

## **Naturalism Without Reductionism. A Pragmatist Account of Religion**

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*[Draft version, not for citation]*

### *Introduction*

The talk of naturalizing religion often evokes rather uncomfortable feelings in theological circles. If nature is identified with what can be described and explained by the natural sciences alone the idea to naturalize religious phenomena means to reduce them to lower-level phenomena, for instance in the areas of neuroscience or physics. At the same time, theology and philosophy of religion lose their primacy to make sense of religious phenomena, or worse, are even eliminated as legitimate theoretical approaches. I want to mark this understanding of naturalizing religion as blunt scientism which, despite of bearing 'science' in its name, seems quite unscientific and is no option I want to give more space to here. Rather, I would like to present an alternative way of understanding the project of naturalizing religion which is able to evade falling neither into a flat scientism which is bound to save religious phenomena by destroying it, nor into a position that simply ignores scientific insights and eventually reality itself. This alternative could be called pragmatic naturalism. It still is strictly anti-metaphysical, or rather anti-supernaturalistic, however, it allows religion to be part of nature via being part of pragmatic reality.

But before jumping in the middle of things, let me outline shortly what awaits you in the next twenty minutes. First, I'm going to outline what is characteristic for a pragmatic philosophical account in general. Second, I want to give an example for what it could mean to apply this account to philosophy of religion and establish it as a means of critique and reform or transformation. I will also say a few words on why I hold it to be an attractive candidate for naturalization. Finally, then, there will be a concluding prospect of what can expected to be lost and to be gained by following the presented account.

## *I. Why a pragmatic account?*

To begin with, I'd like to highlight three key elements of a pragmatic account. (1) Darwinian thinking and humanism (2) radical empiricism and (3) a pragmatic theory of truth. As some of you have surely already recognized, William James lurks in the background here. Indeed, I take him to be my main reference in what follows.

### *(1) Darwinian thinking and humanism*

With James, we find one of the early philosophical adopters of Darwin's theory of evolution. He transferred the motif of selection and adaption on other areas – progressing from epistemology and psychology to social philosophy and philosophy of science. Thus, we find a decisive humanism in James' pragmatism: Reality is not found, but made. It is dependent on and shaped by human interests. Under the conditions of humanism knowledge becomes relational to human interests and environmental contexts like language or culture. Endorsing Darwin's fundamental methodological principles he established a teleological theory of mind, consisting, in a nutshell, in the thesis that every belief is product of our interest to survive. This „law of interest“<sup>1</sup> is the leading principles for building a worldview. (Welterschließung? Weorld-disclosure) According to this view, reality is humanized throughout and never objective in the classical sense. But it is far from falling into a constructivist conception of reality. Though James highlights the human factor in the process of reality-making, reality is not only made, but also found and pre-figured. Human interests, needs and volitions play a crucial role, but they cannot play freely and arbitrarily. We have to work with the raw material given like a sculptor carves a statue out of a block of stone. With this metaphor, James points to the fact that we cannot remain only receptive and passive. We have to become active agents in the world to create reality, to carve it out, so to speak. Reality is ever increasing and evolving with our actions and explications, it is open with regard to the future. It is plastic.

### *(2) Radical Empiricism*

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<sup>1</sup> PP (II), 181.

The second aspect I want to emphasize is what could be called James' ontology, or rather theory of reality, namely, radical empiricism. It represents a radicalization and reformation of classical empiricism in so far as it picks up the insights of humanism and in this way widens the area of what has to be taken as real, which is also the area of what is scientifically and philosophically relevant. It is no longer pure sense data or simple impressions that define that area, because there are no such things according to humanism. The mind is no mirror that reflects the external world. So what constitutes reality is human experience. On the one hand, taking all human experience as real, regardless of its content, the range of phenomena that can be a subject of scientific and philosophic inquiry is substantially extended, may it be sensual impressions, religious or even parapsychological experiences. On the other hand, everything that has no anchor in human experience is excluded

### *(3) Pragmatic Theory of Truth*

It is obvious that the first two elements pay also severe consequences for a theory of truth, which is the third aspect I want to expose. Even though James does not drop the conception of truth as correspondence, there are some modifications due to his pragmatic reformulation of this concept. The meaning of the word 'truth' is revealed only in the workings of the proposition in which it is stated.<sup>2</sup> To put it bluntly: A belief is true when it works. But if we take a look at the reason for that, this definition loses its potential for indignant objections. There is a story to tell why a certain belief works, and summing this story up, it goes like this: it works because it is true. True beliefs are selected because they helped to survive, to navigate through a mainly hostile environment. As the conditions in an environment can change, so the truth-status can. Nothing is ever and always, or, to put it more philosophically, absolutely true. Contrasting the notion of truth as correspondence, which defines truth as fixed and absolute, the pragmatic notion is relational to a given context or situation and therefore not at all immutable but changeable depending on the conditions of uttering a proposition.

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<sup>2</sup> See James, *The Existence of Julius Cæsar*, 221, 224.

From this rather evolutionary notion of truth a pronounced *fallibilism* can be derived, that always allows for our beliefs to turn out wrong tomorrow. If new experiences will conflict with my present belief in the future, my belief will be revealed as wrong or at least not perfectly true. Similar to the development of scientific theories, a belief may be modified to fit better. Seen this way, truth is a matter of *graduality* and not of all-or-nothing as stated in the classical conception. By ongoing corrections our beliefs approximate what could be called the “absolute” truth<sup>3</sup> – something which is reached in the long run. Absolute true would be ideas that are confirmed in the total drift of thinking.<sup>4</sup> But we never know if the process of verification is completed, there's always a good chance that our beliefs may be falsified on the next day. Truths are only truths “as far as we know”. But we also don't have to adopt a harsh skepticism. As long as our beliefs fit with what we experience in the world, as long as they work properly, there is just no good reason to doubt their truth.

## *II. The pragmatist account as a means of critique*

Let me now illustrate what happens when we apply this Jamesian account of philosophy on the field of religion and why a pragmatic account of naturalizing religion seems particularly promising to me. Especially, I want to shed some light on the implications for the understanding of reality, truth and the critique of religion.

The major characteristic and, to my mind, at the same time the greatest advantage of a pragmatic account is its frame of reference for reality. From the pragmatic perspective, everything given from experience is real, everything that leads to action in the widest sense, that is, everything that transforms reality is real. [I strongly intertwine his pragmatism with his radical empiricism here, without saying that this is in line with James. It isn't. Nevertheless, I hold it to be a compelling

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<sup>3</sup> See James, *A Word More About Truth*, 155f. He assumes an „extreme approach to being absolutely true“ (James, *A Word More About Truth*, 156). For a more detailed discussion see Colapietro, *William James's Pragmatic Commitment to Absolute Truth*.

<sup>4</sup> Vgl. James, *The Will to Believe*, 17.

combination.] With setting human experience as the basic ground for reality, neither a blunt reductionist scientism nor a head-in-the-clouds metaphysical system are satisfying or even reasonable narratives any more. Rather, religious phenomena in their roles as natural and cultural products and promoters of evolution, that is to say, as real phenomena are taken into account.

Once we acknowledge their reality, we also have to deal with their claim on being true. With pragmatism, a certain cognitivism can be established – religious statements are more than expressive or aesthetic statements, they have cognitive content and accordingly constitute truth claims. They do not belong to a kind of private language with complete different rules and thus aren't immune to external critique. The other way round, they have to be recognized as relevant contributions to exploring reality.

As religious “[f]aith is synonymous with working hypothesis”<sup>5</sup>, it is treated like every other belief and runs through the process of verification with equal criteria. Religious beliefs belong to no separate, special sphere and thus are not excluded from the intermediations and modifications every belief subdues to in order to reach consistency in the web of beliefs. And as long as no serious problems arise, there's no reason to abolish our religious hypotheses. Only if there are contradictions with other beliefs, other experiences, we have to drop a belief, as this has to be taken as an indication for its wrongness. Put very shortly, they have to work to prove themselves at least possibly true. Thus, we are given a means of critique, an instrument for cutting off probably wrong, but also superfluent and empty hypotheses, a pragmatist's razor.

As we have seen, humanistic pragmatism is drenched with evolutionistic thinking. James' thoughts about religion are no exception. Thus, it explains the evolution of religions in the same way as the evolution of scientific theories. (What is more: it is no question IF it subject of evolution. Everything is.) For example, some images of God or Gods just don't work anymore. Put very bluntly, a man or woman sitting on the clouds contradicts just too harsh with what we know about

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<sup>5</sup> See James, *The Sentiment of Rationality*, 95.

how reality works, they are intellectually no longer satisfying. Also, a certain moral ideal has to be met, otherwise, the proposed image fails to be morally justifiable. James himself counts the problem of theodicy as a major objection against the standard model of an almighty, all-knowing and good God. In consequence, he holds to a finite, mutable, evolving God, which is the only possible God for him.

So religions adapt to their environment, they evolve, certain traits are selected for their usefulness, others are given up as they lose plausibility. From a pragmatist's point of view, they are instruments to cope with reality, they are in a way theories about the world we live in.

This has also consequences for institutionalized religions and the articulation of their doctrines. They are challenged to explicate the meaning of their dogmas in a way that makes sense in the context of the real world, that is, one should be able to operate with them. It does not follow that traditional teachings and practices have to be given up entirely. Naturalizing religion in a pragmatist way does not imply to eliminate what has been working for a long time in order to put there something completely new instead. Rather, tradition is acknowledged as something that has established for a reason and is the result of a long process of adaptation. Thus, the aim of pragmatic naturalization and its critique of religion is revision. It is more of a reconstruction than a deconstruction. Nevertheless, a pragmatic revision may change the face of a religion drastically. There are no untouchable dogmas for the pragmatist, and perhaps some of the elements of a religion that were hold to be constitutive have to be reformulated or given up. The conception of God as a personal entity is such a precarious candidate. James did only a first step towards a complete transformation (towards panentheism, as we heard in the talk of Prof. Müller) by abandoning what he calls the orthodox image, the classical identity of God with the absolute, an immutable, almighty all-knowing entity.

Furthermore, let me hint to a positive side-effect of pragmatic naturalization. With setting human experience as the main criterion for the validity of religious beliefs, the pragmatic account is clearly

anti-authoritarian. The religious subject itself is the decisive instance. Every believer has to reflect on the plausibility of what institutions and leaders offers him. This is a heavy burden, to be sure, but it presumably also helps to strengthen the transformative and critical power of religion. By being tested on its relevance for reality, religion may be able to sustain its relevance that otherwise is in danger to get lost by ignoring reality.

The last point I want to mention concerns the evaluative outlook pragmatism takes. In general, the pragmatic account remains neutral in its evaluation of religious phenonema. There is no such thing as essential religion, first, because it permanently evolves, and second, because a religion is no block of doctrines that comes only as a whole. Therefore no general judgment about religion is possible – we always have to look at the concrete context in which a religious phenomenon occurs. So if religion plays the role of an inhibiting or stimulating factor in social and cultural evolution of mankind is always an open question. There's after all no reason to condemn religion as biggest obstacle or to celebrate it as finest promoter of progress. History knows many cases of both sides. Thus, the pragmatic account allows to give credit to the Janus-faced character of religion.

### *III. What is lost, and what is gained?*

To conclude, let me briefly point out what is lost with this kind of account in philosophy of religion, and what merits one can expect. Pragmatic naturalization means above all humanization of religion, which rules out certain methods of thinking about religion. Clearly, any talking about God, the soul or immortality in the old metaphysical sense turns out to be impossible, or at least highly problematic. Any dogma and any practice that does not pass the „reality-check“ appears questionable from a pragmatist's point of view. Thus, theology and philosophy of religion are challenged to articulate their statements in a way that makes them intelligible in the light of human experience.

The strict fallibilism of the pragmatic account results in the loss of certainty. No authority, no

dogma grants the truth of a religious statement. Intellectual honesty forbids speaking about absolute truth. Surely, this goes hand in hand with a loss of authority and power on the side of churches and religious leaders. But it also implies a gain of credibility. In the course of pragmatic naturalization, religions offer justified hope instead of truths. Any belief that passed the pragmatic test is as certain as a belief could be.

One could even speculate about possible effects on religious dialogues and conflicts: Without the claim of absolute truth, perhaps religions would be more peaceful.

Pragmatic naturalization of religion means above all humanization of religion, its back-bonding to human experience and awareness of the “human factor” in the making of reality, and thus also in the making of religions.

I hope to have made clear that the kind of naturalism I want to suggest has nothing in common with a “nothing-but”-reduction. Actually, I would even go so far to argue that a pragmatic notion of nature is equivalent to its notion of reality. So naturalizing religion is clearly nothing theologians or philosophers of religion should ignore or be afraid of. On the contrary.