JAMESIAN PRAGMATISM, RORTYAN IRONISM, AND KANTIAN ANTITHEODICY

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Introduction: pragmatism and critical philosophy

According to John Dewey’s famous words – toward the very 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*, 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. (“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 examine the ways in which Kantian issues are ineliminably 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 *antitheodicist* philosophical outlook. However, I also want to connect 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. Finally, 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.

I am in this draft helping myself to, and thus summarizing, some of my previous work on these topics. We will begin from James’s pragmatic method and antitheodicism and then move on to Rorty and Orwell – and, at the same time, to the Kantian background of the pragmatist inquiry into suffering.

**James, the pragmatic method, and the reality of evil**

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 both influenced by and in contrast with the Kantian (somewhat proto-pragmatist) idea of the “primacy of practical reason” in relation to theoretical reason. 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. Ethics is also the realm of the practical (in a Kantian sense) to which the metaphysical needs to be “translated” in order for metaphysical issues to be truly humanly meaningful. In this sense, pragmatism is deeply about a kind of ethical translation of the metaphysical.

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”. 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. (I will not be able to dwell on these familiar Jamesian arguments in any detail here.)

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 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.

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. 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, 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, bravely 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 the eighth chapter of his last book, Some Problems of Philosophy, he offered several arguments against

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2 Notebook sheets from 1870, quoted in Ralph Barton Perry, The Thought and Character of William James: Briefer Version (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1964 [first published 1948]), pp. 120-121. Here James saw that fighting evil—holding that “though evil slay me, she can’t subdue me, or make me worship her” (p. 121)—required 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 p. 388.)

3 Perry, Thought and Character, p. 122.
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? (SPP 138)⁴

That pragmatists, unlike monists, must take evil and imperfection seriously, refusing to “be deaf to the cries of the wounded”, 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 ordinary extremely unhappy 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” (P 20), that what such desperate human beings experience “is Reality”: “But while Professors Royce and Bradley and a whole host of guileless thoroughfed thinkers 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” (P 21).

Thus, idealist, optimistic philosophers “are dealing in shades, while those who live and feel know truth” (P 22); a Leibnizian theodicy postulating a harmony of the universe is “a cold literary exercise, whose cheerful substance even hell-fire does not warm” (P 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” (P 17). James here even quotes at length from Leibniz’s *Théodicée* (P 19-20), concluding that “no realistic image of the experience of a damned soul had ever approached the portals of his mind” (P 20). In order to overcome the ethically unbearable 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. P 23). It is from this antitheodicist challenge that *Pragmatism*, like pragmatism, unfolds.

James’s pragmatist and pluralist position can be summarized as an outcome of a transcendentental argument in a quasi-Kantian fashion. The reality of evil 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 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 “corrupted,” immoral idea that an ultimately moral creator “planned” it and is prepared to pay the price in order to secure some greater good.

Furthermore, the metaphysical acceptance of evil and the fight against it constitute a pragmatic criterion of adequacy of 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), but which encourages us to join in a struggle against it, melioristically trying to make our world a better one. The problem of evil is, then, pragmatically resolved in James’s pluralistic pragmatism—and 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 permanent metaphysical and theological insecurity: there is no final solution to the problem of evil, as new experiences of ever more horrendous evils may eventually make it impossible for us to go on actively fighting against evil, as pragmatism urges us to do. Insofar as a pragmatic defense of pragmatism is available, such a defense will have to remain fallibilistic. We may just be unable to react pragmatically to the problem of evil, and for many thinkers this may be a ground for rejecting religious beliefs altogether.

Thus, 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. Positive thinking is possible and meaningful against a melancholic background, against the negativities that a “sick soul” perceives in her/his world. Positive individual contributions, then, have their legitimate role to play, empirically speaking, provided that a pessimistic position is accepted transcendentally. Only the sick soul sees, profoundly enough, that everything is not all right, that the world is, for many of us (at least “the wounded”), in an important sense a wrong or even evil place, and that therefore pragmatic, even positive, thinking and “difference-making” is required. Otherwise, no “positive” approach can be serious enough.

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. (P 141-142.)

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, melioristically, 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 of evil. 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 theodetic 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.

**Rortyan ironism and Nineteen Eighty-Four**

Having briefly defended a resolutely antitheodicist reading of James and an antitheodicist 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 now 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 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. 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 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. Consistently with his well-known position (if it can be regarded as a “position” at all), Rorty 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 redescription 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”. Hence,


8 Ibid., p. 175.
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.”

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”. 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”.

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). I believe we should follow Kant in rejecting theodicies not only for intellectual but also

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9 Ibid., p. 176.
10 Ibid. This is followed by the well-known Rortyan one-liner, “If we take care of freedom, truth can take care of itself.” (Ibid.)
11 Ibid., p. 179.
12 The essay was first published in Berlinische Monatsschrift, September 1791, pp. 194-225; it is available, e.g., in Wilhelm Weischedel (ed.), Immanuel Kant: Werke in zehn Bänden (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1983), vol. 9. For an English translation, see Immanuel Kant, Religion and Rational Theology, trans. and ed. Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 20-37 (with the translator’s introduction on pp. 21-23). In referencing, even though I am citing the English translation, the standard Akademie-Ausgabe numbering will be used. For Kant’s theory of radical evil, see Book I of his Religionsschrift (Religion innerhalb der blossom Vernunft [1794], in Werke in zehn Bänden, vol. 9). I cannot examine the much-discussed theory of radical evil in this paper. For secondary literature focusing on the theodicy essay, see, e.g., Johannes Brachtendorff, “Kants Theodizee-Aufsatz – Die Bedingungen des Gelingens philosophischen Theodizee”, Kant-Studien 93 (2002), 57-83; and Elizabeth C. Galbraith, “Kant and ‘A Theodicy of Protest’”, in Chris L. Firestone and Stephen R. Palmquist (eds.), Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), pp. 179-189. As Galbraith notes (p. 182), it was presumably David Hume who “awoke Kant from his dogmatic slumbers” regarding theodicy – as well as, more famously, the capacities of human reason more generally. The theodicy essay is of course a very late work of Kant’s; in his pre-critical writings, he seems to have favored a basically Leibnizian theodicy.
for ethical (and, therefore, religious) reasons; indeed, James (as I have interpreted him above) is, in this sense, a Kantian. As Richard Bernstein points out in his introduction to what is one of the most important contributions to the problem of evil in the 21st 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”. 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 (and other pragmatists), even though pragmatism more generally is also critical of Kant’s aprioristic approach to philosophy in general. We might say that Kant’s antitheodicism was transformed into a pragmatist antitheodicism by James.

The details of Kant’s analysis of the failures of theodicies need not concern us here. I just want to 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”:

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

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14 Ibid., p. 4. For Bernstein’s insightful reading of Kant’s theory of radical evil, see ibid., chapter 1.
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 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 [...].

For Kant, the leading feature in Job’s virtuous character was 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”. 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 theodiscist 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 indeed 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.

16 Ibid., AA 8:265-266.
17 Ibid., AA 8:270.
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 antitheodicist project generally as well, also in its Jamesian reincarnation. Now, insofar as Rorty’s pragmatism carries Jamesian pragmatism into a certain 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, as we may say, 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 (in a sense) it does in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the very project of antitheodicy, which (I believe we may argue) is based on and depends on the Kantian notion of *Aufrichtigkeit* (sincerity),\(^\text{18}\) becomes threatened. Truthfulness, or *Aufrichtigkeit*, itself collapses here. Hence, this is another very 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 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 antitheodicists 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

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\(^{18}\) This is argued in some detail in Kivistö and Pihlström, *Kantian Antitheodicy*, chapter 5.
distinction that is necessary for truthfulness or sincerity)? This fragility of antitheodicy, the fragility of sincerity necessary for antitheodicy, is a crucial 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 antitheodicist approach 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 that we found characteristic of James’s ethically grounded metaphysics.19

While James (on my reading) only resisted certain metaphysically realistic forms of metaphysics, especially Hegelian monistic absolute idealism (and corresponding metaphysical realisms), without thereby abandoning metaphysics altogether,20 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”.21 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

19 Note that I am not claiming that James would be committed to any explicitly Kantian antitheodicy. His antitheodicism, in my view, is Kantian in the broader sense of arguing that it is a necessary condition for the possibility of a moral point of view that evil and suffering are not explained away or justified. He rejects precisely the kind of rationalizing justification that Job’s “friends” paradigmatically offer. My worry is whether this Kantian approach works in the overall context of Jamesian pragmatism, with its softened notion of truth.


possibility of sincerity, too, and that is something we need for resisting the future of all possible O’Briens’ (paradoxically) theodicist 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).

**Conclusion**

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.22 Jamesian pragmatism seems to take the correct, indeed vital, antitheodicist step in refusing to philosophically justify evil and suffering. This step was initially made possible by Kant’s antitheodicism, rooted in the Book of Job. 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 a quasi-Rortyan point: Orwell is more

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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 have seen Orwell equipping us with. Pragmatism can maintain those resources only by being critical – viz., Kantian. Only the critical path is open.