

THE EMANCIPATORY POTENTIAL OF PRAGMATIST PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

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ABSTRACT: Pragmatist philosophy of religion functions as a critical mediator between various rival positions and conflicting systems of belief in the philosophy of religion, not only between theism and atheism but also between meta-level views such as evidentialism and fideism, or realism and antirealism. This paper argues that pragmatism can perform this critical task best if it is not subordinated to any apologetic project of defending (or attacking) religious belief. In this context, the essay criticizes Michael R. Slater's recent interpretation and development of pragmatist philosophy of religion. However, it is also argued that pragmatist philosophy of religion, in order to carry out its emancipatory project, should take a definite stance in (at least) one specific area within contemporary philosophy of religion: pragmatism ought to be strongly committed to antitheodicism (as opposed to any defense of theodicies) in the debate on the problem of evil. Antitheodicism itself manifests significant emancipatory potential: pragmatism may emancipate philosophers of religion from the need to theoretically "solve" the problem of evil in the first place. William James's views on evil are briefly discussed in the essay as an illustration of this.

1. Introduction

Pragmatist philosophy of religion functions in many ways as a critical mediator – just as William James proposed pragmatism in general to function – between various rival positions and conflicting systems of belief in the philosophy of religion, not only between theism and atheism but also between meta-level views such as evidentialism and fideism, or realism and antirealism. I will in this paper argue that pragmatism can perform this critical task best if it is *not* subordinated to any apologetic project of defending (or attacking) religious belief. In this context, I will take issue with Michael R. Slater's recent interpretation and development of pragmatist philosophy of religion. However, I will also argue that pragmatist philosophy of religion, in order to carry out its emancipatory project, should take a definite stance in (at least) one particular area within contemporary philosophy of religion: pragmatism ought to be strongly committed to what I am calling *antitheodicism* (as opposed to any defense of theodicies)

in the debate on the problem of evil. This is because an antitheodacist approach to evil is, for Jamesian pragmatism in particular, a frame for any ethically serious investigation of the pragmatic value of religious belief (and, more generally, a frame for *any* ethically serious investigation of other ideas and worldviews, metaphysical ones included). We might say that antitheodicism itself manifests significant emancipatory potential: pragmatism may emancipate philosophers of religion from the need to theoretically "solve" the problem of evil in the first place, and this is part of the emancipatory project of pragmatist philosophy of religion more generally. Whether this leads to a tension within pragmatist philosophy of religion itself needs to be investigated further, though such an investigation can barely be begun in this essay.

After having assessed and to some extent criticized Slater's reading of James (and pragmatist philosophy of religion more generally), I will very briefly canvass, in a broad outline, my approach to the way in which James in my view ethically "grounds" metaphysics and "frames" this project in the problem of evil. That theme is much more comprehensively explored in some of my other on-going work on James.¹ It should be noted, furthermore, that I cannot properly define "emancipation" here. What I will offer is a set of remarks on how pragmatism could be regarded as emancipatory at several different levels: at a metaphilosophical level as a Jamesian-like "critical mediator", and in relation to more specific questions in the philosophy of religion, such as the issue of realism and the problem of evil in particular. There is no need to believe that all these cases of emancipatory philosophizing would inevitably fall under a single general concept. However, it may be useful to investigate them on the basis of a notion of emancipation that may possess a family resemblance character.

¹ See Sami Pihlström, "The Cries of the Wounded in *Pragmatism*", hitherto unpublished ms. (partly presented at various conferences in 2014-15, forthcoming in an updated version).

Finally, my paper remains somewhat programmatic in the sense that I am primarily here interested in criticizing certain anti-emancipatory tendencies (shared by pragmatists like Slater) in contemporary philosophy of religion that pragmatism ought to set out to correct. Much further work would be needed to actually carry out the kind of philosophical emancipation whose possibility and pragmatist promise I will here try to defend.

2. James's anti-apologetic attitude: taking issue with Slater

I want to approach my topic by first critically commenting on Michael Slater's recent views. Slater's new book, *Pragmatism and the Philosophy of Religion* (2014),² is highly welcome, as it is one of the few substantial studies on pragmatist philosophy of religion that integrate historical scholarship on the classical (as well as more recent) pragmatists with a systematic argument in favor of a carefully articulated position in the philosophy of religion. However, I also find the book problematic in a variety of ways.

Slater's work is very well structured. He first focuses on key pragmatist figures and then moves on to take up systematic issues and arguments in the philosophy of religion, equipped with the pragmatist perspective reached earlier. In chapters 1 and 2, the focus is on William James – on *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, in particular (rather than, say, *Pragmatism*) – and in chapter 3 on Charles S. Peirce, particularly on his “neglected argument” for the reality of God. Slater seeks to show that these two classical pragmatists were sympathetic to supernaturalism and theism, in contrast to John Dewey, whose naturalism, secularism, and “accommodationism” are critically discussed in chapter 4, as a prelude to a thoroughgoing critique of two

contemporary Deweyan naturalistic pragmatists, Richard Rorty and Philip Kitcher (chapter 5). Having defended supernaturalism and criticized naturalism, Slater argues for two other broad positions toward the end of his inquiry: (weak) metaphysical realism, as well as the view that theism can be rationally and argumentatively supported (and, conversely, that standard evidentialist attempts to defeat it can be successfully met by the theist). His overall argument seeks to demonstrate that pragmatism need not be committed to either (ontological) naturalism or antirealism in the philosophy of religion but can and should join reformed epistemologists and other “Christian philosophers” in a campaign for supernaturalist theism, traditionally understood, offering rational support for theistic beliefs. Accordingly, he challenges the view that pragmatism simply, as many pragmatists have maintained, entails naturalism; on the contrary, “anti-naturalism” or supernaturalism remains in his view a “viable option” for pragmatists (pp. 2-3).

Slater's analysis of James's ideas is a learned contribution to the discussion of James's relevance in the philosophy of religion and religious studies (or “science of religions”). I believe Slater is right to emphasize that a certain kind of *open-mindedness* is one of the key virtues of James's account of religion: the question regarding the existence or non-existence of an “unseen order” is left open, and a scientific study of religion need not be committed to the denial of supernaturalism on the outset (p. 28). This openness is, we might say, what a general pragmatically fallibilist attitude requires us to maintain in all inquiries we undertake, and inquiries in the philosophy of religion are no exception. James, if he were alive today, “would almost certainly be critical of contemporary cognitive scientific explanations of religion” (p. 29) – primarily because those explanations tend to reduce scientifically acceptable accounts of religion into a very narrow set of all possible accounts that could be considered. Here it is easy to agree with Slater. The Jamesian spirit is also well maintained in the

² Michael R. Slater, *Pragmatism and the Philosophy of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). I will cite Slater's volume by providing the page numbers in the text. See also my review of Slater's book in *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 50:2 (2014).

later chapters where Slater defends “doxastic pluralism” about an irreducible plurality of religious and metaphysical beliefs (e.g., p. 181).

Where it is more difficult to agree with him is in the analogy he sees between James’s views on the epistemology of mystical experience and contemporary Christian philosophers’ (e.g., Alvin Plantinga’s and William Alston’s) views on this topic (pp. 44ff.). I think here Slater reads James too realistically; indeed, I have criticized his earlier writings on James in relation to these issues in more detail elsewhere.³ However, on the whole, the treatment of James is balanced and careful, based on a close reading of *The Varieties* in particular – though lacking a comparable close attention to what James is trying to do in *Pragmatism*. James’s general antievidentialism is well captured by Slater when he maintains that “an adequate philosophical defense of religious faith does not require producing arguments or evidence that would convince any rational agent to believe” (p. 56). In this respect, James is, admittedly, close to those Christian philosophers who emphasize the need to contextualize the epistemic justification of religious beliefs into our doxastic practices. But in other ways the analogy may be misleading, because those same Christian philosophers, unlike James, are involved in an apologetic business. James is much more open-minded, leaving the atheistic option open as well.

In any case, James’s defense of the rational possibility of religious faith is itself contextualized *ethically*: the problem of evil is for him the starting point for any adequate philosophical consideration of the metaphysics of theism. What James rejects is the “vicious intellectualists” (i.e., the Hegelian monistic idealists’) “metaphysical monster”, the absolute. I am not entirely convinced that Slater’s account of James succeeds in bringing this antitheodicism into view. Fortunately, Slater

recognizes that James’s “fallibilism, pluralism, and religious individualism do not mix easily with most forms of religious apologetics” (p. 75). It would, in my view, be helpful to cash out James’s criticism of such apologetics more explicitly in terms of evidentialism and antievidentialism. (I will return to the issue of theodicism vs. antitheodicism shortly.)

After the treatment of James, Slater continues his argument for the compatibility of pragmatism and supernaturalist theism by examining Peirce’s “neglected argument”, again comparing it with contemporary Christian philosophers’ arguments for the explanatory power of theism. Among these one finds Plantinga’s account of theism as a properly basic belief, as well as the traditional Calvinist ideas about *sensus divinitatis*, revived, for instance, in Alston’s theory of “perceiving God”. My worry is that Slater here turns Peirce into something like a reformed epistemologist in Plantinga’s and Alston’s style. While the neglected argument surely does offer itself to re-readings of this kind, given the enormous complexity of Peirce’s views, it also seems to me that the entire context in which one is required to produce complicated theoretical arguments for theism as an allegedly explanatory hypothesis is relatively foreign to Peirce, for whom belief in the reality of God could function just as a natural “attunement” of the human mind. The desperate need to *argue theoretically* for or against theistic beliefs seems to be a product of an intellectual culture different from Peirce’s (though perhaps not entirely different from James’s).

After having sympathetically discussed his two favorite pragmatists, Peirce and James, Slater turns to the more naturalistically (or at least anti-supernaturalistically) oriented later pragmatists, beginning from Dewey. Here the argument takes a problematic turn. In my view, it is false to say that Dewey’s naturalist interpretation of religion was “reductively” naturalistic (p. 117). It is true that Dewey dismisses theistic arguments (p. 120), but Slater offers no good reasons

³ Sami Pihlström, *Pragmatic Pluralism and the Problem of God* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), chapter 4.

why they shouldn't be missed in Dewey's way. He also begs the question against Dewey who seeks to revise theism in a thoroughgoing way when he says that no traditional theist thinks of God merely symbolically (p. 127). Of course no traditional theist does so, but the very point of Dewey's rearticulation of the notion of God – admittedly vague and controversial – is precisely to develop such a symbolic reading, possibly to some extent comparable to what has been later offered by "Wittgensteinian" philosophers of religion (who are, of course, at least equally controversial among traditional theists, as well as atheists). Similarly with the issues concerning the rationality of religious belief: while we "will find very little in the way of actual argument against the rationality of belief in God" in Dewey (p. 129), the question is why we need such arguments, rather than needing a reconsideration or even transformation of the entire "game" of arguing for and against the rationality of such beliefs.

For these reasons, my own approach to pragmatist philosophy of religion differs considerably from Slater's, because I have never regarded any apologetic projects (theistic or atheistic) as either necessary to pragmatism or philosophically very interesting. On the contrary, I think the pragmatist, especially the Deweyan pragmatist, may entirely legitimately start from the generally (or at least academically) perceived cultural situation that we may call, following Max Weber, the "disenchantment" (*Entzauberung*) of the world, which many intellectuals simply find part of enlightened common sense today – even if we in a sense live in a "post-secular" culture that no longer believes in a smooth secularization process. I suppose that only if you in some sense regard such a condition of disenchantment as your starting point can you find philosophy of religion *existentially urgent* in the way James (though perhaps not Dewey) does. That is, I do not believe, as Slater does, that it would somehow be philosophically illegitimate or irrational to start one's inquiry from such an assumption in contemporary discussions of religion – even if this position might itself be criticized or rejected in the end.

This is also a major disagreement between Slater and the contemporary pragmatists he discusses at some length, viz., Kitcher and Rorty. He maintains that philosophers tend to "overestimate the rational grounds for secularism" and to "underestimate the rational grounds for traditional forms of religious faith such as theism" (p. 151). This may or may not be true, but Slater himself fails to address the traditional arguments against theism in any detail, or to argue against those arguments, which, I suppose, he should do in order to tell us that those arguments need not be considered decisive. Yet, I do think, and here I agree with him, that a (pragmatist) investigation in the philosophy of religion *may* even quite fundamentally lead us to change our views on disenchantment, even to embrace a partial "re-enchantment" of the ("post-secular") world. This might, however, happen in a way very different from Slater's proposed way, e.g., through a certain kind of moral argument, or possibly a Deweyan-like redescription. In the spirit of fallibilism, again, I would insist on the possibility of revising one's theistic or atheistic beliefs in the course of inquiry, and I would suggest that we keep this possibility *genuinely* open.

One problem in Slater's project is that he constantly charges the critics of (supernaturalist) religion, including Deweyan naturalists, for begging the question against those who believe that there is still rational support available for supernaturalistically interpreted theism. Well, it is hard to judge who is actually begging the question here. The critic might just point out that Slater himself offers no response to the general *Entzauberung* we have been facing since the Enlightenment, or to the specific arguments against, say, the traditional proofs of God's existence that philosophers like David Hume and Immanuel Kant provided. In particular, Kant's devastating criticism of all the traditional proofs ought to be taken very seriously by the contemporary pragmatist – but so should Kant's own "moral proof".⁴

⁴ I have tried to argue in *Pragmatic Pluralism and the Problem of God* (ibid.) that pragmatist philosophy of religion, especially James's ideas, should be interpreted

Another major problem in Slater's book, already hinted at above, is that he fails to take *the problem of evil* seriously enough (except for, e.g., brief discussions in the context of James and Peirce: see pp. 71-72, 91). If one is as much concerned with the problem of offering rational support for theism as he is, one should consider in detail the ways in which the problem of evil has been seen as a "defeater" of theism. That is, Slater should consider the employment of the problem of evil in atheistic argumentation, and respond accordingly. Given that he doesn't find much support for that kind of argumentation against theistic beliefs in naturalistic pragmatism, he should at least pause to reflect why this is so. Perhaps it is so because for naturalistic pragmatists like Dewey, traditional theism is problematic to begin with, and there is no need to employ a heavy machinery of arguments from evil against it; and perhaps also because less naturalistic pragmatists, including James in particular, didn't find the problem of evil a problem that either needs to be theoretically solved or that could be put into work as a piece of atheistic argumentation in the first place. In my view, James never viewed the issue of evil in such an argumentative context at all. On the contrary, evil seems to function, for James, as a *frame* for the entire discussion on pragmatism and melioristic religion in *Pragmatism*. However, this is precisely the aspect of Jamesian philosophy of religion that Slater does not discuss, possibly because it doesn't really fit his reading of James as a philosopher engaging in a traditional project of defending supernaturalism. (Curiously, though not entirely neglected by Slater, neither "evil" nor "meliorism" are listed in his index.)

What Slater does offer us in the way of theodicies is the observation that according to Peirce one might maintain that "an overarching divine purpose [...] requires the existence of evil as a condition for growth, including not only intellectual growth but also the ongoing development of the universe", anticipating (he says) both John Hick's "soul-

making theodicy" and Plantinga's "*felix culpa* theodicy" (p. 91). If Peirce's philosophy of religion anticipates such modern (or reinvigorates classical) theodicies, so much the worse for Peirce's philosophy of religion – and this is something I am confident James would have urged, too. James's philosophy of religion is resolutely antitheodicist in comparison to any of these theodicies, including Peirce's (and especially Slater's contemporary philosophical and theological heroes'). Again, no wonder Slater fails to substantially engage with James's (in contrast to Peirce's) engagements with evil. The way in which James responds to evil as an *ethical* challenge prior to any theistic or atheistic commitments would not fit the way in which Slater makes James play the apologetically shaped game of arguments pro and contra religious belief.

Now, a treatment of pragmatist philosophy of religion remains, in my view, seriously incomplete and inadequate without a substantial discussion of evil. This is not because the existence of evil would be a premise in an argument against theism, or in favor of atheism, that would then have to be refuted by the pragmatist (such as, possibly, James) seeking to defend the rational acceptability of religious belief. On the contrary, for James, the problem of evil defines the entire context within which it is so much as possible to engage in rational argumentation about these matters. It sets the project on an ethically serious path. It is only by responding to the problem of evil that philosophy of religion – or its emancipatory project as articulated by pragmatism – can so much as get started. The problem of evil is not an additional problem to be solved after the other major problems, e.g., God's existence or the rationality of theism, have been settled. It is a problem opening a perspective on these other problems – and, more comprehensively, on all problems of human significance. I would even go as far as to argue that the problem of evil is necessary for an ethically adequate development of the pragmatic method.⁵

and further developed in this broadly Kantian spirit.

⁵ Cf. my unpublished paper, "The Cries of the Wounded in *Pragmatism*", for further reflection on this.

Of course, to say that the problem of evil ought to be taken much more seriously than it often is taken by pragmatist philosophers of religion (including Slater) is not to say that the naturalistic pragmatists Slater criticizes would have succeeded in this. It seems to me that James rather uniquely stands out among the pragmatists as a philosopher who genuinely sought to develop an adequate ethical response to evil. Most of the others, given their scientific progressivism (especially in Dewey's case) or postmodern relativism (in Rorty's case), have basically brushed the problem of evil under the carpet. They didn't, or don't, take it seriously – or at least not as seriously as James did. Only for James is the problem of evil a frame of or a perspective on the project of pragmatist philosophy of religion in general, a contextualizing factor making possible the kind of ethically concerned approach – eventually leading up to the entanglement of ethical, metaphysical, and religious/theological issues and beliefs – that James tried to develop. The ethics-metaphysics entanglement that (I would argue) is part and parcel of Jamesian pragmatism could not even be made full sense of independently of the problem of evil. The metaphysical issues concerning, say, God's reality or monism vs. pluralism won't even get off the ground unless we first take the problem of evil seriously. Our responses to this problem to a large extent determine our responses to those metaphysical questions. (I will briefly return to these matters toward the end of the essay.)

3. Pragmatic realism

This kind of pragmatist philosophy of religion according to which, e.g., the metaphysical views on theism vs. atheism are dependent on our ways of dealing with evil will undoubtedly be very difficult, or impossible, to appreciate by someone like Slater who defends a realist and basically evidentialist account of pragmatism. It seems to me clear that Slater just begins from a realistic picture (e.g., p. 108) that is too simple to accommodate Peirce's, James's, and Dewey's (or the later pragmatists') very complex views.

Specifically, for Slater, realism does not seem to be a *transcendental* problem at all. While the pragmatists have generally avoided this Kantian terminology, it seems to me that their approach to realism and its alternatives can be redescribed in such a vocabulary, precisely because it is not a matter of just maintaining a commonsensical realistic view about what there is but a matter of inquiring into how far the human mind, or human practices, (co-)constitute reality as we know it. Thus, I have previously argued that pragmatism, or Jamesian pragmatism at least, seeks to move beyond standard realisms and antirealisms, as well as standard evidentialisms and antievidentialisms (e.g., fideism), in the philosophy of religion. I think we still ought to emphasize why in fact it seeks to do so. This is, I believe, because those standard mainstream views are not only problematically monistic, hence silencing legitimate "voices" that, ethically, need to be heard, but also incapable of responding to evil.

Thus, I am also afraid that Slater simply does not appreciate what I mean by "pragmatic theological realism" in my (re)interpretation of Dewey as such a realist that he cites (p. 126, n19). Of course Dewey rejected traditional supernaturalist beliefs. But he could still have been a "pragmatic realist" in a reinterpreted sense even when it comes to reconceptualizing the very idea of God. Slater's footnote about Kant (p. 154, n2), in which he rather straightforwardly takes Kant to be an antirealist in metaphysics, is revealing here. Slater's almost total failure to address the transcendental (Kantian) dimension of the realism issue leads him to too easily contrast realism and antirealism within pragmatism. By starting from a shallow (and not fully textually supported) antirealist reading of Kant, he closes all interesting discussions of realism and transcendental philosophy in pragmatism, and in philosophy of religion – or, better, doesn't let them be opened at all in the way in which a truly emancipatory pragmatism should let them arise.⁶

⁶ Admittedly, Slater has defended his "weak metaphysical realism" in earlier publications, and there is

Slater even sympathizes with some versions of the “fine-tuning” (design) argument for theism (pp. 189ff.). Here, if not earlier, the more naturalistically inclined pragmatist will drop out of the discussion. On the other hand, I think Slater does make an important point – a point that is worth emphasizing precisely in the context of mainstream Anglo-American philosophy of religion today, a context to which he in a way seeks to accommodate the pragmatists – when he *denies* that theistic arguments should be understood as “serving a primarily *apologetic* function, namely that of convincing non-theists to believe in God through sheer force of reason” (p. 193). They definitely should not be understood as serving such a function, and they might still play some role in a religious person’s way of thinking of God.

I also agree with Slater that the (Jamesian) pragmatist ought to maintain, against stronger naturalists like Kitcher, that the assumption that naturalism is the only credible ontological view is “objectionable on ethical grounds, on account of its intolerance of other reasonable overbeliefs” (p. 174). But equally objectionable on ethical grounds is, we may argue, the theodicist attempt to theoretically account for the reality of evil. Jamesian pragmatism in the philosophy of religion, and Jamesian pragmatism more generally, starts from the rejection of such attempts. This is one (but only one) reason why a proper Jamesian pragmatism is not

no need to repeat all those arguments here. Nor is there, however, any need for me to repeat here the defense of a very different picture of realism-cum-idealism in pragmatism that I have elsewhere offered, thereby also explicitly criticizing Slater. Another problem in Slater’s attempt to reconcile pragmatism with theistic arguments based on metaphysical realism is the easiness at which he helps himself to the vocabulary and methodology of “possible worlds” in his treatment of Plantinga’s modal version of the ontological argument (p. 184). Here the pragmatist should pause to reflect on what pragmatic difference it makes to postulate possible worlds in the first place. I am afraid that this way of employing the metaphysics of possible worlds is far from Peirce’s doctrine of “real possibility”, based on his “extreme scholastic realism”.

apologetic *at all*. On the contrary, the key point of pragmatist philosophy of religion is to emancipate us, and philosophy of religion in general, from both apologetics and theodicism, two intellectual and ethical vices that often go together in mainstream philosophy of religion.

In a recent paper, my senior Finnish colleague Simo Knuuttila criticizes pragmatist philosophy of religion, insofar as it remains “antirealist”, of a kind of “double life” – also interestingly comparable, he suggests, to religious writers’, such as Martin Luther’s, views on how a Christian lives the double life of a worldly person on the one hand and a converted Christian on the other hand (i.e., “my own” life in space and time vs. the timelessness of “Christ in me”).⁷ “Pragmatic religious non-rationalism”, he says, entails acting on assumptions “one believes to be false”. Hence, there is a sense in which it entails a kind of self-deception. I would argue, however, that a truly pragmatist philosophy of religion may also emancipate us from this demand to set all our beliefs on a *single* scale of truth vs. falsity. It makes, if you will, a *legitimate* double life possible for us – or at least this could be regarded as a key aim in the pragmatist’s struggle with issues of reason and faith. However, we might say that one problem in Slater’s approach to pragmatist philosophy of religion is that, given its commitment to realism, it makes it impossible for us to react to the “double life” charge in this manner. Slater’s position makes pragmatist philosophy of religion less emancipatory than it could be. Admittedly, the notion of emancipation at work here is more specific than the general metaphilosophical one associated with the idea of pragmatism as a critical mediator between rival views, but the two are related. Precisely by allowing a kind of “double life” – one’s taking seriously both religious and scientific orientations in one’s life, for instance – pragmatism emancipates our *weltanschaulich* lives more generally.

⁷ Simo Knuuttila, “Transformation of Religion”, ms. (2014), forthcoming.

**4. James's ethical metaphysics:
the problem of evil as a "frame"**

So how exactly *does* James develop an antitheodist and (hence) antiapologetic philosophy of religion, joined with (what I see as) his ethical grounding of metaphysics? I will only very briefly try to explain how I see this matter.

James's *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (1907)⁸ is rather minimalistic when it comes to explicit discussions of ethics or moral theories. The book is most famous – and in fact rather notorious – for its defense of what has become known, and has often been ridiculed, as the “pragmatist theory of truth”, according to which truth is more or less coextensive, or even conceptually reducible to, usefulness or satisfactoriness. However, far from subscribing to such an extremely implausible theory of truth (which I will not discuss here in any detail), *Pragmatism* is also one of those writings by James that upon a closer reading do turn out to contain substantial ethical insights and reflections, though not explicitly formulated moral theories or principles. Those insights and reflections are developed in conjunction with James's treatment of religion and metaphysics. Therefore, in order to understand the ethical picture James defends in *Pragmatism* (and, by extension, elsewhere in his *oeuvre*), one also needs to pay attention to the religious and metaphysical aspects of his work.

James's “pragmatic method”, as articulated in *Pragmatism*, is reinterpretable as a philosophical method seeking to ground metaphysical inquiry in ethical reflection and evaluation. James introduces the pragmatic method – originally formulated by Peirce in the 1870s⁹ – in Lecture II by suggesting that when

seeking to determine the meaning of our “ideas” (e.g., concepts, conceptions, beliefs, theories, and worldviews), we should look into the possible (conceivable) practical effects they and/or their objects might have in human experience and habits of action. (Note, however, that James is, again notoriously, relatively unclear here, because he is not as careful as Peirce to distinguish the practical effects of ideas from the practical effects of the objects of those ideas.) In Lectures III and IV, he illustrates this method by applying it to some metaphysical problems and beliefs, including theism vs. materialism (atheism), the concept of substance, freedom, as well as monism vs. pluralism. On my reading (which I won't be able to substantiate here), in all these cases, the pragmatic method is a method of assessing the rival views (“ideas”) from an ethical perspective.

But what does it mean, for James, to evaluate our ideas, concepts, or beliefs from an ethical perspective? The pragmatic method will remain hopelessly vague if it simply encourages us to look for the practical meaning of metaphysical (and religious/theological) views in their ethical impact, unless we have some idea about how to go on investigating that impact.¹⁰ Here, I believe, we should take the further step of interpreting the pragmatic method as a method of taking seriously the “cries of the wounded” (a phrase that does not occur in *Pragmatism*)¹¹ in relation to the various metaphysical beliefs or theories that could be proposed regarding these matters at issue. It is a method that looks into the possible futures of the world in which we live, focusing on what the different metaphysical views “promise” and on whether they can function as philosophies of hope, especially from the point of view of the “wounded”, the

⁸ All references will be to the critical edition of *Pragmatism* included in *The Works of William James*, eds. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1975-88 [1975]).

⁹ See, in particular, Charles S. Peirce, “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” (1878), in *The Essential Peirce* (2 vols), vol. 1, ed. Nathan Houser (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

¹⁰ I think my own previous work on this – cf., e.g., Sami Pihlström, *Pragmatist Metaphysics: An Essay on the Ethical Grounds of Ontology* (London: Continuum, 2009) – doesn't go deep enough in this respect.

¹¹ This phrase comes from William James, “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” (1891), in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (1897), also in *The Works of William James* (1979).

sufferers or the victims of evil. This is a profoundly ethical undertaking. Far from maintaining that our metaphysical problems ought to be solved first – or that we could simply get rid of them – in order to turn to ethical problems later, James is suggesting that we should begin our metaphysical inquiries from the ethical examination of the practical relevance of the rival metaphysical ideas that have been or can be proposed, and that this ethical examination can only take place if we focus on how “the wounded” would respond to this or that world-picture being true.

This discussion of what I call the ethical grounds of metaphysics (and, more generally, the metaphysics–ethics entanglement) in *Pragmatism* ought to be placed in a context of a more generally ethically oriented reflection on issues of fundamental human importance, especially evil and death. As both the opening and the closing of *Pragmatism* indicate, James is deeply conscious of the significance of the problem of evil, and he is strongly opposed to any philosophical and theological attempts (e.g., theodicies) to explain evil away or to justify its existence. This is another example of Jamesian pragmatist metaphysics ultimately grounded in ethics. The metaphysical controversy between monism and pluralism, in particular (addressed in Lecture IV), invokes the problem of evil. James offers an ethical argument against monism and in favor of pluralism by pointing out that the former, unlike the latter, leads to an irresolvable theodicy problem.

Moreover, the problem of evil is not merely an example by means of which we may illustrate the Jamesian pragmatic method. Much more importantly, it offers, as already suggested above, a frame for the entire project of *Pragmatism* (and for James’s pragmatism more generally). The problem of evil provides an ethical motivation for exploring, pragmatically, metaphysical issues that ultimately need to be linked with ethics. This exploration takes place in a world in which theodicies are no longer possible (if they ever were). No theodicy

consolation is an option, James argues, for an ethically serious thinker. What we may call Jamesian antitheodicy is therefore a crucial element of his pragmatic method (framed by the problem of evil).

Pragmatism as a whole, then, is a profoundly ethical work – or so I am willing to argue. It does not contain any theory of ethics, and arguably James is opposed to the very idea of a single correct ethical theory.¹² But it does maintain that philosophical issues, whenever they are pragmatically investigated, can only be adequately explored in an irreducibly ethical context. For James, unlike the scientifically (and politically) progressivist meliorist pragmatist Dewey (and most other pragmatists), ethics is primarily an *existential* matter inseparably tied up with death, evil, and our general human finitude and vulnerability – and, therefore, with religious and metaphysical concerns about the ultimate nature of reality. In this respect, James is significantly closer to thinkers like Soren Kierkegaard, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Jean-Paul Sartre than to his fellow pragmatists like Dewey (or even Peirce). Ethics in general, and evil in particular – as a frame of ethics, as urging us into adopting the moral perspective, as “hurting us into morality”, to borrow a phrase from Avishai Margalit¹³ – is a compelling issue for the “sick soul” rather than the “healthy-minded” (even though this terminology, again, is not used in *Pragmatism*).¹⁴ In other words, to adopt a truly ethical attitude to the cries of the wounded is to embrace a fundamentally *melancholic* view of the world.

¹² See, for an excellent argument to this effect, Sergio Franzese, *The Ethics of Energy: William James’s Moral Philosophy in Focus* (Frankfurt: Ontos, 2008).

¹³ See Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2002).

¹⁴ For James’s views on the “sick soul”, see the relevant chapters of his *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), also included in *The Works of William James* (1985). My references are to the New American Library edition (1958).

5. Conclusion

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James tells us that the sick souls are those who, in contrast to the “healthy-minded”, maintain that “the evil aspects of our life are of its very essence, and that the world’s meaning most comes home to us when we lay them most to heart” (VRE 114). The sick souls, then, are those “who cannot so swiftly throw off the burden of the consciousness of evil, but are congenitally fated to suffer from its presence” (VRE 116). Reflecting on the reality of evil and suffering, we may become “melancholy metaphysicians” (VRE 121), acknowledging human helplessness and sadness even when life seems happy and easy. James concludes, as we saw, that “[t]he completest religions would [...] seem to be those in which the pessimistic elements are best developed” – that is, “religions of deliverance”, according to which one has to “die to an unreal life” in order to be “born into the real life” (VRE 139). It is, in brief, the sick soul whose investigations of ethics, metaphysics, and philosophy of religion are “framed” by the problem of evil. It is also, one might argue, the sick soul whose approach to these fundamental issues is truly emancipatory. The sick soul perceives the futility of offering a theoretical resolution to the problem of evil.

The concept of the sick soul is, for James, a concept to be employed in the psychological and philosophical description and explanation of certain kind of religious attitudes and ways of living and thinking. However, given the close relation between religion and ethics in James, this concept can, I believe, be used in ethical contexts bracketing the actual religious aspects of, say, conversion. We may say that the sick soul takes ethically seriously the evil and suffering around her/him in the world even if s/he never experiences this as a *religious* problem. The sick soul, then, acknowledges that (as James puts it toward the end of *Pragmatism*) “something permanently drastic and bitter” (P 141) may always be in store for us, however successfully we fight against evil and suffering.

Does one actually have to *be* a sick soul in the Jamesian sense in order to be able to be ethical at all? Well, I think the answer is no, in a sense roughly comparable to the sense in which you – returning to the realism issue for a moment – do not have to be a transcendental idealist (in a Kantian context) in order to have objective experiences, even if you do have to be a transcendental idealist (according to Kant) in order to be able to philosophically account for the possibility of objective experience. Thus, we may reconstruct the Jamesian argument as maintaining that you must be a sick soul in order to be able to account for the possibility of ethics. The problem we have been dealing with throughout this paper is (in non-Jamesian terms) transcendental rather than empirical, and insofar as pragmatist philosophers of religion like Slater fail to recognize this, they cut the emancipatory and more generally human potential of pragmatist inquiry into religion. The concept of the sick soul, like antitheodicism, is *constitutive of the possibility of the ethical*, not for anyone’s actually being, or failing to be, ethical.

Insofar as we detach the notion of the sick soul from its immediate context in the psychology of religion, we may say that James writes in an intellectual and spiritual setting comparable to the one occupied by Richard Bernstein, Susan Neiman, and some other contemporary philosophical and political theorists of evil, a context in which evil is a challenge to our attempt to find life meaningful at all – a setting *very* different from the theoretical context typical of mainstream evidentialist and theodacist philosophers of religion.¹⁵ Acknowledging

¹⁵ See, e.g., Richard Bernstein, *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002); Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); for a mainstream attempt at a theodacist argument in philosophy of religion, see Peter van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006). I criticize van Inwagen from a perspective largely indebted to (though not identical with) Bernstein’s and Neiman’s in Sami Pihlström, *Taking Evil Seriously* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Pivot, 2014; for a discussion of James and the sick soul in that book, see chapter 2).

evil and the potential disharmony and even absurdity of life (individual and social), as well as the limits of philosophical theorization and reflection on these matters, while affirming an active, melioristic attitude (against an unavoidably tragic background), can be seen as a key Jamesian contribution to the problem of evil and to the challenge to reflect on the relations between religion, metaphysics, and morality arising from this problem. According to James, as I read him, we should never philosophically theorize in a theodist manner about the potential “harmonious” justification, accommodation, or meaningfulness of evil and suffering. We should, rather, acknowledge evil and its victims by not attempting to explain it, or their sufferings, away; and we should simply fight against evil instead of accepting it by justifying it. Moreover, we should fight against the corruption of acceptance.

A more comprehensive undertaking along these lines would seek to show that this fight against evil (and against corrupted theodicies) is part and parcel of the pragmatic method itself. It is by employing this method that we turn our attention to ethics whenever we are concerned with the world in any allegedly or apparently non-ethical sense – conceptually, metaphysically, or perhaps religiously – and it is through that kind of reflective attention that we inquire into what needs to be done by listening, as carefully as we can, to what James called the cries of the wounded. Only the sick soul, rather than the apologetic theologian, really hears those cries. The pragmatist ethical thinker *is*, on James’s view, a sick soul in this (transcendental) sense. This condition for the possibility of ethics, for the possibility of the ethical point of view itself, can only be reached if we learn to appreciate the way in which the Jamesian pragmatic method is framed by the recognition of evil.

This is also related to the double life issue briefly touched above. We may simultaneously take the ethical task fundamentally seriously, striving for what James often called the “strenuous mood”, and accept (with a kind of Stoic resignation) that there is in the end little we can do, that we will inevitably remain infinitely far from having done what we ought to do.¹⁶ Again, as in the realism case, the double life is not as catastrophic here as it might seem to be. The ethically serious frame – the problem of evil, seen as an infinitely pressing existential problem for us – legitimizes even those more relaxed moments of life during which we do recognize our finitude. This is, again, part of the emancipatory project, or perhaps promise, of pragmatist philosophy of religion. Pragmatism, at its best, can emancipate us from dealing with various pseudo-issues that stand in the way of deep understanding of religious forms of life. Among such issues are apologetic concerns with theism vs. atheism, as well as theodist attempts to deal with evil and suffering.¹⁷

¹⁶ This does not mean, however, that I would accept John Lachs’s views, as presented in his *Stoic Pragmatism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012). Lachs makes things too easy for us, because he does not find the “infinite” ethical challenge a genuine challenge at all. In my view, the Stoic resignation can (legitimately) come only after we have first found this *the* key challenge in our lives.

¹⁷ This paper was initially drafted at the kind invitation by Rebecca Farinas – even though I was unable to participate in the conference at Fordham University to which she invited me – and then scheduled to be (partly) presented at the European Pragmatism Panel in the SAAP 2015 conference in Grand Rapids, MI, which I couldn’t participate in, either, due to weather and traffic problems in New York City. Thus, I ended up writing the paper while being stranded in New York (which is not the worst thing that could happen in one’s life). There is some minor overlap with my review of Slater’s book cited in note 2, as well as with my much more comprehensive essay on James and the “cries of the wounded” (cited in note 1). I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments.