**THE PROBLEM OF EVIL AND PRAGMATIC RECOGNITION**

**Sami Pihlström**

Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, University of Helsinki, Finland

E-mail: [sami.pihlstrom@helsinki.fi](mailto:sami.pihlstrom@helsinki.fi)

**Abstract**

This essay contributes to the on-going debate on the problem of evil by examining from a pragmatist point of view whether, and in what sense, the “theodicist”, the “anti-theodicist”, and the victim of evil and suffering are able to engage in (mutual) acts of pragmatic recognition. It is suggested that the theory of recognition may be helpful in a critical exploration of the problem of evil. The paper joins the critics of theodicist approaches, arguing that attempts to justify evil are ethically inappropriate; it specifically criticizes Peter van Inwagen’s and Marilyn McCord Adams’s recent positions. As such, the essay engages in an ethical critique of contemporary philosophy of religion focusing on evil. By way of conclusion, it is suggested that the distinction between recognition and acknowledgment may further illuminate the very special way in which we are challenged to react ethically to evil and suffering.

**Introduction**

The classical American pragmatists were all seriously interested in religion, though in quite different ways.[[1]](#footnote-1) Charles S. Peirce was probably the one most deeply religious among them – to the extent that religion does not seem to be a major philosophical *problem* for him. John Dewey, in turn, offered a naturalized account of religion that essentially reduces what is valuable in religious experience to experiences inherent in scientific inquiry as well as democratic politics and education. Among the major three classics, only William James was, as far as I can see, truly interested in the issue I want to explore in this essay – the problem of evil. Dewey’s progressivism prevented him from appreciating the dark and tragic dimensions of existence in James’s manner, while Peirce’s views on evil are not easily available in his vast corpus. Peirce did regard nominalism and individualism as “metaphysics of wickedness”, but only James, it seems, both begins and ends his discussion of pragmatism – especially in *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (1907) – from a recognition of the existential depth of evil and suffering. If there is any single problem in the philosophy of religion that is at the very core of “practicing philosophy as experiencing life” (quoting the subtitle of this book), it is certainly the problem of evil, which may fundamentally challenge our ways of experiencing life as meaningful at all – and of practicing philosophy.

I have explored pragmatist (and related) reactions to evil in some detail on a number of earlier occasions.[[2]](#footnote-2) My approach will now be somewhat different. Instead of seeking to offer any new theological or philosophical solutions to the problem of evil, or “theodicy problem”, I will in this essay attempt to clarify the discussion around this problem (or set of problems) by employing the concept of *recognition*. More precisely, the concept of recognition will be used in a distinctively *pragmatic* sense, loosely based on the tradition of pragmatism (in which explicit discussions of recognition have been rare, though).[[3]](#footnote-3) What we may mean by “pragmatic recognition” is, in a first approximation, a recognition of someone – a person or a group – *in some practical role*, that is, as (an) actor(s) or agent(s) of a certain kind or as (a) subject(s) involved in certain normatively structured practices or habits of action.

Recognition, in the Hegelian tradition of *Anerkennung*, re-established in more recent philosophy by Axel Honneth and others, is always a matter of recognizing someone *as* something.[[4]](#footnote-4) What the notion of pragmatic recognition contributes to this general picture is the idea of a specific recognition of someone as an agent of a certain kind, that is, as a subject of certain practices or habits of action (as understood in a pragmatist sense). The “as” clause, hence, is specified in terms of the actions, habits, and/or practices the recognized person or collective engages in. Pragmatic recognition is a special instance of recognizing someone or something *as* something specific, because it focuses on a practical, habitual, and/or functional role, rather than a mere static (non-action-related) status – though such distinctions may often be vague.

These practical roles in which a person is recognized as something in particular may be formal or official, as in the case of recognizing, say, a person in some public office with the rights and duties that entails. But, more importantly for the topic of this paper, they can also be highly informal and unofficial. One may, in particular, inquire into the conditions of an *ethically adequate recognition* of certain people – individuals or groups – *as victims* of certain instances of evil and suffering, especially of persecution and atrocities such as, paradigmatically, the Holocaust. Note, however, that we may talk about the recognition of certain persons as victims as well as about the recognition of victims as persons. It might also be advisable to avoid the conceptual category of “victim” altogether in this context, because in many cases victimization may be ethically highly problematic. In this paper, I rather loosely speak about “victims of evil” or “victims of suffering” without defining the notion of a victim in any formal way, and without claiming that it would always be ethically unproblematic or politically correct to use such vocabulary. In fact, my concluding discussion on the difference between recognition and acknowledgment (see below) will propose one way of moving beyond the need to recognize victims as something specific.[[5]](#footnote-5)

This way of using the notion of pragmatic recognition also requires a broadening of the notion of “agent” relevant to the specification of the “as” clause: a passive victim or sufferer is also an *agent* in the relevant sense, going through a practice-embedded experiential process with a certain specific meaning (or, often, an experience characterized by a complete lack of meaning). Conversely, we will also discuss the ways in which victims of evil and suffering could recognize, or fail to recognize, philosophically “well-meaning” theodicies. The challenges of recognition cut both ways.

The concept of recognition is potentially helpful in this area because the philosophical discourse surrounding the problem of evil is extremely polarized. Not only do the rival views sharply disagree with each other; in many cases they either fail to talk to each other or may even disregard each other completely. One should not maintain, however, that the concept of recognition will easily resolve this situation. Yet, this concept may serve the common interest of identifying the most plausible positions and facilitating the philosophical and theological dialogue between them. A key goal in the present inquiry is, as we might say, an *ethical criticism of contemporary philosophy of religion* (and philosophy more generally), especially of the discussion concerning evil, particularly theodicy, within that field. As we will see, this amounts to a critique of a certain kind of *existential inadequacy* of contemporary philosophy of religion. (It should be noted that a critical investigation of this kind does not presuppose any particular position regarding the debate between theism and atheism; I fully acknowledge that there are more resolutely naturalistic pragmatists for whom the problem of evil in the religiously relevant – even if not necessarily religious – sense invoked here does not arise at all. Moreover, the kind of ethical criticism at issue here can also be expanded into an aesthetic criticism, assuming a suitably rich pragmatist account of the entanglement of the ethical and the aesthetic. This theme, however, will remain only implicit here.)

However, a project like this is, pragmatically, a call for a certain kind of *moral growth* for all of us, a development of learning to better recognize what is required of us in a world in which there is evil. This is a key challenge whether or not we find religious and/or theological responses to evil relevant. I will in the following only rather implicitly appeal to pragmatism in my criticism of the reactions to evil in contemporary philosophy of religion. It should be understood, however, that this entire project has a Jamesian orientation from the very start.

This *ethical* – and hence practical, not merely intellectual – perspective on what is going on in the philosophy of religion focusing on the problem of evil thus defines the specific approach of this inquiry. There is no need to be primarily interested in how the problem ought to be resolved; it is more important to inquire into how it should be ethically responsibly discussed in the philosophy of religion. Accordingly, the philosophical and existential relevance of the problem of evil is significantly broader than some mainstream philosophers of religion would be willing to admit. On the other hand, it is precisely for that reason that we should take a look at how the problem is discussed by philosophers of religion today.

Note, furthermore, that the problem of evil has usually been approached from two quite different perspectives: (1) from the traditional point of view of theology and philosophy of religion (which is also the focus of the present inquiry), and (2) from the point of view of secular ethics, politics, and historiography, supplemented by, e.g., psychological and psychopathological explanations of evil-doing. It is far from clear that these different academic discourses on evil have much, or indeed anything, in common. In fact, this division among approaches to evil itself opens up issues of recognition. It can be argued that the two rival discourses on evil either intentionally or unintentionally fail to recognize each other as adequate responses to the *same* problem of evil understood as a fundamental human problem receiving different interpretations throughout history. Here, again, pragmatism can be helpful, though this meta-level issue will have to be set aside in this essay.

**The problem of evil and its presuppositions: a very short introduction**

So what is the current situation in the discussion of evil in the philosophy of religion, and what are its most pressing problems?

Very briefly, the problem of evil is the problem of reconciling God’s omnipotence, omniscience, and absolute goodness with the empirical fact that evil exists. These attributes – or, more specifically, the statements attributing them to God – seem to run into conflict with the statement that there is real evil, because either God is unable to eliminate all the empirically real (unnecessary) evil there is (in which case he is not omnipotent), or he does not know about its existence (in which case he is not omniscient), or he is not wholly good because he fails to eliminate it even though he knows about it and could eliminate it. The premises needed for the argument are, first, a relatively standard conception of the divinity attributing the above-mentioned properties to God and, second, the empirical premise that there is (unnecessary) evil in the world. Formally, the argument could be presented thus: (1) Necessarily, x is God if, and only if, x is omnipotent, omniscient, and absolutely good; and there is at most one individual x such that x is God. (2) God prevents or eliminates unnecessary evil. (3) There is unnecessary evil. (4) Therefore, there is no God.

The problem of evil has traditionally been invoked as an “atheological” argument, either in a logical or in an evidential form, by several critics of traditional theistic religion, including J.L. Mackie, Kai Nielsen, and William Rowe. In short, the *logical* version of the problem argues from the incompatibility of the above-mentioned key attributes of God with the empirical reality of evil to the non-existence of God. Theism, at least in the traditional sense, is taken to be logically incompatible with the reality of evil. Hence, atheism, or at least non-theism (including agnosticism), is claimed to follow deductively from the premises. In contrast, the *evidential* version makes the slightly more moderate point that it is a major theoretical burden of proof for the theist to reconcile the reality of evil with the co-presence of God’s key attributes. That is, while the argument is not presented as a straightforward logical demonstration of the falsity of theism, it is suggested that the theist owes us an explanation of how the divine attributes are compatible with the existence of evil as we know it; thus, the empirical reality of unnecessary evil is a major piece of evidence against theism.[[6]](#footnote-6)

We need not be primarily concerned with these atheological uses of the argument, which can be argued to be extremely problematic on independent grounds. A key problem with such arguments is that they presuppose an *evidentialist* understanding of religious beliefs. Evidentialists tend to view theism as an hypothesis comparable to scientific hypotheses that need to be evaluated in terms of available evidence. The reality of evil is then presented as a powerful set of evidence that speaks against theism. It is important to note that, while evidentialism is a widespread background assumption for the testing and evaluation of philosophical and theological views on theism and evil, it is an assumption we need not share. In any event, a proper understanding of the literature on the problem of evil requires that we see the various theodicies and “defenses” that have been offered by authors such as Richard Swinburne, Alvin Plantinga, Peter van Inwagen, and others as working on the assumption of evidentialism, broadly conceived.[[7]](#footnote-7) The specific relations between these and other leading philosophers’ of religion proposed solutions to the problem of evil and their underlying evidentialist assumptions need to be examined in much more detail than is possible here.

Another typical philosophical assumption shared by both atheists appealing to the argument from evil and theists producing theodicies and defenses is a form of theological and/or religious *realism* that views realism in these fields as broadly analogous to scientific realism. According to such a realistic picture, theology and philosophy of religion are in the business of constructing true theories that ideally correspond to the way the world is (and in less ideal circumstances at least approximate the mind-independent truth of the matter). This paper is not a proper place to criticize realism in general.[[8]](#footnote-8) However, it should be noted, again, that not all philosophers of religion share the realistic understanding of the relation between philosophico-theological theorization and mind-independent (or divine) reality. In contrast to evidentialism and realism, some philosophers of religion may argue that an adequate reaction to the problem of evil is personal response and engagement instead of impersonal intellectual theory-construction. Such philosophers would generally object to invoking, say, God’s “reasons” for allowing evil as a theoretical concept that could do explanatory work in the construction of a philosophical theory of evil (and theodicy), or to conceiving of evil itself as something that needs a theoretical explanation. Moreover, the attempts to develop theodicies seeking to justify the existence of evil might itself be regarded as “anti-realistic” in a quite different sense: such attempts do not take seriously the reality of evil as we know it but rather swipe it under the carpet. Theodicies do not, then, maintain a truly “realistic sprit” in their attempt to face evil.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Here we cannot evaluate major background assumptions like evidentialism and realism in relation to the problem of evil. We just have to be conscious of them, and we have to understand that philosophers rejecting, e.g., strong forms of realism (metaphysical realism), such as pragmatists following James,[[10]](#footnote-10) may develop quite different versions of realism (“pragmatic realism”) in order to engage with the problem of evil. The general point, then, is that the relevant kind of realism invoked here need not be understood in terms of the analogy to scientific realism, as it often is understood. Such analogies may be highly misleading. We will, in fact, revisit the issue of realism (at least implicitly) when dealing with our need to recognize, or acknowledge, the *full reality* of evil and suffering. This kind of recognition is also part of the response we need to develop to the challenge of *bearing witness*, which is something at the heart of our reaction to historical atrocities.

**Theodicies and “defenses”**

We will now move on to a more explicit discussion of theists’ counter-arguments to the atheistic argument from evil. As already indicated, this argumentative situation needs to be analyzed, at least at a general level, for any genuine ethical critique of contemporary philosophy of religion to be possible.

Theistic thinkers have throughout centuries proposed theoretical responses to their (actual or imagined) opponents who challenge theism by invoking the reality of evil. For example, Richard Swinburne has argued for decades for a theodicy according to which a “half-finished” universe that contains evil is the price we have to pay for the fact of human freedom. It is better that there are free agents in a world with evil than it would be if there were a world in which there would be neither evil nor freedom. Accordingly, the evil there is is not “unnecessary”, after all; it plays a certain role in the world’s scheme of things. More elaborate versions of this “free will theodicy” and/or “free will defense” have been offered by Alvin Plantinga and other leading “reformed epistemologists” and Christian philosophers. Another sophisticated version of what we may call “theodicist” thinking today is the approach known as *skeptical theism*, according to which we cannot know God’s reasons for allowing evil (or for many other things, including his “hiddenness” generally) but the theist may nevertheless trust, and perhaps justifiably believe, that there *are* such reasons unknown and presumably unknowable to us.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Now, without going into any details, we may say that these are all “instrumentalist” theodicies in the sense heavily criticized by thinkers as different as D.Z. Phillips and Marilyn McCord Adams.[[12]](#footnote-12) The reality of evil, in such theodicist rationalizations, plays an instrumental role as a condition for something else that is, all things considered, an overall good. In this sense, the reality of evil is not undermined or eliminated but is shown to play a necessary role in God’s supremely intelligent and benevolent cosmic project of universal salvation which crucially includes human freedom.

Something similar seems to be going on in van Inwagen’s defense, which is one of the most impressive recent analytic achievements of theodicism. In his carefully argued volume, *The Problem of Evil*, based on his Gifford Lectures delivered in 2003, van Inwagen emphasizes that he is *not* offering a theodicy but only a “defense”. A theodicy and a defense need not differ in content; both are stories according to which both God and evil exist, but a theodicy is put forward as “the real truth of the matter”, whereas a defense is, according to its author, a story that “may or may not be true” but is argued to be consistent and epistemically possible.[[13]](#footnote-13) A “defense” of this kind may still belong, and typically does belong, to the theodicist tradition: the one who offers a defense – a story trying to make potential sense of, or identifying potential reasons for, God’s allowing there to be evil – is still engaged in the process of *justifying* God’s (possible) actions and his (possible) reasons for them, even if s/he does not claim that the story is true. The mere appeal to the epistemically possible here – that is, to something that, for all we know, might be true – is justificatory in nature.

Another point worth emphasizing is that the problem of evil, for van Inwagen, basically amounts to the problem of reconciling God’s existence with the fact that there are “bad things” in the world.[[14]](#footnote-14) He thus refuses to recognize any *depth* in the concept of evil itself, as distinguished from (mere) badness. Furthermore, he notes that his task is “a purely intellectual one”, a theoretical examination of the problem of evil understood as “the problem that the real existence of bad things raises for theists”.[[15]](#footnote-15) Thus, van Inwagen simply denies the “intractability” or “inscrutability” of evil emphasized by thinkers like Richard Bernstein and Susan Neiman.[[16]](#footnote-16) For him the problem seems to be as transparent as any other conceptual and theoretical issue to be settled by employing the methods of analytic philosophy. It does not have any special mystery into it; nor does it seem to be any more intimately connected with the existential meaningfulness of human lives than any other intellectual issue.

It is obviously very important for a philosopher to be explicit about the limitations of her/his approach and methodology; in this sense, van Inwagen’s project is exemplary, because he is very honest about what he is doing (and more explicit in this regard than many other mainstream analytic philosophers of religion). On the other hand, it can be argued that van Inwagen is not particularly sensitive to what some others have seen as the religious and existential depth of the problem of evil, and of the corresponding religiously profound concept of evil. Not only does he set aside the Kantian-Arendtian concept of “radical evil”; he also rejects the idea that there is some “overarching problem of evil” in the sense proposed by Neiman.[[17]](#footnote-17) This is what he says:

I am only a simple-minded analytical philosopher. […] As I see matters, the problem of evil is what it has always been, a problem about God and evil. There is no larger, overarching problem of evil that manifests itself as a theological problem in one historical period and as a problem belonging to post-religious thought in another. I don’t know how to argue for this conclusion, because I wouldn’t know how to enter into anything I would call an argument with someone who would even consider denying it.[[18]](#footnote-18)

The mutual recognition – or, rather, the lack thereof – between philosophers like Neiman and van Inwagen is a key example of the general problem of recognizing rival approaches to evil.

In the passage just quoted, it seems to me, van Inwagen reveals the fundamentally *ahistorical* nature of his philosophical approach and methodology. In contrast, it may be suggested that, when viewing religious ideas as responses to human problems naturally emerging within our practices, we are dealing with historically developing and reinterpretable matters.[[19]](#footnote-19) While evil itself may be a persistent feature of human life in this world, a fundamental experience that will be with us to stay, our interpretations of and responses to evil may take very different forms during the history of human thought and action. Theodicist responses, one might argue, are ethically unacceptable *for us*, in the particular historical situation we are now in, within the kind of practices we have developed. This is, in particular, something that we may learn from post-Holocaust theorists of evil, including Hannah Arendt, Hans Jonas, and Richard Bernstein, for whom the Holocaust was not just one additional piece of evidence for the reality of evil and thus against theism but a breaking point after which no human moral or intellectual categories can remain exactly what they were.

In addition to developing a highly theoretical philosophical approach to the problem of evil and thereby manifesting insensitivity toward any attempts to historicize either the problem itself or the relevant notion of evil, van Inwagen is even more strikingly insensitive toward what we may consider the ethical need to avoid overly intellectualized accounts of this problem. When suggesting that, “for all logic can tell us, God might have reasons for allowing evil to exist that, in his mind, outweigh the desirability of the non-existence of evil”,[[20]](#footnote-20) that God may have foreseen that “free will is a sufficiently great good that its existence outweighs the evils that have resulted”,[[21]](#footnote-21) that in the end it might happen that “[e]very evil done by the wicked to the innocent will have been avenged, and every tear will have been wiped away”,[[22]](#footnote-22) and that, just as “there can be cases in which it is morally permissible for an agent to permit an evil that agent could have prevented, despite the fact that no good is achieved by doing so”, this is “the moral structure of the situation in which God finds himself when he contemplates the world of horrors that is the consequence of humanity’s separation from him”,[[23]](#footnote-23) van Inwagen engages in a theoretical speculation that might not only be considered insulting and even obscene by victims of evil but that may also be argued to be philosophically defective because of its failure to existentially *engage* human beings’ problems – their experience of evil – at all.

God’s having *reasons* to allow evil – especially instrumental reasons that may outweigh some other considerations – makes God a calculating monster, as has been acknowledged by theodicists and anti-theodicists alike.[[24]](#footnote-24) It is, however, not primarily the argumentative structure carefully canvassed by van Inwagen that the anti-theodicist should be opposed to; it is, much more fundamentally, the picture he offers of the divinity and human beings’ relations to both God and history that we should find simply ethically unacceptable. Van Inwagen points out that his account does explain why God might allow, and might have a reason to allow, evils happening to people “without any reason”, because “being separated from God” means to be “the playthings of chance”.[[25]](#footnote-25) *Therefore* people, including children, suffer and die horribly “*for no reason at all*”.[[26]](#footnote-26) Yet, God has, according to van Inwagen’s defense, reasons – and even good, ethically sound reasons – to allow *this* to be the case. The appeal to reasons at such a meta-level is as problematic as the first-order appeal. It still invokes God’s “reasons”.

Just as van Inwagen says he finds it difficult to argue with those who claim to be able to grasp something like a comprehensive problem of evil, his critic may find it very difficult to provide any argumentative response to van Inwagen’s “defense” at this point. (Moreover, there is no reason to regard the problem of evil as an atheological argument in the first place.) One may find it simply ethically disastrous – and, when it comes to one’s theological picture of the divinity, possibly even blasphemous – to suggest that God might have “good reasons” to allow the world he created to be a place in which innocent children are, say, led to gas chambers. If one’s philosophical approach leads one to say things like that, then there is surely something wrong with that philosophical approach. One should not only recognize the “limits of argumentation” – the fact that we should *not* always follow the intellectually most sophisticated argument, wherever it leads[[27]](#footnote-27) – but one should more generally be continuously aware of the ethical context in which one’s philosophizing takes place.

Part of this ethical context arguably is that philosophy should, in dealing with (as Dewey put it) “problems of men”, also offer some kind of *comfort* or *consolation* to the suffering. Or, more broadly, philosophy should contribute to the ethical task of bearing witness – to the duties of remembering.[[28]](#footnote-28) Note that there is a sense in which the fact/value dichotomy must be rejected here: as a commitment, bearing witness is not just a matter of telling the truth about the bare facts. One can say the same words and *do* different things by saying them, depending on whether one is, for example, a moral witness or a war criminal interviewed by a court. Such fact/value entanglement is hardly available to a van Inwagenian intellectualizing “defense” theorist.

These requirements should be especially easy to appreciate (without denying the complexities involved in the very notion of bearing witness),[[29]](#footnote-29) if you are a philosopher with pragmatist leanings. Pragmatists like James and Dewey famously insisted that philosophy must be relevant to human beings’ genuine problems, instead of just being theoretically and intellectually relevant. (On the other hand, there should, especially for pragmatists, be no fundamental dichotomy between “theoretical” and “practical” philosophy, or relevance.)[[30]](#footnote-30) Now, van Inwagen is again conscious of the limitations of his approach, and this is obviously to his merit. He says explicitly that he is not, in offering his defense, attempting to even hypothetically comfort anyone.[[31]](#footnote-31) It is precisely for this reason that we may, and perhaps should, reject his “defense” with the words James directed at Leibnizian theodicies, that is, as “a cold literary exercise, whose cheerful substance even hell-fire does not warm”.[[32]](#footnote-32) Van Inwagen’s critic may argue that a philosophical reflection on the problem of evil should avoid the purely intellectual God’s-Eye View adopted by van Inwagen and should sincerely acknowledge our human limits in dealing with this problem, maintaining sensitivity not only to the victims of evil but also to everyone needing comfort in the (historically developing) situation of having to live within such limits. Otherwise, our theorization of evil lapses into what James memorably called “vicious intellectualism”.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Our challenge, therefore, is to defend a resolutely anti-theodicist philosophy of religion, based on the notion of pragmatic recognition, that will be more sensitive to the human (existential) dimensions of the problem of evil than van Inwagen’s purely theoretical approach. In short, the concept of recognition ought to do the job of engaging and possibly even comforting the victim, which van Inwagen’s analytic approach is manifestly incapable of – not, of course, because it is a piece of analytic philosophy but because it lacks the kind of fundamental ethical orientation that critics of theodicies have in my view rightly asked for.

**Anti-theodicy**

The problem of mutual recognition becomes clearer as we note that several philosophers – not only philosophers of religion but also thinkers concerned with the “more comprehensive” problem of evil that van Inwagen rejects – have argued, against theodicists of various kinds, that offering a theodicy of any sort, either theological or secular, is a way of explaining away, or justifying, the existence of evil and that this amounts to an ethically unacceptable, or even obscene, reaction to the evil and suffering that human beings, especially the victims of historical atrocities such as the Holocaust, have to go through in their lives. We must not, it can be argued, “excuse” evil in this (or any) sense; nor should we speculate about the possible reasons that an omnipotent and benevolent God (or his secular cousins, e.g., History) might have for allowing apparently unnecessary evil to exist; such speculations would turn God into a monster. One of the most powerful anti-theodicist arguments in contemporary philosophy of religion has been provided by D.Z. Phillips, whose point of departure is Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion.[[34]](#footnote-34)

Briefly, according to what we may call *Wittgensteinian anti-theodicism*,[[35]](#footnote-35) the proper use of religious and/or theological language does not incorporate or even tolerate theodicies, or *any* speculations about God’s possible reasons for allowing horrendous suffering. Evil and suffering should, rather, be addressed in properly religious, symbolic, and possibly poetic language, such as the language we find in The Book of Job. Rationalizing theodicies make God himself an evil demon. No benevolent creator could just sit back and contemplate his absolutely good divine plan when something like the Holocaust is taking place among his creatures. The reasons for the rejection of theodicies are, hence, both ethical and theological/religious. Ethically, theodicies are outrageous or even obscene,[[36]](#footnote-36) disregarding the sufferings of the victims and demonstrating crude moral insensitivity to those unfortunate people who have (had) to go through such experiences. Theologically and religiously, theodicies are conceptual confusions in which human beings try to justify God’s ways which ought to be understood as completely different from ours. Arguably, one should not undertake such a confused and possibly even blasphemous task if one wants to be “genuinely religious” rather than pseudo-religious or superstitious.[[37]](#footnote-37) Catastrophes, natural and moral, may strike us “without rhyme or reason”, and moralizing speculations about why they happened should be discouraged. Rather, the proper response is silence and wonder, perhaps faith and prayer – but equally possibly the *loss* of faith, depending decisively on the individual case. Moreover, *such* a loss of faith does not take place because of an atheological argument based on evidentialism but as a personal response to concrete suffering.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Anti-theodicy is, however, not restricted to philosophy of religion. Clearly, there are anti-theodicist thinkers (who would typically not use these words) who find the very idea of excusing or explaining away evil morally obscene without caring too much about the *theological* confusions involved. These more secular anti-theodicists include philosophers writing in the tradition of Jewish responses to the Holocaust, such as Jonas and Bernstein, but also, arguably, philosophers coming from a quite different intellectual background, such as James.[[39]](#footnote-39) An important literary contribution to anti-theodicist thinking is of course Dostoevsky’s character Ivan Karamazov, who famously “returns his ticket” to the God who (supposedly) created a world in which children are tortured.

Let us at this point take a brief look at two quite different but arguably in the end similar anti-theodicisms, namely, James’s and Jonas’s.[[40]](#footnote-40) Both thinkers refuse to respond to the problem of evil by offering anything like a theodicy, either religious or secular. This is also one of the aspects of Jonas’s philosophy thoroughly discussed by Bernstein.[[41]](#footnote-41) Not only are theodicies that are taken to justify or legitimize evil and suffering within, say, God’s (or History’s) overall supremely benevolent plan usually theoretically unconvincing and implausible; much more importantly, they are, especially in our world after Auschwitz, immoral. No decent ethical thinker can claim – after the atrocities of the twentieth century – that *all this* serves some hidden divine purpose. There is no morally acceptable way in which we could explain away the brute reality of evil.

This is a key starting point not only for James, whom we already saw arguing against Leibnizian or Hegelian theodicies,[[42]](#footnote-42) but also for Jonas, who states the following: “And when in horror we look at the pictures from Buchenwald, at the wasted bodies and distorted faces, at the utter defilement of humanity in the flesh, we reject the consolation that this is appearance and the truth is something else: we face the terrible truth that the appearance is the reality, and that there is nothing more real than what here appears.”[[43]](#footnote-43) These words by Jonas should be seriously considered by those who, in the spirit of metaphysical (theological) realism and evidentialism invoke the “real”, hidden, possibly unknowable reasons that God may have for allowing such (according to them) perhaps only apparently real phenomena as the suffering of the Holocaust victims to take place. Nothing, for post-Holocaust human beings, can be more real – nothing can be more real in the ethically demanding sense of our being unable to fail to focus our attention to it – than the ultimate suffering of those victims.

Note that reality, according to Jamesian pragmatism, is in a special sense dependent on our selective attention.[[44]](#footnote-44) We “construct” what is real for us through our purposive habits of action; it is a general pragmatist idea that our ontologies always serve some human interest or have a practical function. Now, the “wasted bodies and distorted faces” of the camps of the twentieth century command us to focus our attention in a very special way, not to forget their reality. They could be seen as *ethically real* in a sense primary to any (merely) metaphysically construed reality.[[45]](#footnote-45)

It must, furthermore, be observed that James’s and Jonas’s religious differences inevitably make their responses to the theodicy problem somewhat different. Jonas has repeatedly emphasized that there is a sense in which the problem of evil – especially in its post-Holocaust version – is more difficult for the Jew than it is for the Christian. This is because from the Jewish point of view, God is “the lord of history”, and this is particularly difficult to explain “after Auschwitz”.[[46]](#footnote-46) Moreover, the Jews who died in the Holocaust died *not* because of their faith or for the sake of their faith – martyrdom had been rendered impossible in their utter dehumanization – but simply anonymously and inhumanly, deprived of any reason to die.[[47]](#footnote-47) When Jonas finds it necessary to rethink both the nature of ethical duty and the concept of God after Auschwitz, he engages in this rethinking within the Jewish tradition, while James offers us his (pre-Holocaust) version of rethinking from the perspective of liberalized Christianity – albeit without any dogmatic Christian creed. Even so, both end up with strikingly similar pictures of the divinity, according to which only a *finite* God can be reconciled with the reality of suffering.

A “realistic spirit”, then, according to these quite different thinkers, urges philosophers of religion to revisit some of our most fundamental conceptual assumptions regarding the metaphysical character of the divinity. These philosophers’ conceptions of God cannot, however, be further examined here, as our primary purpose is to discuss ethically the current state of the art in the philosophy of religion rather than the substantially metaphysical or theological problems addressed in the field.

**Adams’s alternative**

While anti-theodicist argumentation may seem compelling, both ethically and religiously, it would be wrong to too quickly conclude that theodicies are simply over. On the contrary, they flourish in ever more sophisticated forms in contemporary philosophy of religion, and therefore further inquiry is needed. Not all theodicies are as crudely insensitive to human suffering as (one may argue) van Inwagen’s is. Some of them actually oppose the “instrumentalization” of evil and suffering to the service of some allegedly greater good, just like anti-theodicies do. A noteworthy Christian proposal in this discussion has been offered by Marilyn McCord Adams, a major authority in the field who again returns to the problem of evil in a recent article.[[48]](#footnote-48) We may formulate further worries regarding theodicies – which will eventually introduce the issue of recognition – by discussing her proposal. The reason for exploring Adams’s position here is that she is one of the few theodicy-seeking philosophers who take seriously the kind of anti-theodicist argumentation that plays a key role in thinkers like Jonas, James, Bernstein, and Phillips. In a sense, she also takes seriously what is lacking in a sheer intellectual exercise such as van Inwagen’s, namely, the need to offer at least some kind of comfort to the sufferer of evil. However, arguably, the problem lies in the kind of consolation offered.

Adams agrees with Phillips’s criticism of instrumentalist theodicies that finds “*morally obscene any idea that instrumental reasons could impose […] moral obligation or confer […] moral permission on and so wash the hands of agents who allow them*”.[[49]](#footnote-49) Only philosophers who “separate the theoretical problem of evil from the existential context in which horrors arise”[[50]](#footnote-50) can come up with such ideas. This, precisely, is what philosophers like Swinburne, Plantinga, and van Inwagen seem to be doing. It is this separation of the intellectual and the existential that Adams also opposes, and here she makes a very important point.

Rather, when we have to not merely suffer but also ourselves be involved in evil, as, famously, the characters in William Styron’s *Sophie’s Choice*, the evil is not excused because some other (possibly greater) evil is thereby avoided but remains with us, “sticks with” us.[[51]](#footnote-51) However, this does not mean, according to Adams, that a religious person shouldn’t view God as “an agent-cause” “acting in our world”. What Adams offers is a picture of divine goodness that includes an idea of God as infinitely good in a metaphysical sense. God is *not* “a good for which horrors are instrumentally necessary”, and “beatific intimacy” with the divinity is *not* “a goal for the sake of which horrors are tolerated as the price” – that would, indeed, be cruel and obscene – but rather, “as incommensurately good for the created person, beatific intimacy with God can overcome the *prima facie* life-ruinous quality of horror participation”.[[52]](#footnote-52) Moreover, there is an element of “divine solidarity” in God’s own “horror participation” due to the incarnation; in this sense, this is a specifically Christian response to the problem of evil and suffering.

Thus, Adams maintains that insofar as we “recognize our own horror participation as an episode of intimate togetherness in our – on the whole and in the end – beatific life together with God, we would not retrospectively wish it away from our life histories”.[[53]](#footnote-53) Now – even given Adams’s promising integration of the existential and the theoretical – this could be regarded as an extremely problematic thing to say. It could still be found obscene from the point of view of, say, Holocaust survivors to appeal to *any* kind of compensation, even infinite post-mortem metaphysical compensation. The critic can ask: Could we really console a Holocaust victim in this way? Could such a victim *avoid* wishing certain experiences away from her/his life history? Wouldn’t s/he, rather, “return the ticket” and have nothing to do with a beatific intimacy that even *could* compensate for such evil and suffering?

Philosophers like Jonas and Bernstein would presumably pose these questions. They would find it unacceptable to suggest anything like a divine compensation in this spirit. There is, furthermore, no reason to think this difference in opinion about such a fundamental matter can be reduced to the differences between Judaism and Christianity in this regard. It is a deep ethical difference in the ways we recognize other people.

Recognition, then, could be regarded as a key to this entire problem. Is it a proper recognition of a victim or a sufferer to console her/him by invoking the idea of a post-mortem consolation and a beatific intimacy? Adams duly recognizes (sic!), for instance, that Phillips, given his Wittgensteinian rejection of personal survival after death, cannot accept the idea that full recovery from horror participation takes place after death.[[54]](#footnote-54) However, one may argue that this is hardly the point. Rather, the point is that one’s basic ethical recognition of another human being might require one not to talk about any “full recovery” at all. Very simply, we owe to the victims, as part of our recognition of them, the recognition that there can be no “full recovery” after the Holocaust; indeed, it has famously been suggested that it is not clear that there can be any more poetry, art, philosophy, or even rational thought after the Holocaust. To claim that God, after our deaths, “heals our meaning-making capacities”, teaching us “how to make positive sense of our lives”,[[55]](#footnote-55) can only sound like an incredible insult to anyone who really has to go through suffering of the magnitude of the Holocaust. Equally insulting is, arguably, Adams’s claim that because of this supreme divine healing, “even the Hitlers and Pol Pots of this world will eventually be able to live with themselves”,[[56]](#footnote-56) as horror participation can be posthumously healed as much in the case of the perpetrators as in the case of the victims.

It therefore needs to be investigated how it is *possible* in contemporary philosophy of religion that one can seriously suggest that humans will wear their sins “eternally as honorable battle scars”.[[57]](#footnote-57) Again, try talking this way about the sins of a Holocaust perpetrator to someone whose family was murdered at Auschwitz.

**Could recognition help?**

The philosophical question that needs to be addressed in detail here is whether a Holocaust survivor (or victim) or, more theoretically, an anti-theodicist thinker, could even *recognize* this attempt at a theology of healing as a way of dealing with the problem of evil. Conversely, the question is whether we can say that a theodicist following Adams’s argument actually *recognizes* the person/people who have had to go through, as sufferers or as victims of evil, the unspeakable kind of suffering that the Holocaust involved. The question of recognition cuts through this entire discussion and therefore needs to be addressed in some detail.

To begin with, one might argue that the Holocaust victim does not get proper recognition in Adams’s theory *as a victim* (the legitimate worries regarding the category of the “victim” notwithstanding). S/he might be recognized as someone who seeks, and possibly finds, meaning in her/his life after the horror participation, but still s/he fails to get recognition as a victim or sufferer whose meaning-seeking capacities may have been permanently violated beyond healing. Possibly, the only ethically adequate recognition of such a person as a victim would be the “handing back of the ticket”, in Ivan Karamazov’s famous words. Because *such* recognition is lacking in Adams, her contribution may not (in turn) be fully recognized by the anti-theodicist as a serious, or even as an ethically decent, contribution to the discussion.

The problem may lie in Adams’s strongly metaphysical notion of “perfect goodness” (or divine goodness), according to which “the divine essence is maximally, indeed infinitely and immeasurably, excellent”.[[58]](#footnote-58) Invoking such a divine essence at this point is not only to beg the question against those who find the existence of evil incompatible with any such essence but also an insult to those who try to keep on believing in God after Auschwitz, possibly in a rethought way (following, e.g., Jonas and James, for whom God needs to be rearticulated as finite instead of infinite and omnipotent). A proper recognition of the victims of atrocities qua victims requires, then, an ethical ground upon which any metaphysical goodness is based. *This* is missing from Adams’s theory. One may suggest that a version of such an ethical ground can be found in pragmatism, especially in James’s pragmatism, in which ethical and metaphysical perspectives are inseparably entangled.[[59]](#footnote-59)

However, the notion of (mutual) pragmatic recognition may be helpful not only in locating the true bone of the controversy but also in seeking ways out. When genuinely attempting to recognize each other not only as actual or potential victims or sufferers but also, more theoretically, as participants of the same community of ethical reflection and inquiry, we may tolerate our theoretical differences over the possibility and desirability of a theodicy and focus on healing the victims, to the extent that any healing is possible.

Let me therefore very briefly introduce the perspective that the concept of recognition may offer us here, especially in relation to pragmatist approaches to religion. Issues of recognition, arguably, are not restricted to the mutual recognition among persons or groups (e.g., representing different religious or non-religious outlooks) as being epistemically or rationally entitled to their (religious or non-religious) views, but extend to the need to recognize (from the perspective of certain intellectual and/or ethical outlooks) certain ethically significant *limitations* or *boundaries* that define the proper sphere of human experience, cognition, or reason-use, and even to the need to recognize different groups and people as actual or potential “recognizers” of quite *different* boundaries. The diverging ways in which, say, theists and atheists or theodicists and anti-theodicists recognize something as a boundary limiting human intellectual capacities should themselves be recognized by both groups – in a way that not merely tolerates these different boundary-drawings but acknowledges that there may be legitimately different ways of drawing them, without simply agreeing with the other party, either.[[60]](#footnote-60)

Various acts of recognition across the boundary dividing believers and non-believers or theodicists and anti-theodicists may have as their content at least the following different types of recognition (though this is somewhat simplified, because generally it may turn out to be impossible to define the boundary between religious believers and non-believers in any sharp manner, and the theodicism vs. anti-theodicism division may in fact be more fundamental). One party may recognize the other as (i) human beings (e.g., with certain inviolable human rights), as (ii) thinkers capable of formulating thoughts and/or judgments with intelligible content, as (iii) actual or potential participants in political discussion and deliberation, and/or as (iv) “fellow inquirers” (e.g., possibly, philosophers) seeking the truth about the matter at issue (e.g., about God’s existence or non-existence, or the nature of evil). These different specifications and qualifications of the content of the act of recognition involve quite different factual and normative commitments and expectations. For example, recognizing someone as a (fellow) inquirer in the pursuit of truth yields expectations significantly stronger than “merely” recognizing the same person or group as (a) member(s) of the human species, or even as sharing a common humanity in some stronger sense invoking, say, fundamental human rights. These different contents of acts of recognition are, furthermore, crucially related to the concept of *rationality*: we may recognize someone as rational (as an inquirer, etc.) while disagreeing with her/him on fundamental issues – but can we, and how far can we, also consistently disagree about the criteria of rationality itself?

A key meta-level issue in contemporary philosophy of religion is, therefore, *the very possibility of critical discussion of religious beliefs, including religious beliefs about evil and suffering* (and their actual or potential meaningfulness or meaninglessness). In order for such discussion to be possible across, say, the boundary dividing believers and non-believers, both groups must in some sense recognize each other *as members of the same intellectual and ethical community* – as rational discussion partners – and thus in a sense overcome or at least reconsider the boundaries dividing them from each other. The same obviously goes for the discussion between theodicist and anti-theodicist believers (and non-believers). In order for such discussions to extend to ethical and political matters related to religion, the rival groups must also recognize each other as belonging to the same moral and political community. (However, we should avoid drawing another sharp limit between intellectual matters, on the one side, and moral or political ones, on the other; this division plays only a heuristic role here.) The pragmatist philosopher’s job in this situation is to examine critically the conceptual, practice-laden presuppositions for the possibility of the relevant kind of mutual recognition acts. For a pragmatist philosopher, such presuppositions are always inevitably practice-embedded – in short, and in principle like any other beliefs or commitments, habits of action.

We cannot resolve these questions of recognition here. On the contrary, many key issues are inevitably left open. If, for example, Christian believers and “new atheists” are able to recognize each other ethically, politically, and/or intellectually, can they also recognize each others’ belonging to the same community of inquirers (a community that is, arguably, constituted by mutual acts of recognition)? That is, can they recognize each other *as “fellow inquirers” committed to the pursuit of truth*? Could they do this even while maintaining very different normative conceptions of the role of reason, objectivity, and evidence in the evaluation of religious thought and beliefs, recognizing quite different (both factual and normative) limits for human thought and capacities? Examining these questions pragmatically, from the point of view of the theory of recognition, can again be expected to lead to rearticulations of the traditional issues in the philosophy of religion, including the problem of evil.[[61]](#footnote-61) The concept of recognition is thereby itself re-examined: we may say that even when the diverging (e.g., theodicist and anti-theodicist) practices do not, or cannot, directly recognize each other, they engage in a kind of *transitive* act of recognition insofar as, and to the extent that, they both recognize some normative principle or standard as binding for both.[[62]](#footnote-62) Whether, and how exactly, this is possible in the debates on evil and theodicy needs to be studied in much more detail.

If a relation of mutual transitive recognition is in some sense possible for Christians and new atheists, is it also possible for theodicists and anti-theodicists? It seems to me that the ethically relevant divide between these two positions may cut deeper and even make ethically genuine recognition across this boundary very difficult. The reason for this is that from the anti-theodicist point of view, the theodicist justification of evil is a fundamental violation to the sufferers’ moral right to reject any pseudo-justification or pseudo-explanation of why they had to suffer. But we should offer this as an observation to be considered, *not* as a moral judgment.

Recognizing philosophical and/or theological positions and their advocates as intellectual systems of thought and as rational persons must be distinguished from the recognition of persons (and peoples) as sufferers, or as victims of various types of evil and atrocities, such as violence, murder, or genocide. Both are instances of pragmatic recognition, as they are related to certain human actions, habits of action, and capacities for action, but the types of action they presuppose are quite different, that is, intellectual theorization on the one hand and more practical responding to suffering on the other hand. The notion of pragmatic recognition seeks to draw attention to this variability of the practice-involving contexts that play a crucial role in shaping the “as” in the notion of recognizing someone as something. An intellectually highly sophisticated exchange of theoretical ideas on evil may be based on mutual recognition among the disagreeing participants, while still failing to adequately recognize the victims those theoretical ideas refer to, or their suffering. Thus, an argumentative exchange on evil might be theoretically highly fruitful while still lacking in other aspects of pragmatic recognition.

Note again that recognition, as remarked above, is different from both full agreement and mere toleration. When we recognize something or someone, we do not merely tolerate it/her/him; we attribute some positive value to the object of recognition, while still at least possibly significantly disagreeing with her/him/it. Whether we are inquiring into the possibility of recognizing the sufferer’s experiences or the theodicist’s argument (e.g., a theodicist “defense”), these distinctions ought to be kept in mind. Obviously the sufferer ought to (in some sense) tolerate the theodicist’s project, and the theodicist ought to tolerate the sufferer’s refusal to accept any meaning, however intelligently argued, in her/his suffering. The key challenge is to recognize the other, in her/his distinctive pragmatic role. In some cases this challenge may be very difficult to face, and it may, in particular, be quite impossible for a person experiencing her/himself as a victim of evil to recognize a theodicist’s (even non-instrumental theodicist’s such as Adams’s) possibly entirely well-meant attempt to comfort her/him by referring to post-mortem metaphysical consolation (instead of any – possibly instrumental – “meaning” or “significance” allegedly inherent in the suffering itself). It may even be difficult to merely tolerate an approach taken to be morally obscene, though it is unclear what it would mean not to tolerate it. (No anti-theodicist, clearly, would prefer theodicist books to be burned, for example, even if those books themselves were regarded as being in some sense “evil”.)

In brief, while a Swinburnean or Plantingian free will theodicist, or a van Inwagenian “defense” theorist, or an Adamsian “beatific compensation” theodicist, may be recognized – not merely tolerated – by an anti-theodicist at an intellectual level where the relevant practices are intellectual and theoretical (and vice versa), the relevant kind of mutual recognition may be lacking – and therefore mere tolerance may be all we get – at the more practical level where a Holocaust survivor (implicitly) asks for recognition as a victim who has gone through unspeakable evil and suffering. Here the “as” is different, and appreciating this pragmatic difference is crucial for a proper understanding of the problem of evil. Pragmatists like James would have found such a pragmatic difference fundamental for the very meaning of the philosophical view or idea engaging with the problem of evil.

**Conclusion: recognition and acknowledgment**

We have seen that, when the challenge of recognizing victims of evil as victims (or, more neutrally, as sufferers) is taken seriously, theodicies arguably turn out to be crude forms of non-recognition. We have also emphasized that the concept of (pragmatic) recognition employed here crucially invokes the “as” clause: someone or some group is always recognized as something. Recognition is certainly not a relation between equals – and this is one reason why the entire issue is not only ethically but also politically problematic. The party granting recognition to the party requesting recognition is in some sense in an authoritative position, even though the one requesting recognition also thereby already recognizes the (potential) recognizer as an acceptable authority. A well-meaning “recognition” of someone as a victim of, say, the Holocaust might itself also – in a certain specific context – amount to a non-recognition of that person in some other social role, specified by some other “as” clause. In some cases and for some purposes, it might actually be better to speak about the *recognition of certain forms of suffering*, or of the experience of suffering itself, instead of continuing to operate in terms of the recognition of certain people(s) as victims.[[63]](#footnote-63)

For these reasons, by way of conclusion, the argument could be taken one step further by asking whether the “as” clause itself could or should be dropped in some cases of fundamental human importance. Here an important distinction could be drawn between the concepts of recognition and *acknowledgment*.[[64]](#footnote-64) The way we may prefer to draw this distinction emphasizes a certain asymmetry between recognition and acknowledgment regarding the “as” clause in particular: there is no “as” in acknowledgment, except perhaps in the very basic sense of denoting our sharing something like a common humanity,[[65]](#footnote-65) and thus there is no need to ask for, search, or request recognition as anything specific, either. Moreover, in acknowledgment there is no need for the kind of hierarchical orderings there inevitably is between the parties requesting and granting recognition.

Furthermore, while recognition is based on someone’s seeking recognition as something and thus on at least some kind of common conceptual ground between the subject and object of the act of recognition, acknowledgment involves no such necessity of conceptual (let alone ethically or politically hierarchical) pre-categorization of the acknowledged person or group as something in particular (viz., as something else than merely “other”). Recognition, being a matter of recognizing someone as something in particular, presupposes that these two poles of the relation in a sense inhabit the same conceptual world, but this need not be the case with acknowledgment. While recognition may be needed especially in situations in which we have (to put it in a Wittgensteinian manner) “reached the bedrock” and are unable to rationally argue with the other anymore (that is, when we have lost hope of reaching agreement but are still committed to something more than a mere toleration of the other’s diverging views), the question inevitably arises whether we can always recognize the other when s/he is *very* far from us.[[66]](#footnote-66) Do we first have to understand in order to be able to recognize? Here it could be suggested that we can acknowledge the other, without any specific “as” clause, even when we have no way of really understanding what her/his perspective on the world is, and how, hence, the “as” clause could be specified.

Moreover, while recognition is fundamental for normative social theory, because acts and relations of (mutual) recognition largely constitute social institutions and social reality in the sense we are familiar with them,[[67]](#footnote-67) acknowledgment is a fundamental ethical experience or perspective opening toward the other *as other*. Such an other, possibly a victim of past evil and suffering very far from us, sets a limit to our subjectivity itself, demonstrating our own finitude and the resulting infinite task of ethical acknowledgment. Thus, in sum, while recognition deals with *finite* and well-structured social reality, acknowledgment deals with the *infinity* of one’s ethical duty toward the other. One might argue that it is, in the end, the latter that makes the problem of evil the fundamental problem it is.

It could be suggested, finally, that the theodicist tendency to fail to recognize suffering in its brute reality and equally brute meaninglessness and pointlessness – the failure to develop a “realistic spirit” in this area of philosophical reflection – is itself an example of what Hannah Arendt called the “banality of evil”.[[68]](#footnote-68) Non-acknowledgment too easily penetrates into our most well-meant and religiously or ethically sophisticated attempts to face evil. Facing evil, even facing it philosophically, is not just a matter of philosophical argumentation, understood as mere business as usual. Instead, it is something that ought to shake human lives in a fundamental way. This is why we need an ethical critique of the philosophy of religion focusing on evil, that is, a critique of discourses on evil that fail to acknowledge the suffering other or tend to swipe her/his suffering under the carpet of cool rational theorization. The banality of evil may in this sense be found right in the middle of the theodicy discussion itself.

Perhaps *silence*, instead of theoretical reflection, is, then, the only acceptable form of acknowledgment. But the nagging question returns: is it, really? Or should one, rather, continue to speak about evil, always fallibly and incompletely, without final resolutions or theoretical justifications, and thus help to create ethical and political spaces where evil can be resisted and fought against? And in what kind of language should one do this?[[69]](#footnote-69) These questions do not seem to terminate at any specific point, but we do seem to have an (intellectual as well as ethical) obligation to continue to philosophically investigate the conditions for the possibility of still writing philosophy, poetry, and theology after Auschwitz. This is a fundamental motivation for undertaking an inquiry into pragmatist theory of recognition applied to the problem of evil.[[70]](#footnote-70)

1. I won’t be able to cite their writings on religion in any detail in this essay. For my attempt to deal with pragmatist philosophy of religion, classical and contemporary, see Sami Pihlström, *Pragmatic Pluralism and the Problem of God* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In addition to the book cited in the previous note, see Sami Pihlström, *Taking Evil Seriously* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Pivot, forthcoming 2014), in which I also suggest that we may view evil (metaphysically) as a Peircean “real general”. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. While pragmatism and recognition theories have only seldom been connected, the notion of pragmatic recognition is actually used in Kevin S. Decker, “Perspectives and Ideologies: A Pragmatic Use for Recognition Theory”, *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 38 (2012), 215-226. For an attempt to develop a broadly pragmatist philosophy of religion in which the concept of recognition plays a key role, see Sami Pihlström, “Objectivity in Pragmatist Philosophy of Religion”, forthcoming in *Nordic Studies in Pragmatism* ([www.nordprag.org](http://www.nordprag.org)). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In this essay, I cannot discuss in any detail the already massive, and growing, literature on recognition that has followed Axel Honneth’s seminal work, *Kampf um Anerkennung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003; first published 1992); in addition to Honneth’s many works, see especially Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition”, in Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1995). Regarding the relevance of recognition to the philosophy of religion, I am particularly indebted to Risto Saarinen, “Anerkennungstheorien und ökumenische Theologie”, in Thomas Bremer (ed.), *Ökumene – überdacht* (Quaestiones disputatae 259, Freiburg: Herder, 2013), pp. 237-261. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This is related to what Armen Marsoobian argued (in his paper at CEPF8 in Wroclaw, June 2014) about the need to avoid victimizing the victims a second time by *merely* remembering their suffering and murder. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See, e.g., William Rowe (ed.), *God and the Problem of Evil* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2001); Chad Meister, *Evil: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For an overview of the problem of evil in the philosophy of religion, with a comprehensive bibliography listing most of the key contributions, see Michael Tooley, “The Problem of Evil”, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2012), <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/evil/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For a critical exploration of the issue of realism in the philosophy of religion, see Sami Pihlström, “A Pragmatist Perspective on Theological and Religious Realism”, *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 6:1 (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For the notion of a “realistic spirit”, see Cora Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1991). For a brief discussion of this notion in relation to William James’s philosophy of religion, see Sami Pihlström, “Pragmatic Realism and Pluralism in Philosophy of Religion”, in Henrik Rydenfelt and Sami Pihlström (ed.), *William James on Religion* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. On James’s philosophy of religion, also from the point of view of the realism discussion, see Rydenfelt and Pihlström (eds.), *William James on Religion*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Meister, *Evil: A Guide for the Perplexed*, for a discussion of the relation between the problem of evil and skeptical theism. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For an exchange between Swinburne (the theodicist) and Phillips (the anti-theodicist), see, e.g., their contributions, both titled “The Problem of Evil”, in Stuart C. Brown (ed.), *Reason and Religion* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 81-102 and 103-121, respectively. Swinburne and Phillips have continued to examine these topics voluminously after those early papers. However, their conflict – the paradigmatic opposition between theodicism and anti-theodicism – basically seems to repeat the old patterns of argument. We will get back to Adams’s views in due course. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Peter Van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. 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, 2002; paperback ed. 2004). There are also other recent theorists of evil who have insisted on the peculiar depth of the concept – retaining some of its traditional religious character in a secularized context. See, e.g., Alan D. Schrift (ed.), *Modernity and the Problem of Evil* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005); and Peter Dews, *The Idea of Evil* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil*, pp. 14-15. Van Inwagen admits that he has “a very narrow conception of philosophy” in comparison to the one at work in Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil*, p. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. I make this point more fully in Pihlström, *Pragmatic Pluralism and the Problem of God*, chapter 5 and “Conclusion”. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil*, p. 65; see also p. 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid., pf. 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid., p. 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid., p. 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See also ibid., p. 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid., p. 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid. (original emphasis). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. For critical discussions of this idea, see Sami Pihlström, *Transcendental Guilt: Reflections on Ethical Finitude* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books [Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group], 2011), chapter 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Bearing witness may symbolize our commitment to the moral order that has been upset by a certain historical atrocity, for example. (I am indebted to Armen Marsoobian’s formulation here.) For a now classical study of the duty of remembering, see Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Complicity in evil and guilt is a chief reason for such complexities, as articulated by Holocaust writers such as Primo Levi. See Giorgo Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. For Dewey’s views on the relevance of philosophy in investigating “the problems of men”, see John Dewey, *The Problems of Men* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1946). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil*, p. 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. 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), p. 20. See also, on James’s anti-theodicism, Sami Pihlström, *“The Trail of the Human Serpent Is over Everything”: Jamesian Reflections on Mind, World, and Religion* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America [Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group], 2008), chapter 4. James’s anti-theodicism can be regarded as both ethical and aesthetic (and these are, obviously, entangled here), because theodicies seek a harmony there cannot be in this messy world. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. This is James’s description of the Hegelian idealism he attacked. See, e.g., William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909), eds. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1979). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. See again Phillips’s response to Swinburne in “The Problem of Evil” in Brown (ed.), *Reason and Religion* (cited above). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. In addition to Phillips’s many works, such as D.Z. Phillips, “The Holocaust and Language”, in J.K. Roth (ed.), *Genocide and Human Rights: A Philosophical Guide* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005), pp. 46-64, see, e.g., David Wisdo, *The Life of Irony and the Ethics of Belief* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), especially pp. 92-101; Stephen Mulhall, *Faith and Reason* (London: Duckworth, 1994), pp. 18-19; and Ben Tilghman, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994), chapter 5. These are all formulations of broadly Wittgensteinian anti-theodicism. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. This point is made particularly forcefully by Bernstein in his *Radical Evil* (cited above). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. On the relation between the problem of evil and the distinction between genuine religiosity and pseudo-religiosity, see Sami Pihlström, “Religion vs. Pseudo-Religion: An Elusive Boundary”, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 62 (2007), 3-31. Cf. also Pihlström, *Pragmatic Pluralism and the Problem of God*, cited above. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. We may, hence, speak about a “genuinely religious loss of faith”, as strange as this may sound. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. I have tried to show in Pihlström, *“The Trail of the Human Serpent Is over Everything”*, chapter 4, and Pihlström, *Pragmatic Pluralism and the Problem of God*, chapter 5, that Jamesian pragmatism should both be interpreted and further developed in a strictly anti-theodicist manner. This paper will, while employing the notion of pragmatic recognition, set aside scholarly issues concerning James and pragmatism, however. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. For a more comprehensive discussion, see Sami Pihlström, “James and Jonas: The Ethics and Metaphysics of Post-Holocaust Pragmatism”, *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 28 (2014), reprinted (in a revised form) in Pihlström, *Taking Evil Seriously*, chapter 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. See Bernstein, *Radical Evil* (cited above), especially pp. 194ff. As Bernstein puts it (speaking about Jonas and Emmanuel Levinas): “Both categorically reject any philosophical or religious attempt to ‘reconcile’ us to evil. They would agree that we must give up both vulgar and sophisticated forms of ‘the Happy End.’ There is something brute, unsurpassable, and ‘transcendent’ about evil, which challenges and defies philosophical concepts and categories.” (Ibid., p. 203; see also p. 229.) There is no reason why this would not also aptly describe James’s position. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. See James, *Pragmatism*, pp. 20-22. More specifically, James here 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 quileless thoroughfed thinkers 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”. He continues by pointing out that the idealist and optimist philosophers he argues against are “dealing in shades, while those who live and feel know truth”. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Hans Jonas, “Immortality and the Modern Temper”, in Jonas, *Mortality and Morality: In Search of the Good after Auschwitz* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1996), pp. 118-119. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. James, *Pragmatism*, chapter 7. (This theme is already present in James’s psychological *magnum opus*, *The Principles of Psychology*, 1890.) [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. By this phrase we do not have to mean what Levinas means when he regards our ethical duty toward the other as something that is “otherwise than being”, irreducible to ontology. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1969), trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1974). As Bernstein demonstrates, this is one of the major differences between Levinas’s and Jonas’s views on evil: Jonas, unlike Levinas, does not think we must give up ontology (metaphysics) in order to arrive at an ethical response to evil (see Bernstein, *Radical Evil*, especially pp. 191, 202). James, on my reading, shares Jonas’s rather than Levinas’s view here, even though his special way of dealing with metaphysics cannot be discussed here. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Hans Jonas, “Is Faith Still Possible?”, in Jonas, *Mortality and Morality*, p. 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Hans Jonas, “The Concept of God after Auschwitz”, in ibid., p. 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Marilyn McCord Adams, “Ignorance, Instrumentality, Compensation, and the Problem of Evil”, *Sophia* 52 (2013), 7-26. Already in several previous writings, Adams has explored the possibility of responding to the problem of evil in specifically Christian terms (rather than in terms of a purely metaphysical theism). See, e.g., her paper, “Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. vol. 63 (1989), 297-310; reprinted in Eleonore Stump and Michael Murray (eds.), *The Philosophy of Religion: The Big Questions* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 250-257. Adams there argues that a Christian believer’s intimate personal union with God may give her/his life profound significance even when that life is threatened by “horrendous evils”. The critical questions to be posed below are relevant to the formulations of that earlier essay as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Adams, “Ignorance, Instrumentality, Compensation, and the Problem of Evil”, p. 12 (original emphasis). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Ibid., p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Ibid., p. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Ibid., p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Ibid., p. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Ibid., p. 22, n57. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Ibid., p. 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Ibid., p. 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. This is a major theme in my *Pragmatic Pluralism and the Problem of God* (cited above). See also Sami Pihlström, *Pragmatist Metaphysics: An Essay on the Ethical Grounds of Ontology* (London and New York: Continuum, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Generally, recognition can be regarded as lying between mere toleration, on the one hand, and full agreement, on the other. Cf. Saarinen, “Anerkennungstheorien und ökumenische Theologie” for more details. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. At this point I would propose to connect the discourse on recognition with a pragmatist theory of inquiry drawing from Charles Peirce and John Dewey. See, e.g., my above-cited essay, “Objectivity and Pragmatist Philosophy of Religion”. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. I owe the concept of transitive recognition to Professor Risto Saarinen. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. In any event, the act of recognition is inevitably a response to a request for recognition, as analyzed (in the theological context) in Saarinen, “Anerkennungstheorien und ökumenische Theologie” (cited above). In some cases, the request may of course be highly implicit, or the need for any such request may itself only arise as a response to an experience (possibly by a third party) of there being a failure in recognition. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. I adopt the concept of acknowledgment from Stanley Cavell; see his *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1979). The concept has also been interestingly used by Hilary Putnam, e.g., in his *Philosophy in an Age of Science* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2012), where Putnam – a very different but Cavell-influenced philosopher – speaks about continuous possibilities of non-acknowledgment. The more specific conceptual relations between the discourse on recognition around Axel Honneth *et al*. and the discourse on acknowledgment around Cavell and other Wittgenstein-inspired thinkers certainly deserves more scrutiny. We might say – although I am not making historical or interpretive claims here – that Levinas’s ethics of otherness is also based on a notion of acknowledgment, rather than recognition. For a brief comparison between Levinas and Cavell in this regard, see Simon Critchley’s “Introduction” to Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), especially p. 26; see also Putnam’s contribution, “Levinas and Judaism”, to the same volume. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. See Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. For a recent insightful Wittgenstein-inspired contribution to this discussion of understanding – and ciriticizing – the “other”, primarily drawing on Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty* (1969), see Cora Diamond, “Criticising from ‘Outside’”, *Philosophical Investigations* 36 (2013), 114-131. The issues of cultural relativism, diverging standards of rationality, etc., would be relevant here but must be left for another occasion. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. See Honneth’s *Kampf um Anerkennung* for more details, and see Saarinen’s “Anerkennungstheorien und ökumenische Theologie” for reflections on the relevance of these constitutive relations to religion and ecumenics. According to what Saarinen calls the “ambitious view” of recognition, those acts even constitute persons. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. See Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994; first published 1963). [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. This question could open up an entire set of issues regarding writing, narrative, and mother tongue, explored, e.g., in Michal Ben-Naftali’s work on Hannah Arendt (on Eichmann). See her paper, “Mother Tongue / Body Language” (a talk given at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies in October, 2013); cf. also Arendt, “What Remains? The Language Remains” (1964), in Peter Baehr (ed.), *The Portable Hannah Arendt* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. The topic of this essay is more comprehensively discussed in Pihlström, *Taking Evil Seriously* (forthcoming 2014, cited above), a brief monograph from which the essay partly draws. The paper was also partly presented at the 8th Central European Pragmatist Forum in Wroclaw, Poland (June 8-14, 2014). For insightful comments and criticism, I should like to acknowledge (among many others) Sari Kivistö, Leszek Koczanowicz, John Durham Peters, John Ryder, Chris Skowronski, Ken Stikkers, and Emil Visnovsky. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)