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Sami Pihlström

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# Jamesian Pragmatism, Rortyan Ironism, and Kantian Antitheodicy

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## 1. Introduction

According to John Dewey's famous words—toward the end of *Experience and Nature* (1929)—philosophy can be characterized as the “critical method for developing methods of criticism”. We should appreciate the way in which pragmatism is indebted to, or is even a species of, *critical philosophy*, presumably not exactly in Immanuel Kant's original sense of this term but in a developed sense that still retains something from the Kantian idea of criticism, especially the idea of the *reflexivity* essential to human reason-use and inquiry. It is through inquiry itself that we can (only) hope to shed light on what it means to inquire. Philosophy is an inquiry into inquiry, and this is a fundamentally Kantian critical point. “Der *kritische* Weg ist allein noch offen”, Kant wrote when concluding his first *Critique*.

The relationship between Kant and pragmatism can and should be critically considered not only in general terms but also through specific instances. In this essay, I will first make some broad remarks on the relevance of Kantian critical philosophy as a background of pragmatism, especially pragmatist philosophy of religion. I will then examine the ways in which Kantian issues are present in the distinctive way in which William James—at the very core of his development of the pragmatic method—takes seriously the reality of evil and suffering, developing a thoroughly *antitheodicy* philosophical outlook. However, I will also connect this theme with another development in more recent neopragmatism that might *prima facie* be taken to be far from any Kantian issues, namely,

Richard Rorty's *ironism*, as it emerges from his reading of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. I am not claiming Rorty to be a critical philosopher in a Kantian sense, but I am confident that even the context of pragmatist inquiry within which his liberal ironism is developed owes fundamental points of departure to Kantian transcendental philosophy. Finally, I will show how a worry regarding what might be considered a potential slippery slope from James to Rorty arises from the Kantian background of pragmatist antitheodicism.

I am in this essay to some extent helping myself to, and partly summarizing, some of my previous work on these topics.<sup>1</sup> We will begin from an overall view of the Kantian roots of what I am calling the "pragmatist protest" in the philosophy of religion and then move on to James's pragmatic method and antitheodicism, and finally to Rorty and Orwell—and, simultaneously, to what I take to be the inevitably Kantian dimensions of pragmatist inquiry into suffering. While defending a generally "Kantian" view of pragmatism, I of course acknowledge that many pragmatists have been, and continue to be, highly critical of Kant in various ways (as a number of other contributors to this volume rightly emphasize). Thus, we may regard my Kantian reading of pragmatism as a hypothesis to be critically and self-critically tested through a continuous conversation among pragmatists, Kantians, and their various opponents.

In this essay, I propose to examine this hypothesis by specifically applying my Kantian account of pragmatism to the philosophy of religion, and even more specifically to the theodicy vs. antitheodicy issue. Accordingly, the general remarks on the relations between Kant and pragmatism to be made here are only intended as attempts to sketch the context, or background, within which my defense of a pragmatist-cum-Kantian antitheodicism unfolds. Hopefully, this rather specific case study also demonstrates the wide-ranging relevance of Kantian explorations of pragmatism (or, conversely, pragmatist explorations of Kant), even though here I must leave many central issues undiscussed (see further, e.g., Kivistö and Pihlström 2016).

## 2. The pragmatist protest and its Kantian roots

It may be argued that it is, to a significant extent, the Kantian nature of pragmatism, as well as the ability of pragmatism to critically reinterpret,

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. e.g., Pihlström 2010, 2013, 2017, 2018; and Kivistö and Pihlström 2016, especially chapter 5.

transform, and further develop some key Kantian ideas, that makes pragmatism a highly relevant philosophical approach today—in, e.g., metaphysical and epistemological discussions of realism and idealism, ethics and axiology, the philosophy of religion, and many other fields. In earlier work, I have articulated some central aspects in which pragmatism, early and late, can be regarded as a Kantian philosophy, focusing on the nature of metaphysics, the relation between fact and value, and religion.<sup>2</sup>

James, to be sure, saw philosophical progress as going “around” Kant instead of going “through” him. Undeniably, pragmatists have defended non- or even anti-Kantian views regarding various philosophical problems: contrary to Kant’s universalism and apriorism, pragmatism tends to emphasize the contingent practice-embeddedness of knowledge, morality, and value. However, pragmatism—even James’s—also shares crucial assumptions with Kant’s critical philosophy, to the extent that Murray Murphey (1966) aptly called the classical Cambridge pragmatists “Kant’s children”. Recent scholarship has extensively covered the Kantian background of pragmatism and the affinities between pragmatism and transcendental philosophical methodology.<sup>3</sup> In this essay, we obviously cannot do justice to the richness of the question concerning the pragmatists’ relation to Kant—either historically or systematically. One may, however, shed light on this topic by exploring this relation through the case of *pragmatist philosophy of religion* and its relation to one of the fundamental ideas of Kant’s philosophy of religion, i.e., the *postulates of practical reason*, as well as the more specific case of the theodicy issue (on which the later sections of this essay will focus).

As is well known, Kant transformed and transcended various controversies and dichotomies of his times, critically synthesizing, e.g., rationalism and empiricism, realism and idealism, determinism and freedom, as well as nature and morality. Similarly, pragmatism has often been defended as a critical middle ground option. For James, famously, pragmatism mediates between extreme positions, in particular the conflicting temperaments of the “tough-minded” and the “tender-minded”. In the philosophy of religion, in particular, one may also find Kantian aspects of pragmatic approaches in, e.g., the problems of theism vs. atheism and

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<sup>2</sup> See the references in note 1. Note that, when speaking of “Kantian” philosophy, I primarily mean philosophy derived from and based on, albeit not necessarily identical to, Kant’s philosophy (rather than, more broadly, something corresponding to the entire (post-)Kantian tradition in philosophy).

<sup>3</sup> See several essays in Gava and Stern 2016.

evidentialism vs. fideism. For virtually no pragmatist can religious faith be said to be a strictly evidential issue on par with scientific hypotheses. Evidence plays only a relatively marginal role in religion, as religion has to do with the way in which one understands and relates to one's life as a whole. According to Kant as well as pragmatism, religion must be intimately connected with the ethical life. We can pursue moral theology, not theological ethics: religion cannot be the ground of ethics but must itself be grounded in the requirements of morality.

One may, then, employ both Kantian and pragmatist insights in order to argue that the theism vs. atheism issue is not exhausted by the narrowly intellectual (evidentialist) considerations one might advance in favor of either theism or atheism. This is because one needs the resources of Kantian *practical reason*—the kind of ethically driven use of reason that pragmatists have arguably seen as pervading human reason-use generally—in order to arrive at any humanly adequate reaction to this problem. Theism *might*, the Kantian pragmatist may argue, be rationally acceptable in terms of practical reason, or more generally from the standpoint of the vital human needs and interests embedded in practices of life; nevertheless, this is very different from the kind of justification standardly aimed at in evidentialist philosophy of religion. Moreover, justification in terms of practical reason might, as Kant insisted, be the *only* rational justification available for the religious believer. From a Kantian and pragmatist point of view, faith in God need not be made scientifically acceptable, or warranted in terms of religiously neutral criteria of reason (that is, either empirically verifiable or epistemically justified in a broader sense) because it is ultimately not a matter of science or theoretical reason; the crucial task is to make it *ethically* acceptable.

Pragmatist philosophy of religion (especially James's) can be seen as reinterpreting and further developing Kant's postulates of practical reason, i. e., the freedom of the will, the existence of God, and the immortality of the soul. It is, in particular, from the perspective of the pragmatist proposal to (re-)entangle ethics and metaphysics that this Kantian topic deserves scrutiny. One may ask whether the defense of the postulates in the *Dialectics* of Kant's second *Critique* leads to a metaphysical position according to which God exists. Here the pragmatist may suggest that Kant's postulates are, again, *both* metaphysical *and* ethical—with metaphysical and ethical aspects inextricably intertwined.

Although this is not Kant's own way of putting the matter, one may say that the postulates presuppose that the world is not absolutely inde-

pendent of human perspectives but is responsive to human ethical (or more generally valuational) needs and interests, or (in a Jamesian phrase) “in the making” through such needs and interests. Human beings structure reality, including religious reality, in terms of what their commitment to morality requires; there is no pre-structured, “ready-made” world that could be meaningfully engaged with. It remains an open question whether, or to what extent, this structuring is really metaphysical. Some interpreters prefer a purely ethical, “merely pragmatic”, account of the Kantian postulates. Is there “really” a God, or is one just entitled to act “as if” there were one? This question needs to be pursued by pragmatists as much as Kantians.

Kant (1990 [1781/1787], A 795/B 823 ff.; 1983a [1788], A 223 ff.) constructs his moral argument for the existence of God and the immortality of the soul in the “Canon of Pure Reason” and the Dialectics of the second *Critique*. As mere ideas of pure reason (“transcendental ideas”), the concepts of freedom, God, and the soul lack “objective reality”. At best, they can be employed *regulatively*, not *constitutively*. This, however, is only the point of view that theoretical, speculative reason offers to the matter. From the perspective of practical reason—which, famously, is ultimately “prior to” theoretical reason in Kant’s (1983a [1788], A 215 ff.) system—there is a kind of “reality” corresponding to these concepts. Their epistemic status, when transformed into postulates of practical reason, differs from the status of the constitutive, transcendental conditions of any humanly possible experience, i. e., the categories and the forms of pure intuition, explored in the “Transcendental Analytic” and the “Transcendental Aesthetic” of the first *Critique*. The latter kind of conditions necessarily structure, according to Kant, the (or any) humanly cognizable world, that is, any objects or events that may be conceivably encountered in experience. However, the postulates of practical reason also structure—in an analogical albeit not identical manner—the human world as a world of ethical concern, deliberation, and action. Yet, this “structuring” is not “merely ethical” but also metaphysical.

From a pragmatist point of view, as much as from the Kantian one, ethics and metaphysics are deeply entangled here. Religion, or theism, is pragmatically legitimated as a postulate needed for morality, for ethical life and practices. Yet, no theological ethics in the style of, say, divine command theory can be accepted. What is needed, according to both Kant and pragmatists like James, is *moral theology*. Any attempt to base ethics on theology, or religion, would (in Kantian terms) be an example of

heteronomy instead of autonomy, but the only critical and rational way to provide a basis for theology is the ethical way.

The Kantian pragmatist needs to consider a problem here, though. Is theism practically legitimated a priori, as in Kant, or does it receive its legitimation empirically or psychologically, as an attitude “energizing” moral life, because we are the kind of beings we are, as in James and perhaps other pragmatists? One possible suggestion is that, just as Kantian transcendental (critical) philosophy synthesizes the pre-critically opposed epistemological doctrines of empiricism and rationalism, and just as pragmatism (arguably) bridges the gap between facts and values (see Putnam 2002), one may try to reconcile Kantian (transcendental) and Jamesian (pragmatist, empirical, psychological) ways of justifying theism ethically. The Kantian perspective on theism needs pragmatic rearticulation, and the thus rearticulated pragmatic aspects of theism are not disconnected from the Kantian transcendental work of practical reason (cf. further Pihlström 2013).

It is part of such rearticulation to perceive that Kant’s criticism of *theodicies* as rationalizing attempts to provide reasons for God’s allowing the world to contain evil and suffering can also be reread from the standpoint of pragmatist (especially Jamesian) attacks on theodicies (to be soon explored in some more detail). It is precisely the Kantian perspective of practical reason that can be argued to be central to an adequate philosophical analysis of the problem of evil and suffering. For Kant as well as the pragmatists, there is something seriously wrong in approaching human suffering from the point of view of speculative metaphysical or theological theorizing. Hence, the controversy between theodicy and antitheodicy is at the core of the pragmatist protest—with its Kantian roots—we should develop further in the philosophy of religion. I will now move on to a more elaborated account of this issue.

It is not an accident that Kant is the starting point for both pragmatist criticisms of metaphysical realism and for pragmatist criticisms of theodicies, as both are crucial in the project of critical philosophy continued by pragmatism. From the pragmatist as well as Kantian perspective, theodicies commit the same mistake as metaphysical realism: they aim at a speculative, absolute account (from a “God’s-Eye-View”) of why an omnipotent, omniscient, and absolutely benevolent God allows, or might allow, the world to contain apparently unnecessary and meaningless evil and suffering. Kantian critical philosophy denies the possibility of such a transcendent account or such metaphysical, speculative truths—and this

denial is itself, again, both ethical and metaphysical, followed by James's firm rejection of any theodicies as insensitive to the irreducibility of other human beings' suffering.

Why, we may here pause to ask, am I speaking about the pragmatist "protest" in the title of this section? This is simply because we can see pragmatism as protesting against various received views of mainstream philosophy of religion today, such as metaphysical realism, evidentialism, and theodicism, all of which are typically maintained by leading analytic philosophers of religion—but also against various tendencies in contemporary "postmodern" or "Continental" philosophy of religion, such as radical anti-metaphysics, constructivism, and relativism. We will next study this protest in relation to a special case, the theodicy vs. antitheodicy controversy. It should be emphasized that *protest needs critique*: it is one thing to simply abandon some position or protest against it, and quite another to base one's protest on a careful critical analysis and argumentation. In the case of critical philosophy, this particularly means self-criticism and self-discipline.<sup>4</sup> The pragmatist version of this idea is the Deweyan view of philosophy as a critical method for developing methods of criticism. In this fundamental sense, even Deweyan pragmatists (despite Dewey's occasionally sharp attacks on Kant) continue the Kantian critical project—and this is even more clearly so with James, whose antitheodicy protest we will now examine.

### 3. James, the pragmatic method, and the reality of evil

To properly set the stage for the inquiry into the problem of evil and suffering, I will begin from James's views on the pragmatic method and metaphysics, elaborating on the kind of Kantian reading of James already hinted at in the previous section. I will then suggest that the problem of evil and suffering plays a crucial role in James's philosophy of religion, metaphysics, and the pragmatic method—and it is this problem, in particular, that needs to be examined in relation to its Kantian background.

James famously argued that in *every* genuine metaphysical dispute, some practical issue is, however remotely, involved. If there is no such issue involved, then the dispute is empty. Jamesian pragmatism is thus here both influenced by and in contrast with the Kantian (somewhat proto-pragmatist) idea of the "primacy of practical reason" in relation to theo-

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<sup>4</sup> Compare this to Kant's (1990 [1781/1788]) articulation of the idea of the "discipline of reason" in the "Doctrine of Method" (*Methodenlehre*).



retical reason. As we just saw, for Kant, the metaphysical ideas of God, freedom, and immortality are only vindicated by the practical, instead of theoretical, use of reason. The Jamesian pragmatist, however, goes beyond Kant in emphasizing not simply the “primacy” of ethics to metaphysics but their profound inseparability and entanglement. Pragmatist inquiries into metaphysical topics, such as James’s, lead to the radical claim that metaphysics might not, in the last analysis, even be *possible* without a relation to ethics: pragmatically analyzed, we cannot arrive at *any* understanding of reality as we humans, being ourselves part of that reality, experience it, without paying due attention to the way in which moral valuations and ethical commitments are constitutive of that reality by being ineliminably involved in any engagement with reality possible for us. Ethics, then, plays a “transcendental” role constitutive of any metaphysical inquiry we may engage in.

More specifically, ethics seems to function as a ground for evaluating rival metaphysical hypotheses and for determining their pragmatic core meaning. The (conceivable) practical results the pragmatist metaphysician should look for are, primarily, ethical. Examples of such ethical evaluation of metaphysical matters can be found in the Jamesian pragmatic search for a critical middle path between implausible metaphysical extremes, as discussed in the third lecture of *Pragmatism*, “Some Metaphysical Problems Pragmatically Considered” (James 1975–88 [1907]). The topics James there (and in the fourth lecture in which the analysis continues) considers include debates over substance, determinism vs. freedom, materialism vs. theism, monism vs. pluralism, and (somewhat indirectly) realism vs. nominalism. Some of these metaphysical examples are quite explicitly ethical. Such are, for instance, the dispute between determinism and free will, as well as the one between materialism and theism, which the philosopher employing James’s pragmatic method examines from the point of view of what the rival metaphysical theories of the world “promise”: how does, for instance, the conceivable future of the world change if theism, instead of materialism (atheism), is true, or vice versa? In Lecture III of *Pragmatism*, James argues, among other things, that theism, unlike materialism, is a philosophy of “hope”, because it promises us a world in which morality could make a difference.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> It might be suggested that there are many less grandiose metaphysical issues that do not seem to manifest the kind of Jamesian entanglement of ethics and metaphysics that I am here emphasizing. For instance, is there some specifically ethical dimension involved in the metaphysical question concerning the existence of tables and the “grounding” of their exist-

In this context, I want to draw attention to a very important special way in which ethics is prior to, or contextualizes, any humanly possible metaphysical (and, arguably, theological) inquiry in Jamesian pragmatism. Recognizing the reality of evil is a key element of James's pluralistic pragmatism and its conceptions of religion and morality. The critique of monism, especially the attack on monistic Hegelian absolute idealism, is a recurring theme in James's philosophy. An investigation of the problem of evil can show how he argues against monism and defends pluralism on an ethical basis and how, therefore, his pragmatic metaphysics is grounded in ethics in a Kantian manner.

James was troubled by the problem of evil already at an early stage of his intellectual career, during the time of his spiritual crisis in 1870. He felt that the existence of evil might be a threat to a "moralist" attitude to the world, leading the would-be moralist to despair. "Can one with full knowledge and sincerely ever bring one's self so to sympathize with the total process of the universe as heartily to assent to the evil that seems inherent in its details?" he wondered, replying that, if so, then optimism is possible, but that, for some, pessimism is the only choice.<sup>6</sup> Already at this stage, he saw a problem with the idea of a "total process" optimistically taken to be well in order. According to Ralph Barton Perry (1964, 122), both optimism and pessimism were impossible for James, because he was "too sensitive to ignore evil, too moral to tolerate it, and too ardent to accept it as inevitable". It is already here that we can find the seeds of his *melioristic* pragmatism, which he later developed in more detail. This view says, in short, that we should *try* to make the world better, fighting against evil, without having any guarantee that the good cause will win, but having the right, or perhaps even the duty, to hope that it might and to invest our best efforts to make sure it will.

James worked on these issues throughout his life. In his last book, *Some Problems of Philosophy* (1911), he offered several arguments against

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tence? (I am indebted to an anonymous referee's comment here.) Certainly there is no need to force such a question into any explicitly ethical shape, but in principle any metaphysical issue, even the most banal or everyday one, could turn out to be ethically highly significant, according to Jamesian pragmatism. I try to develop this idea in Pihlström 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Notebook sheets from 1870, quoted in Perry 1964, 120–1. Here James saw that fighting evil—holding that "though evil slay me, she can't subdue me, or make me worship her" (ibid., 121)—presupposes the freedom of the will, and was thus connected with the key problem of his spiritual crisis. (Freedom, of course, is necessary, according to James, for any serious ethical philosophy. Perry notes that "moralism" is just one name for what might be described as James's "fundamental seriousness"; see ibid., 388.)

monism, among them the argument that monism creates, and will not be able to solve, the problem of evil:

Evil, for pluralism, presents only the practical problem of how to get rid of it.

For monism the puzzle is theoretical: How—if Perfection be the source, should there be Imperfection? If the world as known to the Absolute be perfect, why should it be known otherwise, in myriads of inferior finite editions also? The perfect edition surely was enough. How do the breakage and dispersion and ignorance get in?

James 1911, 138.<sup>7</sup>

That pragmatists, unlike monists, must take evil and imperfection seriously, refusing to “be deaf to the cries of the wounded” (as James put it elsewhere), is presented as one of the ethical motivations grounding the entire pragmatist method in the first lecture of *Pragmatism*. Referring to the actual fate of some suffering people, such as (drawing from a publication by Morrison I. Swift, an anarchist writer) an unemployed and in various ways disappointed and discouraged sick man who found his family lacking food and eventually committed suicide, James argued, against “the airy and shallow optimism of current religious philosophy” (James 1975–88 [1907], 20), that what such desperate human beings experience “is Reality”: “But while Professors Royce and Bradley and a whole host of guileless thoroughfeds are unveiling Reality and the Absolute and explaining away evil and pain, this is the condition of the only beings known to us anywhere in the universe with a developed consciousness of what the universe is” (ibid., 21).

Thus, idealist, optimistic philosophers “are dealing in shades, while those who live and feel know truth” (ibid., 22); a Leibnizian theodicy postulating a harmony of the universe is “a cold literary exercise, whose cheerful substance even hell-fire does not warm” (ibid., 20). What I am calling theodicism is, for James, part of the “unreality in all rationalistic systems” of “religious” philosophy that remain “out of touch with concrete facts and joys and sorrows” (ibid., 17). James here even quotes at length from Leibniz’s *Théodicée* (ibid., 19–20), concluding that “no realistic image of the experience of a damned soul had ever approached the portals of his mind” (ibid., 20). In order to overcome the ethically unbearable

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<sup>7</sup> I am here quoting from the Bison Books Edition of James’s *Some Problems of Philosophy* (1911), ed. Ellen Kappy Suckiel (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1996). Generally, I am referring to James’s works in the standard way, citing the critical edition (James 1975–88).

condition of the philosophical (and theological) tradition of theodicism, James offers pragmatism as a philosophy that can, pluralistically, respond to a *variety* of experiences, including genuine loss and evil, without simply tolerating such experiences, and without entirely losing the consolation of religion with the abandonment of theodicies (cf. *ibid.*, 23). It is from this antitheodistic challenge that *Pragmatism*, like pragmatism, unfolds.

We should take seriously the fact that James uses the notion of *truth* in this context, as well as terms such as “fact”, “reality”, “unreality”, and “realistic”. His invoking the concept of truth in particular is not just a non-technical loose way of speaking but, I submit, an instance of his pragmatist account of truth in action. We must, in particular, take James’s concern with the truth of pluralism (and the falsity of monism and absolute idealism) in his own pragmatic sense, the same sense in which he speaks about “living” and “feeling” people knowing “the truth” (*ibid.*, 20, cited above). This is truth not in the sense of metaphysical realism postulating a correspondence relation holding (or failing to hold) independently of human beings and their needs and interests, but a pragmatic truth dynamically emerging from human valuational practices of engaging with reality and their experiences of it.

Nevertheless, it would be highly misleading to claim that James would not be interested in the question about the “real” (genuine, objective) truth of (say) pluralism (vs. monism), or other metaphysical views he considers in *Pragmatism* and elsewhere—just as it would be misleading to claim that Kant would not be interested in the truth of theism, for instance. Certainly truth plays a role here, and neither James nor Kant subscribes to an easy antirealism or relativism according to which the truth (vs. falsity) about evil and suffering (or about God) would simply be a human perspectival construction, yet our human practice-embedded perspectives can never be eliminated from our serious consideration of these truths, and this is where the Kantian and the Jamesian approaches to the philosophy of religion join forces. Indeed, it can be suggested that the special moral significance of the pragmatist conception of truth (and reality), as articulated by James in *Pragmatism* (and elsewhere), arises from the fundamental link between antitheodicism and the acknowledgment of truth and reality along the phrases just quoted. We (pragmatically) need the pragmatist conception of truth in order to make sense of this demand of acknowledgment of the reality of pain and suffering. A non-pragmatic (e. g., metaphysically realistic correspondence) notion of truth just cannot do the job. Moreover, it is, from the Jamesian perspective, a kind of “fake news” based on an

unconcern with truth to claim, with theodicians, that there “really” is no unnecessary or meaningless evil, or that suffering has some “real” sense or purpose.

Well, why couldn’t a realist correspondence-theoretician “acknowledge” the reality of (meaningless) suffering in the antitheodistic sense? I am not claiming that a non-pragmatic realist correspondence-theorist cannot be an antitheodistic. I am, rather, only suggesting that the full force of pragmatist antitheodicism can be brought into view by realizing the way in which something like a pragmatic notion of truth functions in the Jamesian pronouncements on the concrete reality of suffering that needs to be acknowledged if we do not wish to “live in shades” and be out of touch with human experience. Such valuational truths about suffering are among the pragmatically relevant truths that we, according to James, seem to need a rich pragmatic notion of truth to account for.

James’s pragmatist and pluralist position might now be summarized as an outcome of a transcendental argument in a quasi-Kantian fashion. Our taking seriously the reality of evil—i. e., its psychological, social, as well as metaphysical reality—is understood by James to be a necessary condition for the possibility of ethically meaningful or valuable life (in a pluralistic metaphysical setting), including any true religious meaning one may find in one’s life. Evil itself is not intrinsically, metaphysically, necessary to the universe itself, as the absolute idealist would be forced to hold, but it is necessary in a *presuppositional* sense: *if* there is any legitimate role for religious (theistic) beliefs to play in our lives, such a system of beliefs must acknowledge the reality of evil while resisting the “corrupt”, immoral idea that an ultimately moral creator “planned” it and is prepared to pay the price in order to secure some greater good. There is, admittedly, an air of circularity in this argument, because the ethical duty not to overlook others’ suffering can hardly itself be grounded in any deeper ethical demand. Ultimately, then, this quasi-transcendental argument is about what makes morality meaningful and serious for us, and how it is possible for us to adopt the moral point of view on the world and on our lives. The circularity, I think, is unavoidable in the sense that to be concerned with this meaningfulness of the moral perspective is already to adopt that perspective and to be seriously committed to viewing our lives, including our philosophizing, from a moral standpoint. The problem of evil and suffering is, if my argument is on the right track, at the center of this commitment.

Furthermore, it may be suggested that the metaphysical acceptance of the reality of evil and the fight against it constitute a pragmatic criterion of adequacy for pragmatism itself. Pragmatism proves to be a philosophy which takes evil seriously, without hiding it or trying to explain it away (as monistic idealism does, according to James), yet encouraging us to join in a struggle against it, melioristically trying to make our world a better one. This is a reflexive pragmatic argument in favor of pragmatism and pluralism themselves. By enabling us to make a difference, pragmatism offers a more satisfactory picture of the nature and role of evil in human lives than monistic idealism (or, *mutatis mutandis*, some contemporary analytic philosophers' evidentialist theism typically postulating a theodicy). The price to be paid here, however, is an irresolvable metaphysical and theological insecurity: there is no final solution to the problem of evil, as new experiences of ever more horrendous evils may eventually even make it impossible for us to go on actively fighting against evil. Insofar as a pragmatic defense of pragmatism is available, such a defense will have to remain fallible. We may be unable to react pragmatically to the problem of evil, after all, and for many thinkers this may be a ground for rejecting religious beliefs altogether.

According to this Jamesian antitheodicy, the recognition of genuine evil is required as a background, or as I prefer to say, a transcendental condition, of the possibility of making a difference, a positive contribution, in favor of goodness. It should be relatively clear on the basis of these discussions that the problem of evil can be seen as a *frame* that puts the other philosophical explorations of James's *Pragmatism* into a certain context. It shows that reacting to the problem of evil—and the highly individual experiences of being a victim to evil that we may hear in the “cries of the wounded”—is essential in our ethical orientation to the world we live in, which in turn is essential in the use of the pragmatic method as a method of making our ideas clear, both metaphysically and conceptually (and even religiously or theologically). *Pragmatism*, as we saw, opens the project of advancing a melioristic philosophy with a discussion of the concrete reality of evil, and in the final pages James returns to evil, suffering, loss, and tragedy:

In particular *this* query has always come home to me: May not the claims of tender-mindedness go too far? May not the notion of a world already saved *in toto* anyhow, be too saccharine to stand? May not religious optimism be too idyllic? Must *all* be saved? Is *no* price to be paid in the work of salvation? Is the last word sweet? Is all 'yes,

yes' in the universe? Doesn't the fact of 'no' stand at the very core of life? Doesn't the very 'seriousness' that we attribute to life mean that ineluctable noes and losses form a part of it, that there are genuine sacrifices somewhere, and that something permanently drastic and bitter always remains at the bottom of its cup?

I cannot speak officially as a pragmatist here; all I can say is that my own pragmatism offers no objection to my taking sides with this more moralistic view, and giving up the claim of total reconciliation. [...] It is then perfectly possible to accept sincerely a drastic kind of a universe from which the element of 'seriousness' is not to be expelled. Whoso does so is, it seems to me, a genuine pragmatist.

James 1975–88 [1907], 141–2

It is this very same moral seriousness that I find essential to emphasize in the contemporary discourse on evil. There is a sense in which our moral life with other human beings in a world full of suffering is tragic: given our finitude, we will never be able to fully overcome evil and suffering, yet we must constantly try. James's pragmatism is not only generally relevant as a critical middle path solution to several controversies in contemporary philosophy of religion, but also a promising move toward the kind of antitheodicism I think we vitally need in any serious moral philosophy. It may also keep our eyes open to the reality of the tragic dimension of human life. Yet, even the notion of tragedy might lead us astray here in something like a theodacist manner. Tragedies, though not themselves theodicies, are meaningful and "deep" in a sense in which human real-world evils and sufferings such as the Holocaust often are not. It is presumably better to speak about Jamesian *melancholy*—about the sick soul's fundamentally melancholic way of approaching ethics, and the world in general.

Moreover, it must be kept in mind that James's antitheodicy (and the understanding of the problem of evil as a "frame") emerges in the context of developing pragmatism in general as a *philosophy*—not only as an ethical approach but as a philosophical orientation in general. In this context, as is well known, James offers pragmatism as a critical middle ground between "tough-minded" and "tender-minded" philosophies. Antitheodicy and melancholy are, thus, conditions for the adequacy of (pragmatist) philosophizing as such.

#### 4. Rortyan ironism and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

Having briefly defended a resolutely antitheodist reading of James and an antitheodist way of developing pragmatism generally—as a philosophical contribution to the discourse on evil, but also more comprehensively as a contribution to the examination of the relations between ethics and metaphysics—we should consider the way in which this antitheodism is both rooted in Kantian antitheodism and threatened by a certain kind of problematization of the notions of truth and reality that James’s own pragmatism takes some crucial steps toward. In this context, we will have to expand our horizon from James and Kant to Rorty’s neopragmatism and especially to Rorty’s treatment of George Orwell.

According to Rorty, famously, *cruelty* is the worst thing we do. This is, one might suggest, another pragmatist version of the Jamesian principle according to which we should always listen to the “cries of the wounded”. There is a kind of *holism* involved in Rorty’s position, just like in James’s: “don’t be cruel” could be regarded as a meta-principle governing all other moral principles (and, to put it in a Kantian way, governing the choice of all moral principles), yet itself (like all more specific principles, and unlike the Kantian meta-principle, the categorical imperative) fallible and revisable, even though it may be difficult or even impossible to imagine how exactly it could fail—just like it is impossible to imagine, in the context of Quinean holism, what it would really be like to falsify a logical or mathematical principle.<sup>8</sup> There are, *pace* Kant, no *unconditional* ideals or principles, either for James or for Rorty, while both pragmatist philosophers do operate with broader and more inclusive (as well as narrower and less inclusive) moral views and principles. Whereas for James the broadest imaginable principle seems to be the requirement to realize the largest possible universe of good while carefully listening to the cries of the wounded, for Rorty an analogous role is played by the liberal principle of avoiding cruelty and realizing individual freedom as fully as possible. All ethical requirements, including these, are contingent and in principle fallible, as everything is contained in a holistic, revisable totality of our on-going ethical thought and conversation. (Analogously, we may say, the transcendental is contained in the empirical, and vice versa.)

In his essay on Orwell, Rorty—whose “protest” against mainstream analytic philosophy is, we may say, much stronger than most other pragma-

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<sup>8</sup> According to Quine’s (1953) famous holism, logical and mathematical beliefs (or sentences) are in principle on a par with empirical scientific beliefs (or sentences).



tists'—rejects the realistic reading of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, according to which the book defends an objective notion of truth in the context of a penetrating moral critique of the horrible and humiliating way in which Winston is made to believe that two plus two equals five.<sup>9</sup> Consistently with his well-known position (if it can be regarded as a “position” at all), Rorty (1989, 173) denies that “there are any plain moral facts out there in the world, [...] any truths independent of language, [or] any neutral ground on which to stand and argue that either torture or kindness are preferable to the other”. Orwell’s significance lies in a novel re-description of what is possible: he convinced us that “nothing in the nature of truth, or man, or history” will block the conceivable scenario that “the same developments which had made human equality technically possible might make endless slavery possible” (ibid., 175). Hence, O’Brien, the torturer and “Party intellectual”, is Orwell’s key invention, and he, crucially, offers *no answer* to O’Brien’s position: “He does not view O’Brien as crazy, misguided, seduced by a mistaken theory, or blind to the moral facts. He simply views him as *dangerous* and as *possible*” (ibid., 176).

The key idea here, according to Rorty, is that truth as such does not matter: “[...] what matters is your ability to talk to other people about what seems to you true, not what is in fact true” (ibid.).<sup>10</sup> Famously, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Winston’s self is in a way destroyed as he is made to believe that two plus two equals five and to utter “Do it to Julia!” when faced with his worst fear, the rats. Rorty points out that this is something he “could not utter sincerely and still be able to put himself back together” (ibid., 179).

The notion of *sincerity* is central here, as it leads us to the way in which Kant critically discusses theodicies in his 1791 essay, “Über das Misslingen aller philosophischen Versuche in der Theodicee” (“On the Miscarriage of all Philosophical Trials in Theodicy”), a largely neglected short piece that usually does not get the kind of attention that Kant’s more famous doctrine of “radical evil” does (not to speak of the main works of his critical philosophy).<sup>11</sup> I believe we should follow Kant in rejecting theodicies not

<sup>9</sup> For the realistic reading, also directed against Rorty’s pragmatism, cf. e. g., van Inwagen 1993, 69; Mounce 1997, 211–8.

<sup>10</sup> This is followed by the well-known Rortyan one-liner, “If we take care of freedom, truth can take care of itself”.

<sup>11</sup> The essay was first published in *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, September 1791, 194–225; cf. Kant 1983b [1791]. For an English translation, cf. Immanuel Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. and ed. Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 20–37 (with the translator’s introduction at 21–3). In referencing,

only for intellectual but also for ethical (and, therefore, religious) reasons; indeed, James (as I have interpreted him above) is, in this sense, a Kantian. As Richard Bernstein (2002, 3–4) points out in his introduction to what is one of the most important contributions to the problem of evil in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Kant’s rejection of theodicies is a crucial part of his critical philosophy: insofar as theodicies aim at theoretical knowledge about God, they are not merely contingent failures but, much more strongly, impossible and *must* fail, given the limitations of human reason; on the other hand, it is precisely by limiting the sphere of knowledge that Kant, famously, makes room for faith. Kant, therefore, is “the modern philosopher who initiates the inquiry into evil without explicit recourse to philosophical theodicy” and hence also leads the way in our attempt to rethink the meaning of evil and responsibility “after Auschwitz” (ibid., 4).<sup>12</sup> Kant writes about evil in a conceptual world entirely different from the one occupied by his most important predecessors, such as Leibniz. This Kantian conceptual world is, if my argument in the earlier sections of this paper is on the right track, shared by James. We may say that Kant’s antitheodicism was transformed into a pragmatist antitheodicism by James.<sup>13</sup>

The details of Kant’s analysis of the failures of theodicies need not concern us here. As I want to focus on the issue of truth, I must emphasize the way in which Kant invokes the Book of Job as an example of the only “honest” way of formulating a theodicy—which, for him, actually seems to be an antitheodicy. Job’s key virtue, according to Kant, is his *sincerity* (*Aufrichtigkeit*), which establishes “the preeminence of the honest man over the religious flatterer in the divine verdict” (Kant 1983 b [1791], 8:267):

Job speaks as he thinks, and with the courage with which he, as well as every human being in his position, can well afford; his friends, on the contrary, speak as if they were being secretly listened to by the mighty one, over whose cause they are passing judgment, and as if gaining his favor through their judgment were closer to their heart than the truth. Their malice in pretending to assert things into

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even though I am citing the English translation, the standard *Akademie-Ausgabe* numbering will be used. For secondary literature focusing on the theodicy essay, cf. e. g., Brachtendorff 2002; Galbraith 2006.

<sup>12</sup> For Bernstein’s insightful reading of Kant’s theory of radical evil, cf. Bernstein 2002, chapter 1.

<sup>13</sup> The reason I am making a short excursus to Kant’s antitheodicism in this section is that we need to examine the Kantian notion of sincerity in order to critically evaluate the Rortyan neopragmatist developments regarding truth and objectivity. For the significance of Kant for the project of antitheodicism, see the much more comprehensive discussion in Kivistö and Pihlström 2016.

which they yet must admit they have no insight, and in simulating a conviction which they in fact do not have, contrasts with Job's frankness [...].  
Ibid., 8:265–6.

For Kant, the leading feature in Job's virtuous character is not, then, his patience in suffering (as many traditional, particularly Christian, interpreters of the Book of Job might suggest), but his inner sincerity, integrity, and honesty. Indeed, Job protests against his suffering in the poetic dialogues of the book; he does not simply endure his fate or quietly suffer, but complains and insists on the injustice of his adversities. Thus, Job's honesty of heart, rather than his alleged patience, is his greatest virtue.

Toward the end of the essay, Kant discusses the moral evil of insincerity—of our tendency “to distort even inner declarations before [our] own conscience”—as “*in itself evil* even if it harms no one” (ibid., 8:270). Thus, he seems to be saying in so many words that speculative, rationalizing theodicies—the kind of theodicies manifested by Job's friends—are themselves exemplifications of evil. They are also evil in a very specific sense: they do not acknowledge the Kantian—and more generally Enlightenment—ideal of free, autonomous, and responsible thinking based on the idea of inner truthfulness (which is something that we should see pragmatist philosophers like James and Rorty highly appreciating as well). They are therefore revolts (not primarily against God but) against humanity itself, conceived in a Kantian way. We might even say that the insincerity of theodocist thinking does not recognize the essential human capacity for freedom and responsibility, for the kind of autonomous thinking that is the very foundation of morality. It is not implausible, it seems to me, to suggest that James could have sympathized with, or even implicitly shared, this Kantian line of thought in his criticism of theodicies analyzed above. For James, too, there is something ethically, fundamentally insincere in theodicies. Theodicies, as we saw through some illustrative quotations from *Pragmatism*, do not live up to the ideal of knowing the truth instead of living in shades. Moreover, reflecting on what goes wrong in *our own* tendencies to succumb to the temptations of theodicy (as Bernstein calls them in his discussion of Levinas) is a prime example of critical yet pragmatic reflexivity at work.

A fundamental distinction between truth and falsity is, however, necessary for the concepts of sincerity and truthfulness (Kantian *Aufrichtigkeit*), and given the role these concepts play in Kantian antitheodicism, such a distinction is necessary for the antitheodocist project generally as well, also in its Jamesian pragmatist reincarnation. Now, insofar as Rorty's pragma-

tism carries Jamesian pragmatism into a certain kind of extreme, one is left wondering whether there is any way to stop on the slippery slope arguably leading from James to Rorty (and eventually bringing in, with horror, Orwell's O'Brien). Reality, shocking as it often is, must still be contrasted with something like unreality, while truth and truthfulness must be contrasted not only with falsity but also with lying and self-deception, and possibly other kinds of loss of sincerity and truthfulness that may follow from the collapse of the truth vs. falsity distinction itself. What we find here is *the problem of realism in its existential dimensions*. This is, arguably, the core pragmatic meaning of the problem of realism—or even, echoing the reading of *Pragmatism* presented above, an approach to the problem of realism framed by the problem of evil.

Insofar as the distinction between truth and falsity collapses, as it does in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the very project of antitheodicy, which (I believe we may argue) depends on the Kantian notion of *Aufrichtigkeit* (sincerity),<sup>14</sup> becomes threatened. Truthfulness or sincerity itself collapses here. Hence, this is another special message and problem of Orwell, an implicit warning of his great novel: there is no theodicy available even in this negative sense, no happy end or moral harmony available, *even by going through antitheodicism*. Taking evil and suffering seriously entails acknowledging that we constantly run the risk of losing whatever truthfulness we might be capable of possessing, and of thereby losing the sincere attitude to evil and suffering that antitheodacists like Kant and James have found crucially important for an adequately (or even minimally) ethical attitude to suffering. Thus, the Orwellian challenge (or warning) lies right here: is there, or can there be, or can we at least imagine, *such evil that makes antitheodicy itself impossible* by destroying the very possibility of Kantian *Aufrichtigkeit* (by destroying the truth vs. falsity distinction that is necessary for truthfulness or sincerity)? This *fragility of antitheodicy*, the fragility of sincerity necessary for antitheodicy, is a dimension of the more general fragility of the moral point of view; we can consider it a *meta-antitheodicy*. By destroying Winston's capacity for sincerely uttering something and still being able to "put himself back together", O'Brien not only engages in evil that lies (almost) beyond description and imagination, but also leads us to imagine the possibility of evil that renders (Kantian) antitheodicy itself impossible. This will then collapse the Jamesian antitheodacist approach

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<sup>14</sup> This is argued in some detail in Kivistö and Pihlström 2016, chapter 5. In this context, I cannot develop this argument at any more length, as important as it is for our overall assessment of the prospects of pragmatist-cum-Kantian antitheodicism.

as well, given that it starts from a kind of pragmatic softening of the notion of objective truth culminating in the “truth happens to an idea” view characteristic of James’s ethically grounded metaphysics.

## 5. Conclusion

Let me try to offer some ways of pulling the threads together on the basis of our discussions of Kant, James, and Rorty. These concluding reflections will remain inconclusive, but the job of the pragmatist-cum-Kantian antitheodist will in any event continue.

It is important to realize that while James in my reading only resisted certain metaphysically realistic forms of metaphysics, especially Hegelian monistic absolute idealism (and corresponding metaphysical realisms), without thereby abandoning metaphysics altogether (cf. Pihlström 2009), Rorty’s reading of Orwell is deeply based on his rejection of *all* forms of metaphysics. In his view, Orwell tells us that “whether our future rulers are more like O’Brien or more like J.S. Mill does not depend [...] on deep facts about human nature” or on any “large necessary truths about human nature and its relation to truth and justice” but on “a lot of small contingent facts” (Rorty 1989, 187–8). Now, this is hard to deny, at least in a sense; various minor contingent facts have enormous influence on how our world and societies develop. This is also a very important message of Rortyan *ironism* in general: our firmest moral commitments, our “final vocabularies”, are all historically contingent. But the worry is that, if we give up (even pragmatically rearticulated) objective truth entirely, we will end up giving up the very possibility of sincerity, too, and that is something we need for resisting the future of all possible O’Briens’ (paradoxically) theodist newspeak seeking to justify evil, suffering, and torture. It is one thing to accept, reasonably, historical contingency and to reject overblown metaphysics of “deep facts about human nature”; it is quite another matter to give up even a minimal pragmatic sense of objective truth required not only for sincerity but for the very possibility of sincerity (and, hence, for the possibility of insincerity as well, because insincerity is possible only insofar as sincerity is possible, and vice versa). This worry ought to be constantly kept in mind by anyone sympathizing with the Jamesian antitheodist suggestion to apply the notion of pragmatic truth to the acknowledgment of the reality of suffering. Therefore, I have spoken about the problem of realism in its existential meaning.

I am not saying that Rorty (or James) is wrong, or has a mistaken conception of truth (or facts, or history, or anything). What I am saying is that *if* Rorty is right (whatever it means to say this, given the disappearance, in Rorty's neopragmatism, of the distinction between being right and being regarded as being right by one's cultural peers), then we are in a bigger trouble than we may have believed.<sup>15</sup> Jamesian pragmatism seems to take the correct, indeed vital, antitheodist step in refusing to philosophically justify evil and suffering. This step was initially made possible by Kant's antitheodism and critical philosophy more generally. However, insofar as Jamesian pragmatism develops into something like Rorty's neopragmatism, which lets the notion of truth drop out as unimportant, the end result is not only an insightful emphasis on historical contingency (and on the role of literature in showing us fascinating, and dangerous, contingent possibilities) but also the possible fragmentation of sincerity itself, which seems to depend on a relatively robust distinction between truth and falsity. Antitheodicy thus becomes fragmented through that fragmentation.

What this shows is, perhaps, a quasi-Rortyan point: Orwell is more important, and O'Brien more dangerous, than we may have thought. But it also shows that Rorty deprives us of certain linguistic, literary, and philosophical resources that we might see Orwell as having equipped us with. Pragmatism can maintain those resources only by being *critical*—that is, Kantian. Only the critical path is open: this Kantian message should be taken home by all pragmatists, and not only by pragmatists.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> This criticism of Rorty (which is also, implicitly, a criticism of Jamesian pragmatism, though not a proposal to give up that pragmatism but, rather, to carefully rethink its current value, being aware of its potential problems) comes close to James Conant's (2000) highly detailed—and devastating—attack on Rorty's reading of Orwell. See also Rorty 2000.

<sup>16</sup> Versions of this paper were presented at the Nordic Philosophy of Religion Conference in Oslo (June, 2017) and the "Pragmatist Kant" conference in Berlin (July, 2017). I should like to thank the organizers and participants of those events for stimulating discussions and helpful comments. Chris Skowroński's and an anonymous reviewer's detailed comments were particularly valuable. My greatest debt is, of course, to Sari Kivistö, as my views in this paper have been largely developed in collaboration with her (and in our joint book cited above).

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