

Philosophy in Review



Sami Pihlström, 'Toward a Pragmatist Philosophy of the Humanities'

Robert Piercey 

Volume 44, numéro 4, novembre 2024

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1115578ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1115578ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (imprimé)

1920-8936 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Piercey, R. (2024). Compte rendu de [Sami Pihlström, 'Toward a Pragmatist Philosophy of the Humanities']. *Philosophy in Review*, 44(4), 25–28.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1115578ar>

© Robert Piercey, 2024



Cet document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

Sami Pihlström. *Toward a Pragmatist Philosophy of the Humanities.* SUNY Press 2022. 282 pp. \$99.00 USD (Hardcover 9781438491059); \$34.95 USD (Paperback 9781438491066).

This book is a prolegomenon to a *philosophy of the humanities*, understood as something distinct from the philosophies of particular humanities subjects. A philosophy of the humanities does something more general and more fundamental: it tries to articulate ‘a philosophical theory of the basic character, objects of study, and general epistemology and ontology of humanistic inquiry’ (1). This enterprise is based on the idea that ‘most or all’ (7-8) humanistic disciplines face a set of shared questions, notably epistemological and ontological questions about ‘the “reality” they seek to interpret and theoretically represent, as well as their distinctive ways of pursuing the truth’ (ix). These questions could be posed from any number of philosophical standpoints, but Pihlström argues that pragmatism is uniquely well-suited to articulate an ontology and epistemology of the humanistic disciplines. More specifically, Pihlström argues that the Kantian form of pragmatism he has defended elsewhere is the outlook best suited to shed light on the humanities. This version of pragmatism is Kantian in the sense that it sees the objects studied by the humanities as dependent on practices of inquiry—‘not in the straightforward causal or factual sense that our human practices would directly produce them but in the transcendental sense that it is only in the context of a practice of inquiry that certain (kinds of) objects become possible as objects of knowledge for us’ (28). Pihlström sees this approach as a way of avoiding both ‘*reductive naturalism*’ and ‘*radical relativism*’ (20) about the humanities. A Kantian form of pragmatism allows us to be realists about the objects of humanistic inquiry while acknowledging ‘the radical historicity of human culture, including our inquiries into human culture and its history’ (20). The book’s strategy is to identify the ‘*general theory of inquiry*’ (19) that has been articulated by pragmatist philosophers, and then apply that theory to the humanities in particular. Since the pragmatist theory of inquiry was ‘originally developed in general philosophy of science’ (1), this strategy has the effect of emphasizing features of the humanities that resemble features of the natural sciences. Pihlström sees this as an advantage, since it helps highlight the continuities between the humanities and the natural sciences (2).

The book consists of five chapters and a brief preface. Chapter 1 is an introduction that sketches the book’s project and main theses. Chapter 2, entitled ‘Realism, Practices, and Inquiry: What is Pragmatist Philosophy of the Humanities?’, describes the version of pragmatism that the book’s later chapters apply to the humanities. After a quick look at Peirce’s view of inquiry, Chapter 2 gives an extended reading of the views of James and Dewey, arguing that neither figure is simply an instrumentalist or simply a realist. Instead, these thinkers offer a subtle blend of instrumentalism and realism, showing us how to see reality as ‘theory-independent’ but not ‘ready-made’ (45). On this hybrid view, scientific theories are not just tools that improve our lives; they are also ‘in the business of referring to real entities and processes in the world’ (53). These entities and processes, however, become possible objects of inquiry only in the context of specific practices. Chapter 2 then discusses the significance of late twentieth century neopragmatism for this view of inquiry. Pihlström criticizes the tendency to overestimate Quine’s importance in the



development of neopragmatism, arguing that ‘*if* Quine can be said to have been a pragmatist at all, he was a pragmatist of a reductively scientific type, very far even from Peirce’ (58). In Pihlström’s view, the more important figure in the development of neopragmatism is Kuhn. Through his influence on the neopragmatists, Kuhn helped inject a quasi-transcendental element into pragmatism, in which paradigms serve as conditions of the possibility of scientific thinking. Pihlström goes so far as to call Kuhn a ‘historically concerned Kantian transcendental idealist’ (61).

Chapter 3, ‘Developing Pragmatist Philosophy of Literary Theory, Historiography, and Religious Studies,’ identifies several ‘research topics’ (79) that a pragmatist philosophy of the humanities should explore. Pihlström stresses that he is not dealing exhaustively with those topics here, but merely ‘pointing toward further work that will have to be done, should anyone start more systematically developing a pragmatist philosophy of the humanities’ (79). Some of these research topics are so general that they concern many disciplines: for example, questions about ‘the reality of the objects of humanistic inquiry’ (82) and about the nature of ‘[r]ationality in humanistic scholarship’ (83). But much of the chapter deals with three ‘case study areas’ (86), to illustrate the kinds of philosophical questions that arise about particular branches of the humanities. The first area discussed is ‘philosophy of literary theory and criticism’ (87)—not philosophy of literature, but philosophy of the *study* of literature. Questions arising here concern, for example, the ontological status of the meanings of texts and the ‘objectivity (vs. subjectivity) of literary interpretation’ (87). Next is ‘philosophy of historiography’ (90), understood as philosophical reflection on our *thinking* about the past, rather than on the past itself. Here there are important questions about the nature of historical truth, questions that take on particular interest when given a pragmatist spin. Pihlström’s third case study is ‘philosophy of theology and religious studies’ (95)—not philosophy of religion, but a philosophical reflection on ‘what theologians and religious studies scholars are doing (or what they should be doing) when studying religious ideas and activities’ (96). Here there are large questions about what ‘theological inquiry’ studies and whether its objects vary significantly across its subfields (96). Pihlström argues that all three areas would benefit from a pragmatist orientation. In particular, pragmatism can help these areas overcome ‘too easy oppositions between “basic research” (allegedly motivated by a disinterested pursuit of truth as valuable “in itself”) and “applied research” (motivated by some human values or goals external to the research itself)’ (101). For a pragmatist, ‘*all* research is value-guided..., but no research—either in the humanities or in the natural sciences—needs to be understood as merely instrumentally useful’ (101).

Chapter 4 turns to the question of why a philosophy of humanities is necessary. Entitled ‘Pragmatic Naturalism and Transcendental Arguments in the Philosophy of the Humanities,’ the chapter argues that philosophy can discover ‘new truths about its subject matters... that cannot be taught by the various scientific and scholarly disciplines, including humanistic disciplines, investigating those same subject matters’ (128). Chapter 4 argues that philosophy’s distinctive way of discovering new truths is transcendental argumentation: argumentation that goes behind some activity or practice to determine the conditions of its possibility. The chapter is framed with a

critique of Arthur Fine's influential discussion of the 'natural ontological attitude' (129). As Fine sees it, there is no need for any distinctively philosophical investigation of science and its ontological commitments; whatever questions arise about science can be 'encountered and resolved within the special-scientific disciplines themselves' (130). On Fine's view, we should take science 'on its own terms' (131), being realists about the entities posited by our best scientific theories, and not trying to make sense of these commitments from an external philosophical standpoint. Pihlström points out that such a view has odd implications for a philosophy of the humanities. If philosophers of physics must accept the ontological commitments of practicing physicists, does that mean that philosophers of religious studies must take on the views of religious scholars—including, for instance, a belief in God? Things get even stranger in the philosophy of literary criticism: if a critic writes about a novel as though its characters really exist and the events described by its plot actually happened, is the philosopher obliged to accept those ontological commitments as well? The lesson, Pihlström concludes, is that '[n]o ontological postulation whatever... should be "taken at face value" in the sense that no philosophical problematization or critique would be relevant' (137). To try to naturalize the humanities in this way is to dream of a philosophically neutral standpoint that does not exist.

Chapter 5 is the book's conclusion, and consists of an assortment of closing thoughts about the humanities and their significance. An interesting twist in Chapter 5 is its claim that 'the philosophical significance of the humanities is definitely not restricted to pragmatist accounts of this significance' (172). The humanities matter in all sorts of ways and for all sorts of reasons. Indeed, Pihlström favourably cites a remark by Eino Kaila to the effect that our motivation for studying the humanities is just 'there' (181)—part of who we are, and not grounded in anything more fundamental. Chapter 5 also contains a thoughtful discussion of the Holocaust, which Pihlström calls the 'ultimate challenge' (179) for the humanities. If, as many have argued, the Holocaust cannot be theoretically represented, then any 'straightforward realism' (178) about it is impossible. The Holocaust therefore 'disrupts our world-categorization,' and with it, a realist position such as Pihlström's 'arrives at its limit' (178). Pihlström helpfully adds, however, that the humanities 'are as important for analyzing the collapse and destruction of meaning as they are for understanding the emergence of meaning' (172).

This book covers a lot of ground. In addition to its readings of canonical pragmatists such as James and Dewey, there are discussions of several lesser-known figures, including a spirited defense of the holistic pragmatism of Morton White. Alongside the book's central argument, there are more digressive treatments of a number of standalone ideas, and they are among the most stimulating parts of the book. Particularly valuable is the discussion of Peirce's theory of 'real generals'—entities that are not concrete particulars but that are nevertheless real. Pihlström argues convincingly that any ontology of the humanities must make room for entities such as 'historical tendencies of development, interpretive possibilities, as well as general traits of religious practices irreducible to any particular rituals' (104). After all, humanists routinely try to explain why one event happened rather than another, or why a text means one thing rather than something else. It is hard to see how they could do so if these actualized possibilities were entirely unreal, and Peirce's

theory is a useful way to make sense of this fact.

Toward a Pragmatist Philosophy of the Humanities is a valuable book, and for reasons that go beyond its specific conclusions. At a time when universities are frantically shifting resources away from the humanities, and when even defenders of these disciplines feel the need to push them in trendy new directions—digital this, medical that—there is something refreshing about a book that takes traditional humanistic scholarship seriously enough to think deeply about it. Pihlström's book is a kind of love letter to the humanities, one that might help us to understand these disciplines well enough to defend them successfully.

Robert Piercey, Campion College at the University of Regina