
The Problem of Evil

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Abstract

Pragmatist philosophy of religion is often seen as focusing on the experiential "goods" of religion actually or possibly manifested in human practices. Pragmatism could be criticized for its insufficient attention on the problem of evil – one of the traditional issues in theology and philosophy of religion. This panel offers critical perspectives on the problem of evil within pragmatist philosophy of religion. The problem of evil – related but not restricted to the classical controversies over theodicy – turns out to be a highly significant issue in pragmatism.

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Panel Chair: Sami Pihlström

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FAILING BETTER: EXPLORING A PRAGMATIC *VIA NEGATIVA*

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Being anti-essentialistic and pluralistic, pragmatism offers no definite account of the good in a strong metaphysical sense. Hence, the question of moral relativism arises. Doesn't the lack of an absolute conception of the good lead to a situation, in which there are no criteria for qualifying something as evil? And how would that affect the concept of meliorism that clearly depends on a notion of 'the good' (or at least 'the better')? A promising way of handling these questions is opened via a negative account, taking corruption, failure, disturbance as a starting point for thinking about morals.

PRAGMATIST ANTI-THEODICY AND ITS KANTIAN ROOTS

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Kant's "Theodicy Essay" (1791) is a relatively neglected piece of Kant's writings. Kant there seeks to show that traditional rationalizing, speculative theodicies necessarily fail as attempts to justify the existence of evil and suffering. Indeed, Kant has been regarded (e.g., by Richard Bernstein) as the first philosopher who addressed the problem of evil without recourse to theodicy. This paper suggests that pragmatist anti-theodicy, especially as it is manifested in William James's pragmatism, is firmly rooted in this Kantian anti-theodicy project, the pragmatists' (including James's) general distaste for Kantian philosophy notwithstanding. However, as we move from James's pragmatism to Rortyan neopragmatism, the pragmatist resources for responding to the reality of evil may become more fragmented. This will be illustrated by references to Richard Rorty's (1989) controversial reading of George Orwell's dystopic novel, *1984*. The significance of Orwell's criticism of the disappearance of the concept of objective truth will be highlighted against the Kantian background of anti-theodicy philosophy, focusing on what Kant takes to be Job's key virtue - i.e., sincerity - as well as in relation to the softening of the notion of truth in pragmatism from James to Rorty.

POLITICAL RELIGION AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL: THE CONTROVERSY BETWEEN DEWEY AND NIEBUHR

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The crisis-ridden years of the Great Depression in the USA are reflected in John Dewey's normative proposal of a distinctively political religion. According to Dewey's concept of religion, faith enlivens the political commitment for a pacified community based on freedom, equality and solidarity in an indispensable way, and it articulates itself particularly through its motivational power to mobilize criticism and engagement against repressive social structures. On the other hand the future of religion depends on its capacity to adapt the modern scientifically based naturalist world-view. Modern religion according to Dewey serves as a substantial driving force of social progress. An evaluation of Dewey's concept of a political religion essentially depends on how it deals with the problem of evil. According to Dewey the moral evil has social causes, which can be explained through scientific research and eliminated through proper political directive. Dewey's theological contemporary Reinhold Niebuhr claimed the inappropriateness of Dewey's approach. According to Niebuhr the moral evil has an anthropological foundation, which the Christian tradition grasps under the concept of sin. From Niebuhr's perspective Dewey's naturalism cannot account for the problem of evil, its progress-orientation is highly problematic. The pro's and con's of both positions will be presented against the backdrop of the question, what impact the appropriate understanding of evil has for a naturalistically defensible political religion.

AFTER THEODICY: A SKEPTICAL PRAGMATIC ENGAGEMENT WITH SKEPTICAL THEISM

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In recent times, more and more philosophers in the broadly analytic Anglo-American mainstream of philosophy of religion have moved away from discussions of various theodicies and their attempts to justify belief in God via some explanation of why God is entitled to allow so much evil and suffering in the world. Instead, much of the discussions on the problem of evil now concern whether religious belief can be defended through an appeal to some version of *skeptical theism*. According to skeptical theists, arguments from evil (intended to show that the massive amount of evil and suffering in the world makes belief in a powerful and benevolent god epistemically unjustifiable) rely on a much too optimistic view of our

epistemological and moral standing vis-à-vis God. Hence, believers can safely reject such arguments while claiming that we should not expect to be able to know why God allows all the evil and suffering in the world. This paper offers a critical pragmatic examination of skeptical theism, and the conclusion will be that despite the fact that pragmatism and skeptical theism have certain common features, pragmatists who wish to explore the possibilities of retaining the goods generated in religious practices (while avoiding or eliminating problematic elements), should not embark on the skeptical theist-route. First, because skeptical theism cultivates a moral skepticism which, if taken seriously, would undermine confidence in the kind of judgments involved when we come to consider a religious life orientation to be an adequate response to the human existential condition. Thus, skeptical theism undermines the normative sources that according to pragmatists draw (some) people to religion in the first place. Second, because skeptical theists typically seek to remedy the first problem by making much of divine revelation, a move that risks proving too much (even things that we today take to be unacceptable) and also reproduces and enforces the theism/atheism divide as the primary focus of reflection on religion. I end with some comments on how we can pragmatically understand the problem of evil, and what this suggests for how we may respond to it.

Keywords: evil, pragmatism, philosophy of religion, religion, experiment, theism, scepticism, James, Dewey, Kant, relativism, meliorism