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ABSTRACT – PLEASE DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION!

JAMESIAN PRAGMATISM, RORTYAN IRONISM, AND KANTIAN ANTITHEODICY

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According to John Dewey's famous words – toward the very end of *Experience and Nature* (1929) – philosophy is 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, perhaps 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. (“Nur die kritische Weg ist noch offen”, Kant wrote when concluding his First Critique.)

In general, the relationship between Kant and pragmatism can and should be critically considered through particular instances. In this essay, I will examine the ways in which Kantian issues are ineliminably present in the distinctive way in which James – at the very core of his development of the pragmatic method – takes seriously the reality of evil and suffering, developing a thoroughly antitheodictist philosophical outlook. However, I also want to link this theme with another development in more recent neopragmatism that might be taken to be relatively far from any Kantian issues, namely, Richard Rorty's ironism, in this case as it emerges from his reading of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-*

Four. I am certainly not claiming Rorty to be a critical philosopher in anything like the 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. I will show how a certain worry regarding what might be considered a potential slippery slope from James to Rorty emerges from the Kantian background of pragmatist antitheodicism.

Accordingly, I want to draw attention to a very important special way in which ethics is prior to, or contextualizes, any humanly possible metaphysical 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. However, having first briefly defended a resolutely antitheodict reading of James and an antitheodict 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 – I will toward the end of the paper consider the way in which this antitheodicism is, first, rooted in *Kantian* antitheodicism, and secondly, 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 *Pragmatism* to Rorty's neopragmatism and especially to Rorty's treatment of Orwell.

I am not arguing that Rorty (or James) is wrong, or has a mistaken conception of truth (or facts, or history, or anything). What I will be suggesting in the paper 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. Jamesian pragmatism seems to take the correct, indeed vital, antitheodict step in refusing to philosophically justify evil and suffering. This step was initially made possible by Kant's antitheodicism.

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.