

## *Review Essays*



# Should we be Building or Dismantling Echo Chambers?

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### Abstract

Sami Pihlström argues that, for principled reasons, we have a duty not to listen to racists. Although this stance can seem admirable, I worry that by cutting itself off from evidence, a refusal to listen leaves wrongfully accused persons no means of exonerating themselves. Moreover, given that concepts like racism now encompass beliefs and acts that many rightly consider sensible, a policy of silence risks dismissing implausibly large numbers of people as immoral. Stressing that listening is not acquiescing, I urge Pihlström to think more carefully about the consequences of his stance, especially since it would increase the likelihood of conflict.

### Keywords

pragmatism – conversation – realism – evidence – open inquiry – Charles Sanders Peirce

The word “racism” is like ketchup.  
 It can be put on practically anything—  
 and demanding evidence makes you a “racist.”

THOMAS SOWELL

## Introduction

When one surrounds oneself exclusively with like-minded people, one encounters only minor argumentative challenges that leave one's core assumptions untouched. Other people naturally start from different assumptions and reach different conclusions. But, the longer one dwells in one's tribe, the more stupid and evil those rival assumptions and conclusions look. Eventually, one reaches a point where discussion with rival tribe members seems hopeless—or worse, an act of complicity. Of course, the rival tribe has the same low regard for you and thus also wants to avoid any guilt by association. So, with time, the gulf widens. Is there any hope of backpeddling this process of polarization?

Because pragmatism enjoins us to focus on practical consequences, it can sometimes discern unnoticed common ground between apparently rival positions. Sami Pihlström explains, for example, how “many classical and contemporary pragmatists have sought to render science and religion compatible with each other [...]. Furthermore, some pragmatists may even suggest that pragmatism can mediate between entire philosophical traditions, such as the analytic tradition and what is known as ‘Continental’ philosophy [...]” (2023, 2–3). Of course, this aspiration to reconcile is not always realized. Even so, “the phrase of inclusion, ‘both ... and,’ suits the pragmatist temper better than the exclusivist ‘either ... or’” (2023, 2). However, triggered in part by the democratic election of Donald Trump in 2016, Pihlström wants to ensure that pragmatism does not become bound to regard as “equally valuable” what he describes as “lunatic and non-lunatic types of thinking” (2023, 4). Ostensibly, in politics, “either ... or” thinking is okay.

The philosophical school of pragmatism was founded on the idea that, since certainty in matters of knowledge is not available to us, we should always communicate with those who disagree with us, just in case we are the ones who are wrong. Now, however, moral certainty is prompting some to argue that, when it comes to issues like racism, we do not always have to communicate with those who disagree with us. I am very concerned by this stance, so I want to explain my concerns while pressing Pihlström for more details.

Here is how I will proceed. First, I will argue that, by cutting itself off from evidence (section 1), a refusal to listen leaves wrongfully accused persons no means of exonerating themselves (section 2). Moreover, given that concepts like racism now encompass beliefs and acts that many rightly consider sensible (section 3), Pihlström's policy of silence risks dismissing implausibly large numbers of people as immoral (section 4). Stressing that listening is not acquiescing (section 5), I urge Pihlström to think more carefully about the consequences of his stance (section 6), especially since it would increase the likelihood of conflict (section 7).

## 1 Using Morality to Insulate Claims from Reality

James Lindsay, who researches the roots of social justice zealotry, observed that, "[s]o far as I know, there's not some specific piece of scholarship that closes the Woke off to debate, like a single paper or book explaining why they don't do it" (2020). We now have that paper.

Pihlström holds that racism violates "a transcendental condition for the possibility of serious discourse in general" (2023, 22; see also Pihlström 2021, 148). As a consequence, "[l]istening to the racist's voice is, in brief, to fail to listen to the cries of those wounded by the racist" (Pihlström 2023, 3). The desire to avoid moral contamination is so pronounced that even the sign-vehicle conveying a given message must be eradicated. It is not enough to reject what is *said*, we must ensure that the very *voice* used doesn't reach one's ear drum.

In sum, when X is evil, engaging in a conversation to show why/how X is evil would also be evil. To see how this pattern generalizes, here are three further examples, unfortunately all real:

Example A: In the documentary *Bigger, Stronger, Faster*, director Christopher Bell interviews physician Dr. Gary Wadler, an author and advisor to the World Anti-Doping Agency, who claims that anabolic steroids are "killing people." When confronted with the fact that no medical evidence whatsoever supports this, Wadler responds: "Some purists would like to see those studies done. Well, I can assure you they never will be done. It would be a totally unethical study to do." Why would it be unethical to conduct such studies? Because steroids are killing people, of course.

Example B: In Canada, Lindsay Shepherd, a teaching assistant at Wilfrid Laurier University, showed her students a state television channel

debate on gender pronouns that featured, among other panelists, Jordan Peterson. Soon after, Shepherd was reprimanded for violating her university's Gendered and Sexual Violence Policy. Merely viewing the discussion, she was told, created a "toxic" classroom environment. During her interrogation, Shepherd repeatedly asked how listening to arguments on both sides of a debate could possibly be wrong. Nathan Rambukkana, an Assistant Professor, replied that such matters "are not up for debate," because merely discussing them would perpetuate the alleged toxicity.

Example C: Still in Canada, ground-penetrating radar led to the discovery of "anomalies" under the soil near residential schools that once housed indigenous children. Most First Nations investigators were cautious in their initial wording, but within days a consensus arose that children had been physically abused, murdered, and their bodies deliberately concealed by the (obviously now deceased) school personnel. Rarely has a truth-maker been so readily available for some of these claims. Yet, almost no sites were excavated, because doing so would, we are told, dishonor the memory of the putative victims. Canadian flags were kept at half-mast for a record-breaking duration of five months. Catholic churches were burned down. When Mount Royal University professor Frances Widdowson suggested that a full forensic investigation of the alleged "mass graves" should be done to justify/verify the moral outrage, she was labeled a "residential school denialist" and promptly fired from her job.

In the examples just given, morally-loaded language ("unethical," "toxic," "denialist") is used to immunize a view from facts which could show it mistaken (Furedi 2022, 187; Hermanowicz and Hermanowicz 2023, 8–11). Given that the view is explicitly sealed off from reality and gets its epistemic credentials merely by tautology, one might wonder why anyone would endorse it. The answer, I think, is that the vision defended by Pihlström and putative antiracists offers "a special state of grace for those who believe in it. Those who accept this vision are deemed to be not merely factually correct but morally on a higher plane," such that those on different sides of a heated issue "do not argue [...] or play by the same cold rules of logic and evidence" (Sowell 1995, 2–3). One has to read between the lines to decode which individuals belong in which camp, but it is abundantly clear from reading Pihlström that different standards apply: people like "us" deserve a fair hearing, whereas "they" (over there) don't.

This dismissive stance is worrisome, because it releases Pihlström from defining his terms. Presumably, we must depend on Pihlström to tell us when

something or somebody counts as “racist” or “antidemocratic.” Naturally, someone unjustly caught in the crosshairs of such a dismissal will want to warn Pihlström that he is overshooting. But, Pihlström informs us, merely listening to such a dissenting voice would abet evil. Hence, “[t]he liberal pragmatist temperament of listening to as many different ‘voices’ as possible [...] must eventually be constrained by the duty to *stop* listening when the voices become intolerant or simply unacceptable due to their extremity” (Pihlström 2023, 3; emphasis in original). This desire to distance oneself from rival views is coupled with a belief that “people who take an attitude of tolerance towards the other side are [...] traitors by their own,” since “it is often thought that the very *acknowledgement* that there is a position on the other side to be reckoned with, or even *responded* to, is to *betray* one’s own position” (Talisce and Aikin 2005, 157; emphases in original).

This dogmatic tendency is not new—and neither are efforts to keep inquiry open. Charles Sanders Peirce wanted pragmatism to differ fundamentally from “the spirit of Cartesianism” (1931–58, vol. 5, para. 264), since a disdain for impurity similar to Pihlström’s was present in Descartes, who warned that “if we study these works too closely traces of their errors will infect us and cling to us against our will and despite our precautions” (Descartes 1985, 13). The voices in need of silencing may have changed, but the basic exclusion hasn’t. The pickle is that, to make a case for belonging in the more advantageous group that gets a fair hearing, one must first be heard. It is to this drawback that I now turn.

## 2 Without a Voice, How Can Those Wrongfully Accused Exonerate Themselves?

Let us suppose that, to solve the “paradox of tolerance” (Popper 2013, 581), we must be intolerant towards intolerants. Given that communication ceases and information stops flowing, how can we be sure that the person on the receiving end of our intolerance is indeed as we deem them to be?

Pihlström holds that we should not “start from an allegedly neutral context within which it is not yet clear that sexism and racism are to be rejected” (2021, 164). It is fully possible, however, to take badness for granted while insisting that we must start from a neutral context when determining *who* is in fact bad. Pihlström contends that “[e]thics is and must remain *beyond justification*” (2005, xi; emphasis in original). Even if we assume that this is true, one cannot go from the premise ‘I refuse to discuss whether it is good or bad to be a racist’ to the conclusion ‘I refuse to discuss whether or not this particular person is in fact

a racist.' If we clump together these two refusals, we risk converting allegations of moral blameworthiness into ascriptions of moral blameworthiness.

Pihlström presumes a broad area of agreement. As a result, he clearly does not picture himself on the outside of the sound-proofed walls he erects. I wonder, however, how Pihlström would feel were he to experience the following, made-up example:

Example D: Dr. Pihlström's arguments are not worth listening to, because he is a *DINK* (Double Income, No Kids) or worse still, a *DINKWAD* (Double Income, No Kids, With A Dog). *DINKS* and *DINKWADS* represent a particularly reprehensible segment of society, because their short-sighted narcissism undermines the very conditions for there being a society in the first place. Had a *DINK*'s parents reasoned the way a *DINK* does, that *DINK* would not be around to shun parental responsibilities and enjoy short-term pleasures. *DINKhood*, in short, does not universalize. Since "justification is not a matter of a special relation between ideas (or words) and objects, but of conversation, of social practice" (Rorty 1980, 170), it makes no sense to continue discussing with someone whose views destroy the very possibility of discussants. *DINKism* thus violates "a transcendental condition for the possibility of serious discourse in general" (Pihlström 2023, 22). Now, some have spread rumors that Dr. Pihlström may in fact have children. However, listening to the *DINK*'s voice is, in brief, to fail to listen to the cries of the unborn.

I don't know Pihlström well enough to say whether these accusations apply, but that is precisely the point. If labeling a person deprives them of a hearing, then one is at the mercy of anyone applying the label. Signaling one's virtue by denouncing others might look like a safe and tightly-contained move, but when designing a weapon, it is probably helpful to imagine that weapon used against you (if history is any indication, it will be).

Doing our due diligence to determine whether a particular person indeed merits the pejorative -isms thrown at them will invariably compel us to define what we mean by those terms. Unlike Pihlström's hand-waving allusions to "extremism," Jordan Peterson (2019) proposes clear criteria of demarcation. He says that the political Right goes too far right when it endorses ethno-nationalism. Since a similar criterion must prevent the political Left from going to whatever extremes it wishes, Peterson suggests that the Left goes too far when it replaces equality (of opportunity) with equity (of outcome). Whatever one thinks of Peterson's suggestion, it at least offers a principled criterion. Pihlström, by contrast, says that the question of who we can/should ignore

“can only reflexively rely on pragmatism itself” (Pihlström 2023, 25), but it is not clear (to me) what that means. One might perhaps unpack this by saying that it would be a case by case decision responsive to many factors, but such a vague answer would also be unhelpful. If our conversations must countenance an Overton window of acceptability, we should make sure that it does not slide or contract according to the whims of the moment.

This recommendation is important, because things change. Pragmatism originated in the work of Peirce—also a pariah few wanted to listen to. Adultery does not seem to offend Pihlström’s sensibilities, but it clearly offended Peirce’s peers, who “would not stay under the same roof with so immoral a man” (Brent 1998, 164). Like Pihlström, they glossed any connection as complicity with evil. The founder of pragmatism would definitely count as a racist by today’s standards (Raposa 2021), so it is worth wondering whether Pihlström is sawing off the branch he sits on (heaven forbid we should find evidence of Dewey or James also making a transgression).

Keyboard activists on social media have a saying: “Ten people at a table with one Nazi is eleven Nazis at a table.” Less provocatively but in the same spirit, Pihlström writes that “[w]henever we start speaking about Nazism (or, as I also claim, racism), ethical considerations will already be irremovably at work in our discussion” (2005, 1). Presumably, if we saddle conversation with a concern about contamination, morality would demand that we stop teaching Peirce. Luckily, some people broke with the prevailing consensus to preserve Peirce’s papers, so we now have a chance to find out how overzealous the right-thinking was.

As Pihlström acknowledges (2023, 9), his arguments did not dwell on Peirce’s philosophy. Peirce saw that, “in order to learn you must desire to learn, and in so desiring not be satisfied with what you already incline to think” (1931–58, vol. 1, para. 135). In fact, Peirce valued this fallibilist stance so much that he called it “the First Rule of Reason.” Pihlström clearly agrees with the gist of Peirce’s call to not block the way of inquiry. But, when it comes to a handful of pet issues, he has no desire to learn from the large swaths of the population he identifies as racist. Now, under ordinary circumstances, refusing to converse with racists (about a topic of relevance) might be reasonable. But, as we are about to see, these are not reasonable times.

### 3 Concepts that have Been Stretched and Weaponized

Pihlström claims to be “assuming a relatively widely shared understanding (in Western liberal societies) of the basic meaning of such concepts” (2023, 3), but he seems unaware that the concepts he utilizes have been stretched and

weaponized. Here, for example, are some beliefs and actions now ranked as “racist” or “intolerant”:

- Wearing a costume with cultural elements for Halloween.
- Holding that only women can get pregnant.
- Believing that hard drug use should be stigmatized, not encouraged (much less tax funded).
- Not feeling bound by what is forbidden in Islam.
- Being proud of the accomplishments of the West.
- Asking for proof and due process when allegations of abuse or genocide are made and withholding judgment until that evidence is known.
- Thinking that people should be hired only on the basis of merit.
- Believing that illegal immigration is illegal.
- Listening to both sides of all issues, even when one side appears “unthinkable” (Pihlström 2023, 17).

The discomfort that accompanies exposure to differing views has been inflated into an outright “harm” (Haslam 2016) and taken as a sign to halt inquiry. Yet, for the record, none of the beliefs and actions just listed seem “racist” or “intolerant” to me. By analogy, I do not associate with murderers, but if the term were to cover eating hamburgers, I would be unmoved by accusations of murder directed at me. Hence, in addition to erroneous accusations, we must guard against exaggerated accusations.

The call to cancel applies only to speakers/writers who reach certain conclusions (Veber 2021), but since premises matter as much as conclusions, I would like a thumbnail sketch of *why* racism is wrong. Is racism wrong because it warps an equal distribution of groups, or because it latches onto inessential properties and thereby violates the agency of individuals? This underlying rationale matters, because imposing a utopian pie-chart of group distributions would arguably partake in the very phenomena deemed morally reprehensible. For instance, some take “being racist” as equivalent to “being white” (DiAngelo 2018). Blocking one’s ears to racist voices, on this view, would mean never listening to anyone who is white (Stickers 2014). That might not turn out well for Pihlström.

#### 4      It is Unlikely that One is Pure while Half of the World is Wicked

There are plenty of good reasons to oppose racism, but the claim that it violates “a transcendental condition for the possibility of serious discourse in general” (Pihlström 2023, 22) can be tested and is demonstrably false. Consider the case of Nick Bostrom, who is widely-cited but once said something forbidden in an



email. Clearly, rational conversations with Bostrom unfolded smoothly prior to the discovery of his transgression. Hence, talk of antiracism's constitutive status is simply not true (although the previous remarks about DINKs were partly tongue-in-cheek, procreation strikes me as a far more plausible condition for the possibility of continued dialogue).

Scholars who fixate on racism often seem unconcerned with other (arguably more prevalent and consequential) vices such as lying, envy, greed, lust, laziness, narcissism, etc. It is clearly easier to blame others—or, better still, vague “systemic” failures—than to reform one's character, action by action. Hence, despite the level of sophistication achieved in his area of expertise (religion), Pihlström is a “naive realist” when it comes to political matters (Friedman 2019, 44), since it is implied that only persons with reproachable intents would object to his take on things. “If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us [...]. But the line dividing good and evil passes through the heart of every human being” (Solzhenitsyn 2018, 75).

Given the fashionable exaggerations I have witnessed in academia and the steadfast decency I have observed in ordinary people, I find it more plausible to think that the term “racist” has been stretched to encompass half a nation than to think that half a nation is racist. Certainly, if you do not regard one or more of the items listed in the previous section as “racist” or “intolerant,” then your moral compass is better adjusted than those who would question your worth.

Denouncing unnamed “racists” is less an empirical claim—which, if rendered precise, could be defeated—than a performative act, addressed to readers who will presumably cheer. Pihlström's main claim is that “[t]here is no way of mediating between the false extremes of what might simply be described as lunatic and non-lunatic types of thinking” (2023, 4). The use of the passive voice and implication of consensus let him enjoy the benefits of denunciation while dodging its costs/risks (Turri 2022). So, while Pihlström *insinuates* that people who voted for Trump or Brexit are racists, he never actually *justifies* the claims about “hateful or violence-driven identities” (2023, 5) that motivate his rejection of mediation as “illusory.”

I would like Pihlström to name names and show receipts, but he keeps such applied questions at bay by saying that “while I suppose my reflections are politically relevant, [...] my discussion will remain at a more abstract metaphilosophical level of reflecting on the methodology of pragmatism” (Pihlström 2023, 5). Similarly, he recognizes that “there are different views on how exactly to interpret the meaning of the concepts of racism and democracy,”

but he explains that, “[a]s this paper addresses a meta-level issue, we can leave such matters open here” (2023, 3).

As these disclaimers show, Pihlström uses pragmatism mainly as “a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers” (Dewey 1917, 65). I suppose this can be done. Yet, instead of winking at the like-minded, intellectuals who have a specific political aim in mind should take responsibility for their claims by giving an explicit story (Brandom 1994). Surely one should not be allowed to call for sweeping (half-country sized) cancellations—only to then retreat to the rarified air of theory. Extraordinary claims may not require extraordinary evidence, but they require some evidence.

## 5 Conversation Involves no Moral Contamination, because Listening is not Acquiescing

Pihlström’s desire to avoid transfers of moral “condemnability” (2005, 1) makes him risk averse. Yet, most of Pihlström’s worries dissolve once we realize that listening to X does not automatically mean acquiescing to X. In fact, repudiations that come *after* charitable engagements have a greater claim to being justified than repudiations based merely on innuendo and hearsay. We have a natural tendency to “identify what a thing is—‘Oh, I know this (type)’—without attending to *how* a (token) thing actually is” (Champagne 2024, 28). This stereotyping may be suitable for physical objects, but it “becomes ethically deplorable when dealing with people” (*ibid.*). Certainly, if you condemn others based merely on how they once voted in one election or referendum, you seriously need to rethink things.

Although it can be tempting to think that the demands of morality override the canons of epistemology, we should be mindful that “[m]orality binds and blinds. It binds us into ideological teams that fight each other as though the fate of the world depended on our side winning each battle. It blinds us to the fact that each team is composed of good people who have something important to say” (Haidt 2012, 366). Despite pontificating about “the Other,” many current-day intellectuals cannot wrap their minds around the possibility that others might reach conclusions different than they do (Brabazon et al. 2018). Politics the world over is thus devolving into unproductive partisanship, illustrating Peirce’s observation that “no blight can so surely arrest all intellectual growth as the blight of cocksureness” (1931–58, vol. 1, para. 13).

Verbal expressions of concern for social injustices should thus be judged, not by the heroic feelings they elicit, but by the measurable effects they engender (Riley 2016). Since reality exceeds what any individual mind can

fathom, encountering different viewpoints lets us correct errors and restore sobriety to moral panics. These benefits hold, not just for facts, but also for the principles used to evaluate facts. Haidt and Graham, for example, argue that “there are five psychological foundations of morality, which we label as harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity” and that “political liberals value virtues based on the first two foundations, while political conservatives value virtues based on all five” (2007, 99; see Graham et al. 2013). Complex social problems will not be solved by sloganeering and name-calling, so everyone from every tribe should be concerned by calls to cease the conversation.

Unfortunately, such reminders of fallibilism and the need for genuine push-back will not bother people who are convinced that they are on the right side of history. Indeed,

If you have a difference of opinion with them, you are considered to be not merely in error but in sin. You are a racist, a homophobe or whatever the villain of the day happens to be. [...] That is a huge loss because out of disagreements have often come deeper understandings than either side had before confronting each other's arguments. Even wacko ideas have led to progress, when dealt with critically, in terms of logic and evidence. Astrology led to astronomy. The medieval notion of turning lead into gold—alchemy—led to chemistry, from which have come everything from a wide range of industrial products and consumer goods to more productive agriculture and lifesaving drugs. Where an argument starts is far less important than where it finishes because the logic and evidence in between is crucial.

SOWELL 2006, 57

Pihlström knows first-hand that seriously studying widely discredited viewpoints can sometimes pay off (see for example Pihlström 2020). Alas, an unproductive set of ideas has, it seems, now reached the shores of the pragmatist landmass.

## 6 People and Ideas one Dislikes do not Vanish by Plugging One's Ears

Like pilgrims during the Hajj, many academics are marching around the common goal of “DEI”: “diversity,” “equity,” “inclusivity” (Hillman and Borland 2022, 18). However, many (more?) people inside and outside academia think that freedom, rigor, and merit (FRM) ought to be our lodestar (Haack 1998).

Yet, not only are those who oppose prevailing social justice beliefs “deemed to be unworthy, *arguments* inconsistent with that vision are likewise often [...] treated as something to be discredited, rather than answered” (Sowell 2011, 147–148; emphasis in original). What exactly are those arguments? Someone following Pihlström’s recommendations would never have a chance to find out.

Pihlström’s contribution is part of a larger effort to reign in the permissiveness of neo-pragmatism, which some see as “tainted with the cognitive and ethical irresponsibility of the ‘post-truth’ miasma” (Festenstein 2021, 359). Yet, despite its prevalence, talk of “post-truth” (Pihlström 2021) is condescending. The rise of political homogeneity (Duarte et al. 2015, 2–4) and social justice activism in scientific research (Cofnas et al. 2018) have diminished the public’s trust in scientists, not science. “It is not as though people have really given up on the distinction between truth and falsity. Even flat earthers think it is *true* that the earth is flat. [...] Similarly, vaccine skeptics may have false views about the efficacy of vaccinations, but they nevertheless agree with orthodox scientists that there is *a truth* about their efficacy” (Hannon 2023, 42). Intellectuals are not immune from (and may in fact be more susceptible to) groupthink. So, for all we know, presently unfashionable views might turn out to be the best, overall (Mill 2003).

At what point do dissenting arguments become too numerous and cogent to ignore? According to Pihlström, when the people he dismisses want their “voice to be heard in political discussions in the name of freedom of speech” (2023, 4), we are not seeing democracy in action, but rather an infiltration tactic of the intolerant. This hermeneutics of suspicion, which borders on the conspiratorial, is not unique to Pihlström. On the contrary, we have seen it in practice for over a decade now. If an American citizen disagreed with a particular domestic or foreign policy of their government and, as a result of their judgment, did not vote for Hilary Clinton, that American suddenly saw themselves portrayed in the legacy media as the moral and intellectual equivalent of a slack-jawed yokel.

Although Pihlström wants to shut down communication with those he deems “anti-democratic,” one could argue that “communication is *what democracy is all about*” (Coeckelbergh 2024, 219; emphasis in original). Communication is also central to pragmatism (Bergman 2009), since that school of philosophy begins with a realization that no echo chamber will be able “to hold its ground in practice” (Peirce 1931–58, vol. 5, para. 378).

History is replete with illustrations that the truth, “crushed to earth, shall rise again” (Peirce 1931–58, vol. 1, para. 217). For instance, after a string of tumultuous anti-Vietnam protests, “in the 70s there was a lot of self-congratulation that we no longer have violence on campus. Yes, the campuses were quiet, but it

was the quiet of surrender, because people who would cause [other] people to riot were no longer invited on campus” and scholars “who would antagonize the students by their viewpoints were not hired as professors” (Sowell, speaking to Peter Robinson, May 19, 2011; see also Sowell 2006, 54–56). Such “de-platforming” may succeed in doctoring mock-consensus at a local scale, but given that there is no analog of non-hiring in society at large, scholars excluded from the academic conversation simply migrated to think-tanks (and now the internet), where vibrant and rigorous conversations continue to this day.

Universities used to have a monopoly on knowledge and credentials, but now they only have a monopoly on credentials. Having spent decades steel-manning controversial views and applying standard scholarly rigor to thinkers who, by choice, temperament, or necessity, operate(d) outside or at the margins of academic philosophy, I find the nonchalance of Pihlström’s undocumented dismissals infuriating. Unilaterally ending a conversation may give one a momentary ego-boost, but people and ideas one dislikes do not vanish merely by plugging one’s ears. So, above all, the question I have for Pihlström is: *What is supposed to come after silence?*

Language games involve game theory, since what one person does/says is conditional on and responsive to what the other person does/says and vice versa. So, if A characterizes B’s beliefs as “lunacy” and ceases all dialogue with B, what does A expect B to do in response? Spontaneously feel contrition and switch to A’s side? Pihlström is no doubt aware that many scientists and lay people view philosophy as a waste of time, yet he did not ditch his vocation merely on account of these displays of disdain. Speaking for myself, being on the receiving end of closed-mindedness only makes me want to redouble my efforts (by writing pieces like this one). We have no reason to think that the folks summarily dismissed by Pihlström would act any differently.

Unfortunately, dwelling exclusively in one’s tribe is like wearing beer goggles or having a high IQ: one becomes so certain of being certain that one drifts away from facts—including facts about what response conceit typically elicits. While one would have expected a pragmatist to calculate the downstream effects of their actions, it is as if Pihlström decided his first move and gave no thought whatsoever to how others will respond.

## 7 The Cessation of Discourse Risks being the Beginning of Hostilities

People looking for practical solutions often aspire to find a middle ground between rival positions, but this may not always be feasible or advisable.

Pihlström says that “how to tell the cases where mediation or reconciliation is possible [...] from those where it isn’t” is a “hard question” (2023, 15). Yet, if we follow pragmatism’s core recommendation and switch our attention from what Pihlström *says* to what he *does* (i.e., the authorial choices he makes), we find that he does not regard this question “hard” at all. Indeed, the ease with which he enjoins us to “choose the right one among the opposites” (2023, 17) is unsettling. I have no doubt that this is coming from a good place. Still, wishing to do the right thing is necessary but not sufficient. Facts matter (for a healthy counterpull to moral grandstanding, see for example the full bodycam footage in Collin 2023).

Human beings have been making mistakes and committing sins as long as there have been human beings. The great catastrophes of history have usually involved much more than that. Typically, there has been an additional and crucial ingredient—some method by which feedback from reality has been prevented, so that a dangerous course of action could be blindly continued to a fatal conclusion. [...] Today [...] the prevailing social vision is dangerously close to sealing itself off from any discordant feedback from reality.

SOWELL 1995, 1

Taking a page from Pihlström’s playbook, one could have labeled his calls for silence “extremist” or “Far-Left” and used that labeling as a justification to skip justifications. However, “[b]itter divides are poisoning our politics” because a person “aligned with a particular heuristic [...] can continue unswervingly down that path undisturbed by information which does not suit it or which might thwart it” (Murray 2019). A cursory glance will reveal that “[c]urrent journalism practices tend to exacerbate tribal us-vs-them thinking by emphasizing partisan cues in game-schema language, nudging citizens toward *not* listening to political ideas from the other political camp” (Arendt et al. 2023, 424; emphasis in original). Do we really want to steer philosophy in that direction too? Conversing with perceived opponents may be unpleasant, but “[i]f you are under the impression that you have discovered the complete, final truth about politics, then it is more likely that you are a dogmatic ideologue than that humanity has actually, in the person of you, finally arrived at that complete truth” (Huemer 2022, 165).

John Dewey wrote that “[c]ommunication can alone create a great community. Our Babel is not one of tongues but of the signs and symbols without which shared experience is impossible” (2016, 170). Censoring, cancelling, and shutting down dissenters may be trendy and capable of scaling due to technology (Stjernfelt and Lauritzen 2020), but those moves remain inimical

to the pursuit of truth (Winsberg 2024). They are also inimical to the pursuit of peace. When one isolates oneself in an echo chamber, communication with rival tribes ceases, but sign-exchange does not; it merely shifts from symbols to indices. I thus fail to see how further sound-proofing will stop “the slide to lunacy” (Pihlström 2023, 24)—or conflicts that may lead to civil war, if we don’t rapidly find a way to backpeddle the polarization.

Academics who indulge in exaggeration (see the “quasi” comparison between Trump and Stalin in Pihlström 2023, 4) may think that they are talking only among themselves. However, sooner or later, someone somewhere gets the hint and takes such exaggerations seriously. In fact, as of this writing, at least one major assassination attempt has taken place in the US and riots are spreading in the UK. The gunman acted alone and thugs are involved in the rioting, but many people privately or publicly support what is happening. I therefore want a time-stamped textual alibi showing that, if this powder keg explodes, I was not among the intellectuals who called for the vilification to increase and the dialogue to cease.

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