

## PRAGMATISM AND THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF SUFFERING: REMARKS ON ANTITHEODICY, DETACHMENT, AND EMBODIED SUBJECTIVITY

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### Introduction

This paper compares pragmatism and phenomenology in the context of the *problem of evil and suffering* – one of the fundamental issues not only in the philosophy of religion, where it has traditionally been debated in relation to the project of “theodicy”, but also in secular ethics and political philosophy. I will begin, after this introduction, by summarizing some key points in Emmanuel Levinas’s phenomenology of suffering and will then briefly examine William James’s pragmatist approach to suffering by highlighting what I take to be the ethical dimensions of the so-called pragmatic method. These historical discussions will pave the way for a quick look at the notions of *detachment* and *involvement*, with which I will conclude the paper. In addition to what I will call an “antitheodicy” orientation to the problem of evil and suffering, a crucial link between pragmatism and phenomenology turns out to be the *embodied* character of suffering and otherness.

It can be argued that Jamesian pragmatism and Levinasian post-Holocaust antitheodicy ethics share at least one fundamentally important feature: *the philosophical primacy of the ethical acknowledgment of the suffering other*. This “ethics of otherness” is based on a phenomenological understanding of the other as concrete embodied subjectivity. Clearly, this position – both in pragmatism and in phenomenology – is diametrically opposed to any Cartesian postulation of disembodied subjectivity.<sup>1</sup> More importantly, both Jamesian pragmatism and

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<sup>1</sup> Thus it may also be at least implicitly opposed to some background ideas in specifically Husserlian phenomenology, given the “Cartesian” approach based on a kind of presuppositionlessness and methodological solipsism in Husserl; cf. Edmund Husserl, *Cartesianische Meditationen: Eine Einleitung in die Phänomenologie* (1963), ed. Elisabeth Ströker (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1995). This essay, however, does not deal with Levinas’s role in the phenomenological tradition; nor will I provide any comparisons between Husserl and James. It may be noted that while embodiment, intersubjectivity, and otherness figure strongly in recent phenomenology – see, e.g., Sebastian Luft and Sören Overgaard (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Phenomenology* (London and New York:

Levinasian antitheodist phenomenology of suffering can be seen as standing against the tendency to prioritize the metaphysics and/or epistemology of otherness, subjectivity, and embodiment in relation to ethics. In contrast, ethics, for these two thinkers, is primary (in a famous Levinasian phrase, ethics is “first philosophy”), and metaphysics is grounded in ethics rather than vice versa.<sup>2</sup>

The leading idea of this paper is that Levinas and James are equally strongly opposed to theodicies: all theodist attempts to provide (either theological or secular) reasons or justifications for (the necessity or meaningfulness of) others’ suffering, or to render innocent suffering purposeful in some sense, are failures to ethically acknowledge the suffering other and her/his suffering as (sincerely) experienced by her-/himself.<sup>3</sup> There is also a Kantian dimension in this phenomenological-cum-pragmatist rejection of theodicies: antitheodism abandoning the very project of theodicy as morally insensitive and therefore unacceptable is needed to account for the *very possibility* of occupying a moral perspective on (embodied) others and their suffering, that is, of being genuinely involved in practices of encountering others and alleviating their suffering.

### **Levinas on suffering**

Levinas discusses suffering and antitheodicy in a number of key writings, but the 1986 essay, “Useless Suffering” is presumably his key text on this topic. Levinas there argues that any theodicy seeking to “make God innocent” is completely *disproportional* and out of balance in

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Routledge, 2012), and Dan Zahavi (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Phenomenology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), especially Sara Heinämaa’s contributions to both volumes – neither of these two recent volumes devotes a chapter to suffering, nor does the term occur in the index of either.

<sup>2</sup> At a general level, a highly relevant comparison between Levinas and James along these lines is offered in Megan Craig, *Levinas and James: Toward a Pragmatic Phenomenology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010). I find Craig’s book somewhat wanting, however, regarding the problem of evil and suffering in particular (notably, its index contains neither of these terms, nor “theodicy”).

<sup>3</sup> Antitheodicism is a theme I have discussed earlier on a number of occasions, most comprehensively in the recent joint monograph, Sari Kivistö and Sami Pihlström, *Kantian Antitheodicy: Philosophical and Literary Varieties* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); regarding Levinas and James, see especially chapters 3 and 5. In this book, we deal not only with Jewish post-Holocaust ethics and antitheodicism (e.g., Levinas) and pragmatist antitheodicism (especially James) but also with neopragmatism, as exemplified by Richard Rorty’s reading of George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, as well as D.Z. Phillips’s and other Wittgenstein-inspired philosophers’ antitheodisms, tracing all these rather different approaches back to the kind of antitheodicism that can be seen to be fundamental in Immanuel Kant’s critical philosophy.

relation to the forms of suffering we know from the history of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> We may say that this attack on theodicies – indeed on their moral decency – unfolds phenomenologically, as Levinas provides us with a compelling phenomenological analysis of suffering in its meaninglessness. Levinas does not discuss in any detail the debate between the atheist “argument from evil” and the theodist responses provided by theists to that argument – a major theme in analytic philosophy of religion – and neither does James engage with this dispute. Presumably both would find it more or less beside the point. The problem of evil and suffering cannot, and ethically must not, be reduced to standard controversies between theism and atheism.<sup>5</sup>

*Contra* theodicies (and implicitly *contra* atheist criticisms of theism and theodices invoking the argument from evil), Levinas emphasizes the sheer “depth of meaninglessness” in suffering, the “for nothing” character of suffering, and the intimate relation between evil and suffering: “All evil relates back to suffering.” Some of the most central themes of Levinas’s philosophy as a whole are thus strongly present in “Useless Suffering”: It is the “attention to the suffering of the other” that (he argues) “can be affirmed as the very nexus of human subjectivity” and is the “supreme ethical principle” that is “impossible to question”.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, “my responsibility for the other, without concern for reciprocity”,<sup>7</sup> the asymmetrical relation between the other and myself, is, as is well known, a core idea of Levinas’s ethics as a whole, and it finds a particularly strong expression in his treatment of suffering and antitheodicy.

In the main work of his late thought, *Otherwise than Being or beyond Essence* (1974), Levinas in a footnote elaborates on one of his best-known formulations of what it means to be an ethical subject, according to which “[t]o be oneself, the state of being a hostage, is always to have one degree of responsibility more, the responsibility for the responsibility of the other”.<sup>8</sup> The note explicitly links this with suffering: “The vortex—suffering of the other, my pity for his suffering, his pain over my pity, my pain over his pain, etc.—stops at me. The I is what involves one movement more in this iteration. My suffering is the cynosure of all the sufferings—and of

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<sup>4</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Useless Suffering” (1986), in *Entre-Nous: Thinking-of-the-other*, trans. Barbara Harshav and Michael B. Smith (London: Continuum, 2006), 78-87. Regarding my reading of Levinas, I’m crucially indebted to my doctoral student Panu-Matti Pöykkö, who is currently finishing his dissertation on Levinas’s views on ethics, evil, and religion.

<sup>5</sup> This theme is developed in more detail in Kivistö and Pihlström, *Kantian Antitheodicy*.

<sup>6</sup> For these quotations, see Levinas, “Useless Suffering”, 79-82.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>8</sup> See the chapter “Substitution” in Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1981 [reprinted 1999]), 117.

all the faults, even of the fault of my persecutors, which amounts to suffering the ultimate persecution, suffering absolutely. This is not a purifying fire of suffering [...]. This moment of the ‘for nothing’ in suffering is the surplus of non-sense over sense by which the sense of suffering is possible.”<sup>9</sup> The (nonsensical) “sense” of suffering lies, then, only in the ethical subject’s (*my*) absolute and infinite responsibility toward the suffering other.

While Levinas does not tell us *expressis verbis* what kind of impossibility we are dealing with in the impossibility of denying or questioning our responsibility for the other, we may suppose that this impossibility of rejecting the duty of attending to the other’s suffering is *both ethical and metaphysical*—in a sense in which the two are, one might suggest, inseparably (arguably even transcendently) entangled. The same inseparability of the metaphysical and the ethical can be directly seen in Levinas’s uncompromising rejection of any theodicy:

Perhaps the most revolutionary fact of our twentieth-century consciousness—but it is also an event in Sacred History—is that of the destruction of all balance between Western thought’s explicit and implicit theodicy and the forms that suffering and its evil are taking on in the very unfolding of this century. [...] This is the century that is drawing to a close in the obsessive fear of the return of [...] suffering and evil inflicted deliberately, but in a manner no reason sets limits to, in the exasperation of a reason become political and detached from all ethics. [...] [T]he Holocaust of the Jewish people under the reign of Hitler seems to me the paradigm of gratuitous human suffering, in which evil appears in its diabolical horror. [...] The disproportion between suffering and every theodicy was shown at Auschwitz with a glaring, obvious clarity.<sup>10</sup>

Levinas certainly does not mean that only the Holocaust would have made theodicies morally impossible; rather, theodicies have always been morally impossible insofar as it is an ultimate ethical duty for us to acknowledge others’ suffering in its meaninglessness, and this is something that the Holocaust makes strikingly visible. Thus, Levinas continues to note that the “suffering for nothing” of the Holocaust victims “renders impossible and odious every proposal and every thought that would explain it by the sins of those who have suffered or are dead”; it is, indeed, the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>10</sup> Levinas, “Useless Suffering”, 83-84. Note that the essay was published in 1986, hence the reference to the century “drawing to a close”.

justification of the other's (my neighbor's) pain and suffering that is an "outrage" and "the source of all immorality".<sup>11</sup> Note, furthermore, that Levinas constantly employs *modal* formulations in his characterizations of the "obscenity" of theodicies. The "suffering in the other" is not only unjustified but "unjustifiable", and the crematoria of the final solution render theodicy "impossible".<sup>12</sup> It is in this modal sense, in particular, that we may view Levinas's post-Holocaust phenomenological antitheodicism as "Kantian" and *transcendental*. The Levinasian antitheodist argues that theodicies make our (genuinely) moral relations to other human beings impossible. This transcendentalism is based on a phenomenological analysis of the uselessness and excess of suffering: phenomenology as an inquiry into transcendental (structural, constitutive) features of human (moral) experience. The necessity of acknowledging the suffering other is constitutive of moral subjectivity.

In his helpful contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* (2002), Paul Davies writes as follows:

More than anything else it is suffering that with its exemplary phenomenology brings us straight to the heart of what we now take to be Levinas's own project. For suffering to be thought or described *qua* suffering it must be thought or described in its senselessness, as what everywhere and always resists being given a meaning or context. There can be no thematizing of suffering; if there is or seems to be then it is no longer suffering that is really being addressed or considered but rather something which enables us to move away from suffering.<sup>13</sup>

Suffering's senselessness is "excessive" – this is a basic phenomenological insight Levinas insists on. Again, all theodist attempts to provide context and meaning for suffering fail to respond to this phenomenology of suffering, from Levinas's perspective. Davies continues: "In my inability to give a meaning to suffering, I suffer: I fall back upon a passivity always this side of an active sense engendering life, a life from which, in so far as I would attend to suffering *qua* suffering, I

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 84-85.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Davies, "Sincerity and the End of Theodicy: Three Remarks on Levinas and Kant", in Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 161-187 (here 170-171).

can gain or claim no support. It is the scene, too, of a radical asymmetry: my suffering here is always referred to the suffering of the other, a suffering whose senselessness provokes my suffering.”<sup>14</sup>

A strong Levinasian influence can also be seen in, for example, Ingolf Dalferth’s discussion of the uselessness and meaninglessness (*Sinnlosigkeit*) of suffering. What makes suffering meaningless is not just the innocence of the sufferer or the excess of the suffering itself; rather, suffering is *as such* meaningless: “*Leiden ist als solches ganz und gar sinnlos und ohne jeden Sinn.*”<sup>15</sup> One could suggest that a suffering based on, or resulting from, another’s suffering is in some sense “*sinnvoll*” due to this relationality, but even then, Dalferth argues, suffering itself remains essentially and constitutively meaningless (“*wesentlich und konstitutiv sinnlos*”).<sup>16</sup>

All attempts to view suffering as meaningful—in whatever sense, be it biological, social, metaphysical, ethical, political, theological or something else—are, in brief, unethically theodicist and eventually fail to acknowledge the sufferer and their specific, concrete (bodily, embodied) experiences of meaninglessness. Justifying suffering, by way of theodicies, is therefore “scandalous”—hence the Levinasian view on the *scandal* of theodicy. It is, thus, a “temptation” that needs to be resisted by a serious ethical, political, and/or religious thinker.<sup>17</sup> The *embodied* character of subjectivity, emphasized in the phenomenological analysis of the excess of suffering, is crucial here: we should understand that suffering is necessarily embodied, and it is only through suffering and its meaninglessness that we can appreciate the full reality of evil in an antitheodicist way.

### **James and the pragmatic method**

Let us now develop a pragmatist analogy to these phenomenological analyses of suffering. What I have in mind is, as already indicated, William James’s *pragmatic method*, elaborated by James especially in his work *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (1907), though originally formulated by Charles S. Peirce already in the 1870s. This method urges us to examine

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>15</sup> Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Leiden und Böses* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2011), 111 (see 110-116).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>17</sup> See the chapter on Levinas in Richard Bernstein, *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002). Bernstein illuminatingly speaks about the “temptation” toward theodicy and the “obscenity” of theodicies in Levinas.

the meaning of our concepts, conceptions, or “ideas” in terms of their (or their objects’) conceivable practical effects. Essentially, this is, I have suggested on earlier occasions, a method of critically interpreting and assessing rival metaphysical views from an ethical perspective, attending to their potential ethical outcome.<sup>18</sup> But what exactly does this mean? An immediate answer that suggests itself is that the pragmatic method takes fundamentally seriously what James in an earlier essay called the “cries of the wounded”.<sup>19</sup> Insofar as the basic pragmatic question is what the (rival) metaphysical views pragmatically examined “promise”, the pragmatist tracing out their ethical core cannot neglect the question of how they are able to recognize (acknowledge) “the cries of the wounded” – that is, the victims of evil and suffering, and their experiences or perspectives. By discussing Jamesian pragmatism in comparison to Levinasian phenomenology of suffering, we may, then, introduce one possible way in which pragmatism, too, may try to “take evil seriously”.<sup>20</sup>

This is how James contextualizes his important phrase, the “cries of the wounded”:

There is but one unconditional commandment, which is that we should seek incessantly, with fear and trembling, so to vote and to act as to bring about the very largest total universe of good which we can see. Abstract rules indeed can help; but they help the less in proportion as our intuitions are more piercing, and our vocation is the stronger for the moral life. For every real dilemma is in literal strictness a unique situation; and the exact combination of ideals realized and ideals disappointed which each decision creates is always a universe without a precedent, and for which no adequate previous rule exists. The philosopher, then, *qua* philosopher, is no better able to determine the best universe in the concrete emergency than other men. He sees, indeed, somewhat better than most men

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Sami Pihlström, *Pragmatist Metaphysics: An Essay on the Ethical Grounds of Ontology* (London: Continuum, 2009). On the pragmatic method generally, see, e.g., several essays in Sami Pihlström (ed.), *The Bloomsbury Companion to Pragmatism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015; 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 2011). On the contemporary significance of James’s philosophy of religion more generally, see Sami Pihlström, *Pragmatic Pluralism and the Problem of God* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

<sup>19</sup> See William James, “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” (1891), in James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (1897), eds. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1979). For the importance of this phrase in James’s moral thought, and for his moral thought generally, see the recent collection of essays, Jacob A. Goodson (ed.), *William James, Moral Philosophy, and the Ethical Life* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018).

<sup>20</sup> There may be a crucial difference here between James and other pragmatists, e.g., John Dewey, who arguably never took evil and suffering as seriously as James – or at least not exactly in the same way. See also Sami Pihlström, *Taking Evil Seriously* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

what the question always is—not a question of this good or that good simply taken, but of the two total universes with which these goods respectively belong. He knows that he must vote always for the richer universe, for the good which seems most organizable, most fit to enter to complex combinations, most apt to be a member of a more inclusive whole. But which particular universe this is he cannot know for certain in advance; he only knows that *if he makes a bad mistake the cries of the wounded will soon inform him of the fact.* [...] His books upon ethics, therefore, so far as they truly touch the moral life, must more and more ally themselves with a literature which is confessedly tentative and suggestive rather than dogmatic [...].”<sup>21</sup>

“The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” does not specifically raise the problem of evil and suffering, nor does it develop the theme of (anti)theodicy, but James’s *Pragmatism* actually both opens and closes with discussions of evil (as well as death). The problem of evil and suffering functions (as I have argued earlier) as a *frame for Pragmatism* (and, hence, for pragmatism): it provides an (or perhaps even *the*) ethical motivation for exploring the link between ethics and metaphysics and for developing the pragmatic method in the first place.<sup>22</sup> Clearly, any pragmatist philosophy of religion inspired by James should take seriously the reality of evil and suffering, considering how religious (or anti-religious) views respond to this reality. However, this need to respond to human suffering ethically is certainly not restricted to the philosophy of religion. Antitheodicism refusing to explain away gratuitous suffering is as crucial here as it is in Levinas’s compelling analysis of the excess and meaninglessness of suffering. Jamesian pragmatism is as clearly set against theodocist attempts to justify evil as Levinas’s phenomenology is.

Traditionally, the theist who is challenged by the atheist to deliver a theodicy is required to explain how the co-presence of key divine attributes (omnipotence, omniscience, absolute goodness) is compatible with the empirical fact that there is (unnecessary, meaningless, gratuitous) evil and (innocent) suffering. From James’s antitheodocist perspective, this requirement is itself problematic: it could be argued that religious ways of life are themselves responses to the reality of evil and suffering, and that only by taking evil seriously can we make

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<sup>21</sup> James, “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life”, 158-159; emphasis added.

<sup>22</sup> See Kivistö and Pihlström, *Kantian Antitheodicy*, chapter 5; cf. also Sami Pihlström, “The Cries of the Wounded in *Pragmatism*”, in Goodson (ed.), *William James, Moral Philosophy, and the Ethical Life* (cited above).



sense of there being genuinely religious life-orientations and practices at all. Thus, there is *first* evil and suffering, and only then can we so much as consider (genuinely) religious responses to them, and attempts to address the human predicament characterized by if not constant suffering at least the constant possibility of suffering. There is no proper pragmatic use for an argument *from* evil that would challenge the theist in an allegedly neutral argumentative space in terms of evidentialist inquiry into evil and theodicy – and this is because straightforward evidentialism is a misleading way to characterize religious responses to life in general.

In *Pragmatism*, James argues against “the airy and shallow optimism of current religious philosophy” that what suffering human beings experience “*is Reality*”: “But while Professors Royce and Bradley and a whole host of guileless thoroughfeds are unveiling Reality and the Absolute and explaining away evil and pain, this is the condition of the only beings known to us anywhere in the universe, with a developed consciousness of what the universe is”.<sup>23</sup> A Leibnizian theodicy, in particular, postulating a divine or metaphysical “harmony” of the universe, amounts to “a cold literary exercise, whose cheerful substance even hell-fire does not warm”; hence, the Leibnizian and Hegelian idealist and optimist philosophers James criticizes are “dealing in shades, while those who live and feel know truth”.<sup>24</sup> Again, this is an *argument from non-acknowledgment*: theodicies with their alleged harmony are “cold” and insensitive toward the victims (indeed, this can be compared to what Dostoevsky’s famous character Ivan Karamazov says about innocent suffering). For James, the problem of evil, understood in an antitheodistic manner, frames the development and employment of the pragmatic method.

Toward the end of *Pragmatism*, James continues:

In particular *this* query has always come home to me: May not the claims of tender-mindedness go too far? May not the notion of a world already saved *in toto* anyhow, be too saccharine to stand? May not religious optimism be too idyllic? Must *all* be saved? Is *no* price to be paid in the work of salvation? Is the last word sweet? Is all ‘yes, yes’ in the universe? Doesn’t the fact of ‘no’ stand at the very core of life? Doesn’t the very ‘seriousness’ that we attribute to life mean that ineluctable noes and losses form a part of it, that there are genuine sacrifices somewhere, and that something permanently drastic

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<sup>23</sup> William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (1907), eds. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1975), 20-21.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 20, 22.

and bitter always remains at the bottom of its cup?

I cannot speak officially as a pragmatist here; all I can say is that my own pragmatism offers no objection to my taking sides with this more moralistic view, and giving up the claim of total reconciliation. [...] It is then perfectly possible to accept sincerely a drastic kind of a universe from which the element of ‘seriousness’ is not to be expelled. Whoso does so is, it seems to me, a genuine pragmatist.<sup>25</sup>

It seems to me that James is as firmly focused on the significance of the embodied character of human experience, including the experience of suffering, as Levinasian phenomenologists are. The notion of the embodied other thus is, implicitly if not explicitly, at the core of Jamesian pragmatist antitheodicism. It is, very simply, our concrete embodiment that makes us vulnerable to suffering, and it is this vulnerability that we ought to ethically perceive in other human beings around us. Without appreciating such vulnerability in the lives we share with other human beings, no cries of the wounded can be heard, and no pragmatic method can get off the ground. Therefore, James’s physiological metaphors of human finitude should be taken seriously as fundamental to his pragmatism: he finds both *deafness* (to the cries of the wounded) and *blindness* (to others’ experiences in general) significant to his analysis of our responses – or, better, failing responses – to vulnerability and suffering. He notes: “Now the blindness in human beings, of which this discourse will treat, is the blindness with which we all are afflicted in regard to the feelings of creatures and people different from ourselves.”<sup>26</sup>

James’s narrates his personal experience, which I am here quoting at considerable length in order to illustrate the phenomenological thickness of his description:

Some years ago, while journeying in the mountains of North Carolina, I passed by a large number of ‘coves,’ as they call them there, or heads of small valleys between the hills, which had been newly cleared and planted. The impression on my mind was one of unmitigated squalor. The settler had in every case cut down the more manageable trees,

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 141-142.

<sup>26</sup> William James, “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings” (1899), in James, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals*, eds. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1982). I have used the online version available here: <https://www.uky.edu/~eushe2/Pajares/jcertain.html>.

and left their charred stumps standing. The larger trees he had girdled and killed, in order that their foliage should not cast a shade. He had then built a log cabin, plastering its chinks with clay, and had set up a tall zigzag rail fence around the scene of his havoc, to keep the pigs and cattle out. Finally, he had irregularly planted the intervals between the stumps and trees with Indian corn, which grew among the chips; and there he dwelt with his wife and babes—an axe, a gun, a few utensils, and some pigs and chickens feeding in the woods, being the sum total of his possessions.

The forest had been destroyed; and what had ‘improved’ it out of existence was hideous, a sort of ulcer, without a single element of artificial grace to make up for the loss of Nature’s beauty. Ugly, indeed, seemed the life of the squatter, scudding, as the sailors say, under bare poles, beginning again away back where our first ancestors started, and by hardly a single item the better off for all the achievements of the intervening generations.

Talk about going back to nature! I said to myself, oppressed by the dreariness, as I drove by. Talk of a country life for one’s old age and for one’s children! Never thus, with nothing but the bare ground and one’s bare hands to fight the battle! Never, without the best spoils of culture woven in! The beauties and commodities gained by the centuries are sacred. They are our heritage and birthright. No modern person ought to be willing to live a day in such a state of rudimentariness and denudation.<sup>27</sup>

But then he continues:

Then I said to the mountaineer who was driving me, “What sort of people are they who have to make these new clearings?” “All of us,” he replied. “Why, we ain’t happy here, unless we are getting one of these coves under cultivation.” I instantly felt that *I had been losing the whole inward significance of the situation*. Because to me the clearings spoke of naught but denudation, I thought that to those whose sturdy arms and obedient axes had made them they could tell no other story. But, when *they* looked on the hideous stumps, what they thought of was personal victory. The chips, the girdled trees, and the vile split rails spoke of honest sweat, persistent toil and final reward. The cabin was a warrant of safety for self and wife and babes. In short, the clearing, which to me was a mere ugly

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

picture on the retina, was to them a symbol redolent with moral memories and sang a very pæan of duty, struggle, and success.

*I had been as blind to the peculiar ideality of their conditions as they certainly would also have been to the ideality of mine*, had they had a peep at my strange indoor academic ways of life at Cambridge.

Wherever a process of life communicates an eagerness to him who lives it, there the life becomes genuinely significant. Sometimes the eagerness is more knit up with the motor activities, sometimes with the perceptions, sometimes with the imagination, sometimes with reflective thought. But, wherever it is found, there is the zest, the tingle, the excitement of reality; and there is ‘importance’ in the only real and positive sense in which importance ever anywhere can be.<sup>28</sup>

He then concludes: “And now what is the result of all these considerations and quotations? It is negative in one sense, but positive in another. It absolutely forbids us to be forward in pronouncing on the meaninglessness of forms of existence other than our own; and it commands us to tolerate, respect, and indulge those whom we see harmlessly interested and happy in their own ways, however unintelligible these may be to us. Hands off: neither the whole of truth nor the whole of good is revealed to any single observer, although each observer gains a partial superiority of insight from the peculiar position in which he stands. Even prisons and sick-rooms have their special revelations. It is enough to ask of each of us that he should be faithful to his own opportunities and make the most of his own blessings, without presuming to regulate the rest of the vast field.”<sup>29</sup>

We should observe how fundamentally important pluralism, tolerance, and the recognition of otherness are for James. These are all related to embodiment and bodily experiences, constitutive of both enjoyment and suffering. James, on my reading, employs the phenomenological method here by showing us how easy it is to dismiss the others’ experiential perspectives on reality – both their perspectives of meaningfulness and their perspectives of despair and meaningless suffering. Simultaneously, he shows us how such blindness (or, analogously, deafness) is detrimental to the ethically challenging attitude to the world generally

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.; first and last emphasis added.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

that his pragmatism requires. Hence, pragmatism is framed by the problem of evil and suffering – to the extent, we might say, that the pragmatic method receives its phenomenological relevance only by being intimately linked with this problem.

### **Detachment and involvement**

Both Levinas and James can be read as recommending a certain kind of deep *involvement* in others' experiences, especially experiences of suffering. We mustn't simply look aside when faced by the suffering other. We should, rather, attend to the concrete life of the other manifested in their bodily pain and experiences of meaninglessness – in their face, to use Levinas's favorite expression.<sup>30</sup> However, things are not quite as simple as this. There is a sense in which the pragmatist-cum-phenomenological antitheodist her-/himself might also find it necessary to at least occasionally adopt a "detached" (rather than constantly involved) perspective. Let me explain.

We may approach this idea via a minor detour. Citing Ludwig Wittgenstein's cryptic views on the "soul", Ilham Dilman maintains that happiness may be seen as an "inward" attitude belonging to one's "inner life" – such as a "genuine love of the good" which would be better described as something like the state of one's soul rather than as (for example) mere conformity to some objective moral standards.<sup>31</sup> Dilman suggests a plausible reading of the *Notebooks 1914-1916* passage where Wittgenstein claims that it is only "through the life of knowledge" that even a person who cannot ward off the misery of the world can be happy. Here, Dilman says, "knowledge" is close to what Plato meant by "knowledge" or "wisdom", a necessary condition of which is "detachment", "renouncing [*verzichten*] the amenities [*Annehmlichkeiten*] of the world".<sup>32</sup> He continues:

This [detachment] does not mean indifference to the pain of others. Quite the contrary.  
For a man who is immersed in a life of worldliness will be relatively deaf to other

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<sup>30</sup> See Craig's analysis of the similarities between Levinas's and James's encouragement to acknowledge concrete others in Craig, *Levinas and James* (cited above).

<sup>31</sup> Ilham Dilman, "Wittgenstein on the Soul", in G. Vesey (ed.), *Understanding Wittgenstein* (London: Royal Institute of Philosophy, 1974), 179-180.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 180. (I won't offer any reading of Wittgenstein here; I am only citing Dilman because his formulations touch upon an issue highly relevant to my concerns in this paper.)

people's cries of pain. Detachment is a positive renunciation of such a life which allows the soul to turn to the good, to become sensitive to moral considerations. [...] The condition of such renunciation is love – the kind of love that is present in pity for the afflicted, forgiveness of those who wrong one, gratitude for those who help one, and remorse for the wrong one has done to others. It is this love which both Plato and Wittgenstein see as a form of knowledge – this love which for Wittgenstein is an attitude of the will towards the world as a whole.

It may be called love of the good, and the kind of pity which Dostoyevsky portrays in Sonia is a concrete manifestation of it. In that form it is what usually goes under the name 'love of one's neighbour'. The relation between such selfless love and the kind of knowledge in question is internal.<sup>33</sup>

Accordingly, one may be unable to truly listen to the "cries of the wounded" which James urged us to listen to, or to genuinely see the other's face in Levinas's terms – being thus in a way both deaf and blind – if one is too deeply involved and immersed in worldly affairs. Yet, Dilman tells us, the kind of happiness Wittgenstein is thinking of in the *Notebooks* (and, presumably, later in the *Tractatus*) is not "indifferent to the misery of the world, though it is one which that misery need not and even, perhaps, cannot destroy".<sup>34</sup> Arguably, it is, above all, the task of recognizing and being attentive to others' suffering that is necessary for living rightly in Wittgenstein's pregnant ethical sense – and thus for happiness – but it is this same task that, when taken seriously, destroys any easy-going happiness (or, in James's terms again, "moral holidays").<sup>35</sup> We may perhaps join Dilman in concluding that the view of happiness of Wittgenstein's *Notebooks* invokes "a state of soul which contains its own reward".<sup>36</sup> There is nothing external or "outward" in this kind of happiness.

Moreover, this (quasi-)Wittgensteinian picture of happiness and love (of the good), which clearly comes close to Levinas's ethics of otherness in particular, is in striking contrast with the

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 180-181.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>35</sup> For James's notion of the moral holiday, see James, *Pragmatism*, Lecture II; cf. also Pihlström, *Taking Evil Seriously*.

<sup>36</sup> Dilman, "Wittgenstein on the Soul", 182. Dilman thus also sees Wittgenstein (as well as, among others, Simone Weil) as returning to the Socratic view that the evil person is necessarily unhappy, while the one who "dedicates his life to justice" is by necessity happy, "no matter how the world treats him" (ibid., 183-184).

various banalizing treatments of these notions that surround us in contemporary popular culture. Dostoevsky's Sonia (in *Crime and Punishment*) may indeed be full of love, but she does not boast about her love, or her moral character, in the way our narcissistic culture today may encourage us to do, and hence her love (unlike, perhaps, most real-life individuals') remains genuine and uncorrupted.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, the kind of detachment from the world we saw Dilman describe in his characterization of the love of the good can be regarded as integral to the way in which the pragmatic-cum-phenomenological antitheodist can never find themselves fully "at home" in the world and may even find it deeply immoral to be too completely "immersed" in the world around them.

My qualified defense of a certain kind of detachment should not, of course, be regarded as any uncritical defense of any kind of detachment whatsoever. For example, the pragmatist tradition has rich resources with regard to the criticism of the type of detachment or disengagement manifested in what John Dewey called the "spectator theory of knowledge", i.e., the attempt to view the world as it is in itself from a God's-Eye View, as it were.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Charles Taylor's work is equally rich in its criticism of "ontologies of disengagement" that tend to lead to alienation and thus to both ethically and politically unwelcome consequences.<sup>39</sup> We should realize that our human projects – epistemic and ethical alike – must begin from within the world we live in; they *are* essentially projects of world-engagement. What I am suggesting is that the idea of involvement or immersion might, however, get the ethical dimensions of that world-engagement wrong and that a certain kind of detachment may be needed as part of that engagement itself. So what I am defending is perhaps best described as a kind of detachment-within-engagement. It is (to put it briefly and perhaps misleadingly) a pragmatic detachment that needs to avoid alienation from the world and other human beings.

We must constantly be aware of our own problematic tendencies to arrive at a wrong kind of detachment, or a detachment (disengagement, alienation) that itself calls for moral criticism rather than acknowledging the suffering other and thus being in the service of the "love of the

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<sup>37</sup> As already indicated above, Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* is, of course, a standard reference in moral antitheodicies protesting against any allegedly harmonious reconciliation with pain and suffering. See, e.g., Andrew Gleason, *A Frightening Love* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), as well as Kivistö and Pihlström, *Kantian Antitheodicy*.

<sup>38</sup> See John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (Boston: Putnam's, 1960; first published 1929).

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

good”. There are also interesting literary examples of morally and existentially problematic kinds of detachment (or alienation) that may be briefly referred to in order to add some phenomenological richness to this otherwise relatively general meta-level discussion. An obvious case in point is, for example, Albert Camus’s character Mersault in *The Outsider* (1942). He seems to be an outsider to his own life and doesn’t really care deeply about anything – about the death of his mother, about his love affair, about his killing the Arab, or even about his own approaching death. We should hardly call this an ethically serious form of detachment.

A more recent, highly interesting literary character manifesting detachment in a problematic way is Mr. Stevens in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day* (1989). As a butler serving his lord, he is attentive to the minutest detail of his job and develops an unparalleled excellence in mastering those processes (or at least that’s the picture of his work he paints to us in his somewhat unreliable narration of his various life incidents). However, he is remarkably non-attentive to what is really going on around him and his job: he does not seem to realize, or care about, the possibilities of love emerging in his life – or he simply brushes them aside because he finds his job more important – and he is almost as unmoved by the death of his father as Mersault is by the death of his mother. Moreover, the political developments surrounding his lord completely escape Stevens’s critical gaze; he just believes that he, given his role as a servant, should avoid making any judgement concerning such matters. In brief, in his detachment (a kind of dignified or even self-dignified detachment), he seems to exemplify the kind of thoughtlessness, or the kind of inability to think – an inability to move beyond one’s narrow habits of mind and one’s commitment to meeting the expectations based on one’s job or other duties – that Hannah Arendt finds the key to Adolf Eichmann’s “banality of evil”.<sup>40</sup>

There is, then, a sense in which Stevens fails to be an autonomous moral subject in Kantian terms and simply lives through his professional role as a servant. (He is not simply an example of “das Man” in a Heideggerian sense, either, because he *is* truly attentive to what is required of him as a servant and very carefully considers how exactly he should live in that role; the problem is just that he cannot move outside that role in any circumstances.) While he may be regarded as a spectacularly successful servant in the context of that particular professional role,

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<sup>40</sup> See Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin, 1994; first published 1963).



always maintaining the dignity required by that role, his life can also be seen – by us, not by him – as a failure in ethical and existential terms, because he is completely detached from the kind of ethical and existential considerations that would vitally need his attention around him. He could have had an entirely different life, had he been able to think beyond the immediate context in which he lived. On the other hand, the novel also seems to argue that the structures of class society may make it impossible for individuals to exercise that kind of capacity of thinking. Thus, political structures of power and class may make us blind to other relevant perspectives in a roughly Jamesian sense.<sup>41</sup>

In Aki Ollikainen's novel, *Nälkävuosi* (2012), set in the context of the Finnish hunger catastrophe in 1867-1868, the rich upper class people feeling compassion to the beggars dying of hunger discuss the events with reference to the Book of Job. They are sincerely concerned with the poor beggar families' tragedy, and some of them try to help in various ways, but they are also detached from what is actually going on. Their compassion is genuine, it seems, and they articulate it in the Biblical concepts available to them through the Book of Job. At the same time, one cannot help the feeling that they are the ones who can afford discussing the matter in such a cool manner with Joban references; they are not in any danger of dying of hunger themselves.

This might make us think of the way in which my defense of antitheodicism is also detached. I hope it is detached in the morally sincere sense of detachment characterized in the Dilman quote above, but as part of such sincerity one must self-critically acknowledge the possibility of being in constant danger of collapsing into an ethically problematic type of detachment. We, as wealthy people in stable societies, can certainly afford discussing the problem of evil and suffering philosophically, advancing a complex articulation and defense of a theoretical stance I label "antitheodicism". This, as such, does little to alleviate any suffering actually taking place in the world. My antitheodicism is motivated by a kind of compassion (genuine, sincere compassion toward the sufferer, I hope), but it remains detached from concrete suffering itself. It is a theoretical position in the context of philosophical contemplation, available to us in "philosophy's cool place" (to borrow a phrase from D.Z. Phillips).

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<sup>41</sup> For illuminating analyses of James's account of blindness in this sense, see, e.g., the essays by Amy Kittelstrom and D. Micah Hester and Joseph D. John in Goodson (ed.), *William James, Moral Philosophy, and the Ethical Life*, chapters 4-5.

I acknowledge, in *Kantian Antitheodicy* (2016), authored jointly with Sari Kivistö, that there is no way of ever fully acknowledging our inability to fully acknowledge the reality of others' suffering. It is part of this meta-level reflexive acknowledgment to acknowledge one's own inevitable detachment. We must do whatever we can to prevent that detachment from sliding into a morally indifferent stance enabling one to just quote the Book of Job while really not caring for the suffering other. This is considerably more easily said than done. We must be constantly aware of the dangers in our thinking that may turn us into alienated, disengaged, morally and politically indifferent bystanders – blind in Jamesian terms. Such bystanders' guilt should – metaphysically, transcendently – be ours, all the time.

### **Conclusion: embodiment as transcendental**

The antitheodist elaborations in James, which I have found fundamental to his pragmatism, would make little sense without the embodiment of subjectivity and of suffering (in a wider sense relevant to pragmatist analyses of subjectivity generally). The suffering subject, or the subject of suffering, *must* be embodied in order for the structure of moral responsibility to and for the other (in the Levinasian sense), analyzed by James as our duty to listen to the “cries of the wounded”, to emerge at all. I am not saying Levinas is a (Jamesian) pragmatist or that James is a (Levinasian) phenomenologist, but I have in this essay invited you to consider the hypothesis that the two approaches share the same fundamental (Kantian) antitheodism that appreciates embodiment as something like a (naturalized) transcendental condition for the possibility of moral experience, and also for the possibility of making moral sense of our experience. It is precisely in such a rearticulation of transcendental conditions constitutive of our moral life that pragmatism and phenomenology may fruitfully join forces.

Finally, the kind of detachment and involvement we considered in the last substantial section above are crucially important notions in spelling out exactly what kind of ethical attitude we should develop to the suffering embodied other. There are limits to the kind of involvement possible for us but also to the ethically “cool” detachment we must maintain. Perhaps the true Levinasian-cum-Jamesian ethical attitude to others' suffering lies in an attempt to enhance our human wisdom regarding how to position oneself on this scale between detachment and involvement. Here, again, both phenomenological and pragmatist insights are needed.