

Sami Pihlström

Transcendental Guilt: Reflections on Ethical Finitude.

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Small is beautiful, preached economist E. F. Schumacher and, if you believe his credo, you'll find Sami Pihlström's latest book beautiful, indeed. The flip side of its compactness is that its subject matter demands sustained contemplation of the kind of things that hardly leap to most people's minds when they plan a relaxing weekend with a book in hand. Transcendental guilt sounds for all the world like something you might contract from Dostoyevsky, a classic by every definition (including Mark Twain's: a book that everybody wants to have read and nobody wants to read). Ethical finitude sounds like something out of Francis Fukuyama's as yet unwritten *The End of Ethics*.

Transcendental Guilt: Reflections on Ethical Finitude is roughly a hundred and twenty pages of dense prose, comprising the 'Introduction' and six chapters—'Transcendental Guilt', 'Guilt and Ethical Solipsism', 'Ethical Unthinkabilities and Philosophical Seriousness', 'A Meaningful Life in a Meaningless Cosmos?', 'Constructing Moral Identity'—plus a 'Conclusion'. But don't confuse quality with quantity. On occasion, at least, Pihlström manages to wring genuine drama out of refined (even rarefied) analyses in the course of trying to relate them to our daily—even seldom realized and even more seldom reflected on—lives. 'This book emerges out of a concern not only for the present state of the world and humanity, but also for the state of moral thought reflecting on that state,' writes the author, immediately qualifying this opening salvo with a typically understated counterpoint: 'Neither seem to be very promising' (vii).

Pihlström is Director of the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies and professor of practical philosophy at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland, but if he were a chess master, he would be a no-stone-left-unturned contender who would vanquish his opponents by simply not leaving any room for a counterattack. As a philosopher, his argumentative style is methodical, classically decorous in syntactic and semantic nuance, and he makes ready and willing use of *paralogia*—giving the opposition a fair hearing before proceeding to trip their philosophical alibis under cross-examination. Hence, for one thing, so many brackets (with numerous asides), not to mention complex sub-clauses, all in an effort (not always necessary or justifiable) to render full justice to all sides of the issue (to the extent it is possible).

Interestingly, Pihlström the philosopher executes a welcome bow toward literary fiction, notably toward Dostoyevsky, although here he (Pihlström) finds himself on less

than his customarily sure footing. His appeal to literary texts when he speaks of literary *works* ignores one of the most important distinctions in aesthetics, that between text and work (see Swirski, *Literature, Analytically Speaking* [Texas University Press 2010]). Appeals to narratology are also by and large miscued theoretically to the extent that narratology disregards the pragmatic (Gricean) and illocutionary dimension of any communicative exchange (see Enfield and Levinson, *Roots of Human Sociality* (Berg 2006)).

The book begins with a rather prolonged enumeration of topics it does not cover. Once it gets going, however, there is enough in this slim volume to stagger with the sheer weight of the questions it does attempt to wrestle with. Why is there (so much) moral evil and guilt in the world? Does (moral) philosophy always follow the best argument? Should it? Does moral philosophy converge with religion, theology and theodicy, and of so, at which points? Are some subjects in ethics beyond the pale of academic hair-splitting? Where does transcendence end and transcendentality begin? This is only a small selection of the fundamental inquiries that animate this sometimes dry and technical, sometimes heartfelt and poignant, study.

To the extent that the author has clearly read pretty much everyone in the field (though especially, it seems, Wittgenstein, Kant, Gaita, and Levinas), he assumes that everyone else has, even though he aims to make his study accessible to wider audiences. Alas, not too many of the latter will be able to hack their way through such esoteric thickets as, e.g., ‘metaphysically speaking —transcendental guilt (as well as Kantian ‘radical’ tendency to choose evil maxims) can be seen as a “real general” in the sense of Charles S. Peirce’s “scholastic realism”’ (18). To balance the picture, there is the brilliant, trenchant, and poignant Chapter 3, ‘Ethical Unthinkabilities and Philosophical Seriousness’, the centerpiece of the entire book in more senses than one.

What is likely to attract the reader the most—and what did attract those who contributed highly appreciative squibs featured on the back cover—is the deeply personal and, in some ways, iconoclastic approach to moral philosophy and the way it is usually pursued among professional academics. Deploring a perceptible lack of what he terms moral seriousness, Pihlström advocates ‘reflecting on our finite human lives—our lives with other human beings—as presenting us with personal yet fundamental moral demands’ (2). As he underscores, we are always embedded in this life, lacking a God’s eye view on our ethical dilemmas and (mal)practices.

The author’s insistence on the principle—rarely followed and even more rarely evoked—that philosophy should be not only argumentatively cogent but humanly and existentially *honest* carries dramatic implications which he has no qualms spelling out. Some lines of inquiry in ethics may not be worth pursuing. Some are so much academic blather. Some lie so far outside the range of our human concerns that are morally *intolerable*. If this sounds like a declaration of principles, it is: the philosopher clearly

puts himself and his own commitments on the line.

The result is a study that aims to be philosophically systematic *and* personally engaged. As Pihlström describes it, in contrast to rote ethical or meta-ethical theorizing, his goal is moral reflection. Moral philosophy, he continues, ought to be sensitive to the *personal* dimension of ethical problems, tailoring our responses to who we are: fallible, social, selfish *and* groupish creatures. As such, he elevates the concept/emotion of guilt to the status of the primary—‘transcendental’, in Pihlström’s nomenclature—criterion of the very possibility of moral reflection. It’s a sort of secular equivalent of original sin: if you’re moral at all, you are guilty and experience guilt.

To the extent that his ‘primary’ excludes ‘primate’, however, I’m not sure he is right. Apes do not feel guilt, yet they do exhibit rudiments of morality (see de Waal, *Primates and Philosophers*). Indeed, it would be striking if they did not. They have evolved by virtue of the same selective processes we have, and even though they differences between us and them are radical, they are not categorical (see Swirski, *American Utopia and Social Engineering* (Routledge 2011). This squarely contradicts Pihlström, who holds that remorse ‘is a necessary condition for the possibility of morality’ (14). Primatologists and ethologists would answer: not so.

Hence my final reflection. With so much relevant work being conducted in primatology, evolutionary psychology and anthropology, developmental psychology, sociality and ‘interaction engine’ studies, moral philosophy can no longer ignore the empirical/conceptual implications of evolution, altruism, multilevel selection, mirror neurons, theory of mind, and ‘we’ intentionality. Hopefully, we will see them inform Pihlström’s next book, which I predict will very likely be as analytically lucid and morally poignant as this one.

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