and scientific appeals to reason and evidence even recognize each other as members of the same intellectual community of inquirers committed

to shared conceptions of reason, rationality, and science? Is religion a special case here, fundamentally different from science or everyday reasoning? Pragmatism may, by offering its middle path, facilitate such processes of mutual recognition among participants of these and other practices.

Concluding remarks and open issues

Possibly – returning to the second way in which pragmatism offers us a “promise”, namely, the existential one – an even more important boundary can be perceived to lie between those (religious or non-religious) thinkers who maintain that religious thought requires a theodicy – and who may further disagree about whether this requirement can be satisfied – and those who deny this, possibly arguing that theodicies are pseudo-religious or even blasphemous attempts to overstep yet another human limitation, our incapacity to fully understand evil and suffering.¹⁸ The problem of evil has, as is well known, developed considerably in the course of intellectual history; a general pattern of development seems to be the transformation of an originally more or less purely theological problem into a less unified ethico-political set of issues connected with questions of historical memory and recognition, that is, questions of how to adequately recognize the historical and social reality of evil and its victims and their suffering. One open question here, still insufficiently addressed, is whether there is in some usefully definable sense just one single “problem of evil” in its different historical and contemporary manifestations or whether there is, rather, a whole set of quite different problems that have little to do with each other. For example, are those contemporary theorists of evil who engage in a theological debate (e.g., van Inwagen) working on the “same” problem of evil as those who deliberately bracket theological and religious considerations,

¹⁷ I deal with this issue in Sami Pihlström, *Transcendental Guilt: Reflections on Ethical Finitude* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), chapter 4.

¹⁸ Cf. Pihlström, *Pragmatic Pluralism and the Problem of God*, chapter 5.

focusing on the historical and political dimensions of the matter (e.g., Richard Bernstein)?¹⁹ Pragmatism could illuminate this issue as well, refusing to draw a principled boundary between non-religious and explicitly religious ways of addressing the problem of evil. Such dichotomies may hinder the enhancement of understanding instead of illuminating the nature of evil; clearly, no pragmatist should stick to dichotomies that are an obstacle to inquiry.

Again, a key question that needs to be addressed in any pragmatist inquiry into evil is this: can the “theodicist” and “anti-theodicist” (as we may call them) recognize each other as belonging to the same community of inquirers (thinkers) attempting to understand, and cope with, the presence of evil and suffering in human experience? Or is the gap dividing them too wide for any genuine recognition to take place, given that the anti-theodicist may believe that the theodicist is fundamentally ethically misguided in her/his attempt to “justify God’s ways to men”? Can these two groups, or ethico-intellectual orientations, even tolerate each others’ views on the proper religious response to human suffering and evil?

Without seeking to settle this issue here, I want to address one more worry.²⁰ Pragmatism claims to take seriously the genuine human practices people engage in – religious and non-religious. Now, “common people” (whoever they are) engaging in those practices may in some cases very well find theodicies plausible and even consoling. They may, and indeed often do, speculate about God’s reasons for allowing horrible events such as the Holocaust to happen. What should the pragmatist say? This is once again a matter of recognition – and of thereby seeking sufficient common ground enabling critical inquiry. Certainly the pragmatist, while taking

seriously our common human practices, should not simply agree with those engaging in such “common practices”, any more than they should agree with conservative supernaturalist believers (e.g., creationists), for instance. Instead, the pragmatist seriously advancing inquiry into the nature of evil and into proper religious responses to it should seek to critically persuade religious believers out of their theodicist predicament. There is in pragmatist philosophy of religion ample room for normative discussion of the criteria of “genuine religiosity”, as distinguished from pseudo-religion or superstition.²¹ But there is certainly no easy solution available here, no royal road to drawing such distinctions.

I have emphasized pragmatism as a middle path between the implausible extremes of evidentialism and fideism. If there were more space and time, it would be interesting to further reflect on this proposal to develop pragmatism as a critical *via media*²² by making a comparison to an apparently very different but on a closer look interestingly related position developed by Richard Kearney, also intended as a middle ground option between traditional theisms and atheisms, offering an intriguing contribution to the issue of evil.²³ I see Kearney’s “anatheism” as analogous to the kind of pragmatism I am defending in relation to both the epistemic and the ethical interest distinguished above. Both the pragmatist (in my sense) and the atheist seek to move beyond the standard dichotomies between evidentialism and fideism, or theism and atheism; both also reject all rationalizing attempts to resolve the problem of evil as manifestations of “vicious intellectualism”.

¹⁹ See van Inwagen, *Problem of Evil* (cited above); and Richard Bernstein, *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002).

²⁰ This was raised by Niek Brunsveld in discussion.

²¹ See again Pihlström, *Pragmatic Pluralism and the Problem of God*, “Conclusion”.

²² Cf. also Sami Pihlström, *Pragmatist Metaphysics: An Essay on the Ethical Grounds of Metaphysics* (London: Continuum, 2009).

²³ Richard Kearney, *Anatheism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

In addition to pragmatism's relation to atheism, several open questions remain to be considered, and pragmatist contributions to their further elucidation are highly welcome. For example, it is still far from clear how exactly James's "will to believe" argument – his most famous but also perhaps most notorious contribution to the philosophy of religion – ought to be interpreted: does it lead to a fideistic position, or can the concept of evidence be broadened (e.g., in the manner sketched above) within the context of this idea?²⁴ Furthermore, could religious experiences (ever) play an evidential role in our choosing (or not choosing) to believe, and how does James's account of religious experiences, as spelled out in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), help us in cashing out this notion?²⁵ Moreover, one may ask whether naturalism – religious naturalism in particular – becomes too liberal if even God can be included in a naturalistic scheme along the lines proposed by Dewey in *A Common Faith*, that is, as an "active union of the ideal and the actual". Can recognition thus in a sense go too far? This is a question that must never be neglected by the pragmatist who takes seriously the theories of recognition in philosophy of religion and elsewhere.

Moreover, the fundamentally important issue of *realism* – largely set aside in this paper – is at the core of both Jamesian and Deweyan philosophy of religion,²⁶ and its history, especially in the Kantian tradition, must be taken seriously when developing pragmatism in this field. Finally, the problem framework known as "religion in the public sphere" needs further pragmatist articulations and rearticulations; this is, increasingly, a hot issue in our

multicultural societies. Accordingly, it should be clear that the pragmatist philosopher of religion will not run out of interesting issues to inquire into.

Pragmatism in no way proposes quick and easy answers to any of these and other difficult questions. Yet, it does show a way in which answers – painful and difficult ones – can be sought and possibly found, thereby also keeping the questions themselves alive, and *recognizing* them as serious philosophical questions. This is its melioristic promise: neither optimistic (that is, recognition is not easy) nor pessimistic (that is, recognition, or the increased understanding it may yield, is not impossible either).

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²⁴ See, again, Rydenfelt and Pihlström (eds.), *William James on Religion*.

²⁵ Cf. Brunsveld, *The Many Faces of Religious Truth* (cited above), chapter 10; as well as Brunsveld's contribution to Rydenfelt and Pihlström (eds.), *William James on Religion*. James's *Varieties* is available in *The Works of William James*, eds. Frederick Burkhardt *et al.* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1985).

²⁶ As I try to argue at some length in *Pragmatic Pluralism and the Problem of God* (forthcoming).