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**Limits of Pragmatism and
Challenges of Theodicy**

Essays in Honour of Sami Pihlström

**Edited by
HENRIK RYDENFELT, HEIKKI J. KOSKINEN
& MATS BERGMAN**

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Reflections on Limits

LYUBOV D. BUGAEVA & JOHN RYDER

In his *Death and Finitude*, Sami Pihlström argues for a philosophical anthropology that derives from a melding of pragmatism and a conception of a transcendental self. The need for this approach, he says, is that naturalization alone cannot account for a self as subject, so a transcendental self is necessary. However, the idealist traits of Kant's notion of a transcendental self are also unacceptable, and a pragmatic redesign of the concept of the transcendental self is called for. Whether or not this pragmatically construed transcendental self is acceptable, or even desirable, is a question that deserves a degree of close attention that we cannot give it here. We may point out, though, that one of the reasons Pihlström gives for requiring some notion of transcendence is that 'naturalization' alone does not yield the self as subject, but he thinks this because he understands a 'naturalized' view of the self to require that the self be understood only in terms appropriate to the sciences and thus purely as an object rather than a subject. While this is certainly a common view of 'naturalization' and naturalism, it is not the only available naturalism. If one raises the question of a naturalized understanding of the self based on a different conception of naturalism, for example the one common in the American naturalist tradition, rather than that most commonly employed in analytic philosophical discussions, the adequacy of a 'naturalization' of the self may be at least plausible. Pihlström does seem to end up with something like this approach to naturalism after 'pragmatizing' the transcendental self. Whether one needs to go through all that in order to have a naturalist conception of the self that is both object and subject is a larger question.

Be that as it may, our interest here is in exploring a related concept that Pihlström places at the heart of his philosophical anthropology, and that is the concept of limits. In his hands, at any rate in the concept of the self as he develops it, the self is to be understood importantly as a 'limit of the world' in an explicitly Wittgensteinian sense. Again, the details of Pihlström's development of this idea are beyond our scope. That he makes of the concept of limits something central is, however, intriguing and fruitful. We would like simply to accept his view that the idea of limits is philosophically important, and then range a bit over some of the philosophical possibilities that are available to us.

Pihlström treats the self as a 'limit of the world' in a specific sense. In his hands, if we are to understand the relation between the self and the rest of the world as one in which the self is 'involved' in the world, we can do so only if we acknowledge that in some way or ways the self 'constitutes' the world. This is the transcendental side of Pihlström's transcendental pragmatism. However, unlike in Kant's treatment of the transcendental self's constitution of the world, transcendental pragmatism does not posit a self as an entity independent of the world that in turn constitutes the world. For Pihlström, the transcendental self is not an independent 'thing'; it is, therefore, a 'no thing'. Because it is a necessary 'no thing' by virtue of its constitution of the world, it is, following Wittgenstein, not an entity in the world but a limit of the world.

We fully agree with Pihlström that the self constitutes its world, in some specifiable senses and respects, and that the self is not an entity independent of this constitutive feature of its relation to its world. It is not independent of its world because not only does the self in some ways constitute its world, but its world constitutes the self, also in certain specifiable ways. The relations between the self and its world are, in other words, mutually constitutive. Moreover, one of the reasons this is the case, or so we would posit, is that *all* relations are constitutive. If to be an entity that both constitutes by its relations and is constituted by them is to be a 'limit', then limits are central not to philosophical anthropology alone but to nature generally. Limits, we may say, are more central philosophically than Pihlström may realize, though it

is his analysis of limits in the constitution of the self that has pointed us to this idea. We would like to explore briefly some of the ways limits feature in our understanding of ourselves and our world.

Limits can be construed variously. Every distinction between one complex of nature and another implies limits, if only because each has the integrity and identity that it has; borders of all kinds - social, geographical, political - are limits; transitions in nature generally and in human experience are limits; the prevailing possibilities that frame the future potential of individual persons, societies and nations, indeed of complexes generally, are limits; presences and absences are limits, as are beginnings and endings; the eventuality of death, with which Pihlström grapples in detail, is a critical limit in our experience. Some limits can be pushed, twisted, revised, and revoked, while some cannot; some limits, for example laws, enable a complex to survive, function, and prosper, while some limits are obstacles; some limits seem to be universal, for example Newtonian space and time, until we discover that they are not.

Limits are central to and for everything, to all of nature, whether related to human beings or not. The reason is simply that the defining traits of any complex of nature posits the limits of its identity and integrity. At the level of the most general ontology, then, it is possible, indeed necessary, to talk about limits, though for our purposes we shall avoid that level of abstraction and restrict ourselves to a discussion of limits in relation to experience, or, as Pihlström helpfully calls it, philosophical anthropology. His primary interest in this respect is to posit the self as a limit of the world in the attempt to understand a pragmatically construed transcendental self, and in death as a limiting feature of experience, not simply as an eventual end but as a context in which meaning becomes possible.

We ought to make the point here that there seems to us to be problems with these accounts. With respect to the self as limit of the world, there is something unnecessarily mystifying about the idea, in both Pihlström and Wittgenstein's hands. The self, even as subject, can be fully a natural entity by virtue of the fact that the self is enmeshed in innumerable mutually constitutive relations with its many environments.

That there are countless limits to be identified and ideally understood with respect to the self, as both subject and object, is as certain as we can be about anything, but there is no mysterious 'limit of the world' at work; there is the self, which in multiple orders of relations functions as subjects and in equally multiple orders of relations has the traits of an object. What is distinctive is to be found in the details of the limits with respect to human being generally and to specific individuals.

As for death as a limit that enables meaning in life, Pihlström runs the risk in saying so of intellectualizing the human condition to a point where one may not be able to recognize most people. It is fair to say, we suspect, that most people lead normally meaningful and to some extent fulfilling lives - through their families, homes, communities, habits and activities - without ever confronting, and certainly not in a carefully reflective way, the fact of their own deaths. Most people, presumably, pay relatively little attention to the inevitability of their own deaths until they are forced by circumstances to do so. Indeed, one could plausibly claim that for many people, their death is denied through their belief in eternal life, and in fact for certain sorts of religious belief, meaning in life derives precisely from rejecting rather than confronting death. Such facts of most people's lives do not prevent meaningfulness, whether found or placed, which suggests that the importance of a Heideggerian authenticity in this regard, which Pihlström appears to echo, may be rather overstated.

However it is with such matters, surely limits play a central role in experience generally, which is to say in what it is to be a human being, and in more daily and pedestrian features of experience. And often, critically important features of human life turn out to be puzzling limits. Language is a good illustration of the point. Language, if not a dimension of experience in a technical sense, is surely a constituent of experience. Much, though not all, of what it is to live human lives is to live linguistically. The degree to which language configures our experience is debated by linguists, socio-linguists, psychologists, philosophers, and others. Interestingly, though, for a feature so central to human being, we also debate the extent to which language can be ascribed to non-

human entities. The obvious cases are certain species of animals, though it is worth pointing out that comparable questions will arise in relation to artificial intelligence once the technology reaches a sufficient degree of complexity to allow artificial intelligence to grow and learn. If such a human artifact is programmed to 'speak', and if its own capacities develop sufficiently, then at some point it may well be possible to ascribe language to it. When that point is reached, then important limiting features of human experience will have been stretched to apply to non-human complexes, and our understanding of those limits will have to adjust accordingly.

Emotions are another curious case. According to Antonio Damasio, emotions play a significant role in the evolution of consciousness as they map bodily changes, which trigger feelings, in brain structures (Damasio 2003, 112). Like language, our emotional capacities surely condition much of our experience, again if not as dimensions of experience than as constituents, though there remains a great deal to explore about how these factors come into play and how they limit experience. For example, there are interesting questions about the constitutive nature of emotions in relation to film such that the possibilities of enactive cinema depend in part on how emotions configure our engagement with what is happening onscreen. Enactive cinema (as well as some VR and AR experiences) creates a situation that tests the limits of our experience; it traps a viewer in a 'no escape' involvement with the film characters when, for example, an enactive avatar, which is sensitive to a viewer's emotional state, is used. Enactive and VR or AR cinema also give a chance to a viewer to experience with the whole body what it is like to be the other, for example a tree in the CVR experience "Tree" (Milica Zec and Winslow Porter, 2017), or a Syrian refugee girl in a camp in Jordan in the CVR "Clouds Over Sidra" (Gabo Arora and Barry Pousman, 2015). Experiments in active perception open "a new landscape for creating worlds and stories", as it was put at the Tribeca Film Festival, while testing the limits of our imagination. In such cases, the transcendental self that Pihlström speaks about, i.e. the subject, conceived of as a or the limit, is not a necessary category for the demarcation of facts. However, if one wants to retain the idea of the transcendental self as a 'limit of the world', then in the case of

enactive cinema it may align with the acknowledgement of the epistemic position of the emotionally engaged empirical self that is construed through the enactive cinematic experiences. Such experience does not only make the epistemic position possible, but connects the transcendental subject with life.

At more specific levels, it is certainly the case that a range of features of our individual characters condition, or limit, experience. Talents, interests, and other such traits constitute our lives in specific and limiting ways. For the vast majority of us who have any musical talent at all, that talent is not sufficient to allow us to reach the levels of noteworthy accomplishment that concert musicians or prominent composers reach. However much we might aspire to such heights of achievement, our modest talents limit us. If we learn to tailor our aspirations to the limits placed on us by our own characteristics, the talents can be a source of pleasure and satisfaction; if not, they are a source of frustration. Personal interests present a similar scenario. Many of us are interested in athletic activities of one sort or another, and those interests incline us to organize our lives in certain ways and not others. The interests are themselves limiting factors in how we live our lives. To a considerable extent, in fact, such interests, like talents, are factors in the meaning we ascribe to or derive from our lives. In these respects, the limits that help to define us provide enabling conditions for us to lead reasonably satisfying and meaningful lives.

The notion of limits and of the transgression of limits is also built into the rites of passage that mark transitional stages in an individual's life, for example radical changes in social status such as graduating from university, starting a new job, and getting married, or psychological states such as feeling uprooted, and suffering from the 'empty nest' syndrome, or one's physical condition, such as becoming an amputee, etc. A ritual passage transforms the participants of the process; the transformation is "not just any sort of change but a momentous metamorphosis, a moment after which one is never again the same" (Grimes 2002, 6). Even some commonplace situations such as travelling, dying, being ill, coming of age, etc. are potential rites of passage since they may involve essential subjective transformations. At the level of philosophi-

cal categories, the passage from one condition to another is a function of a shift in sets of relations. A person, like any other natural entity, is constituted by its relations, and in the case of the rite of passage, one moves from one set of relations to another. To use slightly different terms, while the rules may "frame the ritual process", it nevertheless "transcends its frame" (Turner 1980, 160). The same is true for the individual in the passage. When the experienced liminality is narrated in literature, film, or performative art, a reader or a viewer becomes a participant of the shared experience and thus transgresses the limits of his or her personal experience.

We have so far considered limits in regard to individual capabilities and activities. There is an equally significant place for limits in social experience. It should not surprise us to find that just as limits provide both defining traits and obstacles for individuals, the same is true for communities of any size and scope. This is clear enough if we consider a nation as an example. The political boundaries of nations, by which we mean national borders, establish the limits for the writ of national law; they demarcate the geographical area in which an individual citizen can demand and expect the rights of citizenship; they posit the points at which immigration and customs control are, under typical conditions, expected or required; they establish the limits within which social systems from education to health care apply; and much else that distinguishes one nation from another and establishes the identity of a nation. These boundaries are of course malleable, as are the nature and implications of the range of limitations they create. Whether malleable or not, they are in the ways specified, enabling conditions of nations, without which nations and whatever goods they may generate would be impossible.

National boundaries can also be obstacles for people both outside and inside a nation, this despite the fact that national borders are remarkably porous. Leaving aside the legal arrangements that make crossing national borders seamless, such as in the Schengen Zone in Europe, illegal border crossings of goods and people are common. This is true even where one may not expect it. While it is nearly impossible to cross the Demilitarized Zone between the Republic of Korea and the DPRK, it is quite possible to have oneself smuggled

across the DPRK's northern border with China. In countries and areas that have less strict controls on their borders, such as the United States and Europe, the extent to which undocumented immigrants make their way to their country of choice is common knowledge.

Even such permeable borders can become challenging obstacles, and the limits they pose can create new, sometimes unanticipated, problems. This is being written in early 2019, a time in which tighter controls over national borders has become an issue. In recent years, wars and poverty in Africa, and wars in Syria and Afghanistan, have generated waves of refugees seeking to enter Turkey and, in greater numbers, Europe. For a time, some member states of the EU, notable Germany, were welcoming refugees, and Italy extended considerable efforts to rescue migrants in dangerous boats floating in the Mediterranean. Soon, however, some nations began to resist. We saw barbed wire and armed police along Hungary's borders with Croatia and Serbia to prevent refugees from the Middle East entering the country. Throughout Europe anti-immigrant parties found greater support, and eventually Italy refused to accept any more refugees or even assist them in the sea. The political limits of many of the EU member states rather quickly became much greater obstacles than they had been. A similar process is unfolding in the US, where the federal government has twisted itself into dysfunction over the desire of some to build a wall along all, or part, of the border with Mexico. Even without a wall, restrictions at many points along that border have since early 2017 become much stronger and, as in Europe, controversial.

The most striking illustration of national limits creating unexpected problems concerns the ongoing saga of the United Kingdom's effort to extricate itself from the EU, a process twice delayed and still underway as this is being written. No doubt many volumes will be written about this event in the coming years, and the details are too complex and befuddling to develop here. The reason for bringing it up is that in the process of 'Brexit' a critical stumbling block has been the land border between the UK and the Republic of Ireland, which is a line that distinguishes the Irish Republic from the six counties that make up Northern Ireland and which are part of the UK. The problem in a nutshell, is this. It was a central com-

ponent of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 that ended the Troubles in Northern Ireland, that the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic will be open. As long as both the UK and the Irish Republic were EU members this was not a problem. But with the UK withdrawing from the EU, that border now becomes an external EU political limit, which the Republic of Ireland would be expected to secure. However, no one on either side of that political limit wants the border to be secured. Where, then, does the demarcation line between the UK and the Irish Republic, especially with respect to customs and immigration control, lie? This so far intractable problem is a prime reason for the difficulty the UK is having in leaving the EU, and that difficulty is affecting the lives of millions of people, primarily to their detriment. The problems created by limits can be as profound and damaging as what they enable.

For societies, whether on the scale of small communities or entire nations, limits are defining traits and they are obstacles. They both enable communities to prevail and be the communities they are, and they present challenges to development, sometimes even to maintenance of the status quo. In this regard, limits play much the same range of roles for people in community as they play for people individually. And, as we have indicated earlier, limits of various kinds are no less centrally important for entities well beyond the human.

The primary point of these remarks is to suggest that we would do well, as Sami Pihlström has rightly urged, to attend carefully to limits and the roles they play. We may have some quarrels with the way he describes the role of limits in the understanding and nature of the self, but his general point is right. Our comments are an effort to point to some minimal reasons for thinking this, and to urge that more attention be paid to limits in our philosophical analyses of any topic.

*St. Petersburg State University and
the American University of Malta*

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