James's Children?
The Pragmatist Conception of Truth and the Slippery Slope to "Post-Truth"

Together with a group of Finnish colleagues, I have since 1999 been involved in writing and revising a series of philosophy textbooks for high-school students, published by a Finnish publishing house specializing in textbooks and nonfiction. In an introductory volume published in 2005, we included a brief discussion of "the pragmatist theory of truth" in the context of a more general exploration of the concept of truth. As textbooks usually, our books also include plenty of pictures, hopefully keeping their young readers alert. For the truth-theoretical section, we decided to use a photograph of Donald Trump, picturing him with his bestseller, *How to Get Rich* (2004). In those years, Trump was not at all well known in my home country Finland, although he was already at that point a famous celebrity in the United States. I cannot remember who decided to use the picture in the book; I certainly had no idea whatsoever who this guy in the photograph was, and I had never heard of him before. The point of the photograph was obvious: by using it we asked our prospective readers whether the sentences of Trump's books are true if they make their author (or, possibly, their reader) rich and if they in that sense pragmatically "work." Getting rich would then be their concrete "cash value."

1.1 Vulgar Pragmatism?

Little, of course, did we know. I could never have imagined that I would write another book – this book – seriously asking whether there is a slippery slope leading from William James (one of my favorite philosophers) all the way down to Donald Trump, and even beyond, but this is precisely what I am now doing. One might argue that if Trump is a pragmatist, he is certainly a most *vulgar* pragmatist.[1] Susan Haack

---

[1] During Barack Obama's presidency, there was serious scholarly discussion (including a special session at the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy and a thematic issue of the journal

(1995) once called Richard Rorty's pragmatism "vulgar," contrasting it with Peircean pragmatism, in particular (see also Haack 1998), but it should be obvious that there can be no serious comparison between pragmatist intellectuals like Rorty (no matter how controversial their views might be) and truly vulgar "pragmatists" like Trump – many of whose pronouncements are not only false but degrading, insulting, full of hate, and a continuous threat not just to global economy but also to world peace. After the US 2020 Elections, there is reason to hope that the chaos caused by the disgraceful Trump presidency will be over as soon as possible (and that any possible readers of this book in the coming years need not worry about it anymore, though they will then undoubtedly have many new things to worry about), but I do believe that we must seriously consider how exactly pragmatism is related to the kind of attitude to truth and reality that we find him, and his supporters, exemplifying. The worry that there might indeed be something like a slippery slope from James – via Rorty – to Trump is to be taken seriously: Are post-factualists "James's children," and if so, in what sense exactly?[2]

There is no need to describe even in general terms the ways in which Trump and his supporters, like many other populists in many other countries, on the one hand deliberately lie in order to advance their own pursuits, and on the other hand just do not seem to care about the distinction between truth and falsehood at all – or seem to care about it only in the crudest possible "pragmatic" sense of having their own interests served.[3] We all know very well how Trump's disrespect for truth was

---

Contemporary Pragmatism) on "Obama's pragmatism," that is, on how Obama's background at the University of Chicago might have exposed him to pragmatist influences that could have played a role in his thinking about law and politics, among other things. In Trump's era, an analogous talk about his "pragmatism" would be a dark joke, comparable perhaps to Mussolini's well-known admiration of James.

[2] The allusion here, as any historian of pragmatism easily recognizes, is to Murphey's (1968) characterization of the classical Cambridge pragmatists as "Kant's children" – a view that I largely share (see Chapter 3). Note that the reason I am focusing on James and Rorty in this chapter is practical: it is in the work of these two pragmatists that the threat of a "slippery slope" is the most striking. Other pragmatist contributions to debates on the concept of truth, including, say, Peirce's or (in contemporary pragmatism) Robert Brandom's, would not as obviously lead to such problems. On the other hand, I am definitely not committed to the picture of there being two clearly distinguishable pragmatisms, the Peircean realistic one and the more relativist or subjectivist one starting from James's alleged misreading of Peirce (see Mounce 1997); I find the pragmatist tradition much more complicated – and also more unified (cf., e.g., Pihlström 2008a, 2008b, 2015, 2017).

[3] My aim in this chapter or this book is not to analyze in detail whether, or in what sense exactly, Trump's or other populists' disregard for truth is a form of "bullshit" in Harry Frankfurt's (2005) famous terms (see also, for further elaborations of this concept, several essays in Hardcastle and Reisch 2006). From the point of view of vulgar pragmatism, both deliberate lying (which obviously entails caring about the truth) and "bullshitting" (which involves a disrespect and unconcern for

consistently manifested[4] in his actions and public statements as president, including his incredible flow of tweets. In an extremely crude sense of pragmatism, those speech acts openly loathsome of truth and of the commitment to pursue the truth may have been pragmatically "true," as they did bring Trump to his powerful position.[5] They indeed pragmatically "worked" for him – but they certainly do not seem to work from the point of view of those suffering from the political and economic catastrophes of his presidency. In this situation, many people disillusioned by recent political developments talk about "post-factualism" and the "post-truth era," and if there is any individual who can act as a face for this cultural situation, it is presumably Trump (surrounded, of course, by an alarming number of leaders of major countries all over the world who share the willingness to sacrifice truth in the interest of greed and power). The slight re-emergence of the recognition of the value of science, knowledge, and truth due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 might have changed this situation a bit, but I am afraid we just need to wait for a while to see, once again, brutal political attempts to opportunistically use a crisis like the pandemic for selfish and/or narrowly nationalist purposes.

Ironically, on the page next to the one with Trump's picture in our 2005 textbook, we placed a picture of a Soviet citizen reading the newspaper *Pravda* (meaning "truth"). Every statement contained in the pages of that official newspaper of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union had passed the strict censorship of the Soviet authorities. There was just one official truth available: the view the Party held. Our situation today, with the Soviet Union fortunately long gone (along with most – though not all – cruel communist administrations), is quite different: in Trump's era, there

truth, caring only for the impression one makes on one's audience) could be seen as serving (at least short-term) "pragmatic goals" or interests. For insightful recent critical analyses of "post-truth," see McIntyre 2018 and Haack 2019.

[4] Even this is incoherent or a bad joke: one needs the concept of truth to be consistent at anything, including one's disrespect for truth. Moreover, as Haack (2019) argues, the concept of objective truth is needed for dismissals of truth.

[5] Moreover, Trump of course perversely uses the notion of truth, as well as related notions like "fake news," always suggesting that what he says is true and what his opponents say is false. For some illustrative picks from among thousands of possible examples, see www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jul/14/the-death-of-truth-how-we-gave-up-on-facts-and-ended-up-with-trump and https://edition.cnn.com/2018/07/25/politics/donald-trump-vfw-unreality/index.html. On the latter occasion, Trump is reported to have urged his supporters: "Stick with us. Don't believe the crap you see from these people, the fake news. . . . What you're seeing and what you're reading is not what's happening." It is of course a traditional populist strategy to claim that only the populist leader has a privileged access to what is "really" happening, including what the mystified "people" really thinks or hopes. Trump consistently continued his truth-denialism when insisting in November 2020 that he had "won" the presidential election he clearly lost.

seem to be no shared truth (or shared falsity) available at all but just a confusing rhapsody of self-serving tweets. Nonetheless, we might be in an equally serious danger of losing contact with truth and reality.

I will now ask whether the pragmatists are in some ways guilty of this development. The two main figures I will focus on in this chapter are, unsurprisingly, James and Rorty. There is no point in offering any close reading of their well-known views here,[6] but I will explore them in the context of the worries many of us share regarding the truth-degrading populists in our confusing political world today.

1.2 William James on Truth

It needs to be emphasized that, far from leading to radical relativism or political opportunism, James's (as well as Dewey's) pragmatism functions as a link between acknowledging the crucial relevance of the concept of truth, on the one hand, and emphasizing individual diversity and spontaneity, on the other.[7] It is through Jamesian pragmatism that we can bring the notion of truth itself to bear on the analysis of human experiential plurality and unique individuality (see also, e.g., Cormier 2001; Capps 2019). This requires, however, that we not only maintain that there is a plurality of truths, or that truths may be relativized to a plurality of practice-laden human perspectives of inquiry, but seriously try to understand and reconceptualize the concept of truth itself from a Jamesian pragmatist perspective. *Pragmatic pluralism* in a Jamesian style insists that our individual perspectives and commitments to truth-seeking matter to what truth is or means for us. This is clear in James: truth is always *truth-for-someone-in-particular*, an individual person, a human being actively pursuing truth both generally and in, for

---

[6] Indeed, neither this chapter nor this book as a whole aims at any kind of thoroughgoing exposition of the pragmatist conception of truth or its historical development. See, for example, Misak 2013 for a comprehensive historical account of pragmatism, including its conceptions of truth and inquiry in particular. Rather, I will explore issues related to pragmatism and truth in order to be able to investigate a number of philosophical topics that motivate our paying due attention to pragmatism and truth, that is, individuality, sincerity, meliorism, religious diversity, as well as religious and "existential" life. One of the best recent examinations of the pragmatist conception of truth is Capps 2019.

[7] The main sources for James's views here are, of course, *Pragmatism* and *The Meaning of Truth* (James 1975 [1907] and 1978 [1909], respectively). My take on James does not directly follow any single commentator's interpretation, but I am generally profoundly indebted to Hilary and Ruth Anna Putnam's readings of James (as well as the other classical pragmatists) on truth (see Putnam and Putnam 2017, especially chapters 8–9, 11–12).

example, their existential, ethical, or religious lives; it is not abstract or antecedently existing *truth-in-general*.[8]

The pragmatist theory of truth is far from uncontroversial, as anyone who ever read undergraduate textbooks on truth knows. We may, however, approach it in terms of the distinction between *truth* and *truthfulness* (very interestingly analyzed in Williams 2002). These are clearly different notions, but they are also connected. One may pursue truthfulness without thereby having true beliefs; one can be truthful also when one is mistaken, insofar as one sincerely seeks to believe truths and avoid falsehoods and also honestly seeks to tell the truth whenever possible (and whenever the truth to be told is relevant). Clearly, whatever one's theory of truth is, one should in some way distinguish between truth and truthfulness.

On the other hand, certain accounts of truth, such as the pragmatist one, may be more promising than some others in articulating the intimate relation between those two concepts. We might say that this distinction is "softened" in James's pragmatist conception of truth, which rather explicitly turns truth into a *value* to be pursued in individual and social life rather than mind- and value-independent objective propositional truth corresponding to facts that are just "there" no matter how we as truth-seekers (or truth-tellers) engage with or relate ourselves to them. In pragmatism, the concept of truth is not primarily conceptualized or investigated as an objective and static relation obtaining between our thoughts or statements, on the one hand, and something external to those thoughts and statements, on the other – namely, a relation obtaining independently of us and our practices of inquiry – but as a processual and practice-laden engagement with the world we live in, inherently connected with valuational, especially ethical, concepts such as sincerity and truthfulness that are used to evaluate our processes of inquiry. Truth in the Jamesian sense is, hence, richer and broader than mere propositional truth precisely because it incorporates truthfulness – a normative *commitment* to truth inherent in our practices of seeking and telling the truth – as a dimension of the notion of truth itself.

Truth, then, is a normative property of our practices of thought and inquiry in a wide sense and in this way something that our practice-embedded life

---

[8] This, clearly, does not mean that truth would be *idiosyncratic* to an individual (thanks are due to an anonymous reviewer for the recommendation to emphasize this important point). Rather, James makes clear throughout his discussions of truth (e.g., James 1975 [1907], 1978 [1909]) that while human beings create "ideas" and give them meaning – that is, truth does not "antecedently" exist in a divine or Hegelian "absolute" mind – when we do "make truths" in this sense, they also have an objective, or at least intersubjective, claim to recognition. We could rephrase this by saying that we place our claims to truth into a normative practice of pursuing the truth. There is no truth, and no truth-claims, in the absence of a *practice* expecting sincere commitment from its practitioners.

with the concepts we naturally and habitually employ involves, not merely a formal semantic property of statements or a metaphysical property of propositions that could be detached from that context of life practices. Its normativity is, moreover, both epistemic and ethical.[9] James's pragmatic conception of truth hence crucially accommodates truthfulness, as truth belongs to the ethical field of interhuman relations of mutual dependence and acknowledgment. Truth is an element of this "being with others" (to borrow a Heideggerian term out of context), while being inherently linked with our deeply individual ways of living our own unique lives, too. It also incorporates an acknowledgment of at least potential if not always actual inner truth (and truthfulness) of others' experiences.[10]

Jamesian pragmatic truth is, furthermore, inextricably entangled with our individual existential concerns; therefore, it is indistinguishable from James's general *individualism* (see, e.g., Pawelski 2007). Individuals' responses to their existential life-challenges vary considerably, and any ethically, politically, existentially, or religiously relevant conception of truth must in some sense appreciate this temperamental[11] variability – without succumbing to the temptations of uncritical subjectivism or relativism, though. Now, if we for ethical reasons do wish to take seriously the Jamesian approach to individual diversity (see also Chapter 2), as I think we should, then we must pay attention to what he says about the "plasticity" of truth and about truth being a "species of good" in Lecture II of *Pragmatism*:

> Truth independent; truth that we *find* merely; truth no longer malleable to human need; truth incorrigible, in a word; such truth exists indeed super-abundantly – or is supposed to exist by rationalistically minded thinkers; but then it means only the dead heart of the living tree, and its being there means

---

[9] This understanding of both truth(fulness) and normativity generally as both theoretical (epistemic and/or metaphysical) and practical (ethical) will be a guiding thought to be developed throughout this volume in slightly different contexts. See Chapter 5 for the concept of normativity specifically.

[10] This particularly concerns others' experiences of suffering (cf. Kivistö and Pihlström 2016, chapter 5; Pihlström 2008a, 2020a). Only irresponsible metaphysical speculation about, say, "theodicies" leads us to postulate a false transcendent meaningfulness for such experiences. My "antitheodicist" reading of James is very closely connected with my understanding of his conception of truth and truthfulness, but this is a large topic that must be set aside in this chapter (see, however, Chapter 6).

[11] James's (1975 [1907], Lecture I) account of individual philosophical temperaments should, I think, be understood in close entanglement with his notion of truth. There is no way of completely disentangling the temperamental aspects from our practices of pursuing the truth. Yet, while truth for James is to a certain degree relative to individual (temperament-laden) goals and interests, such goals and interests must be set by an autonomous subject, rather than externally forced upon us; hence, the notions of sincerity and freedom will also turn out to be crucial for a Jamesian investigation of the pursuit of truth (see also Chapter 4). I am grateful to Alexander Klein for a brief but important exchange on this point.

only that truth also has its paleontology and its "prescription," and may grow stiff with years of veteran service and petrified in men's regard by sheer antiquity. But how plastic even the oldest truths nevertheless really are has been vividly shown in our day by the transformation of logical and math-ematical ideas, a transformation which seems even to be invading physics. (James 1975 [1907], 37)

. . . truth is *one species of good*, and not, as is usually supposed, a category distinct from good, and co-ordinate with it. *The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite, assignable reasons.* (James 1975 [1907], 42)

Another famous Jamesian formulation (in Lecture VI) relevant here is this:

Pragmatism, on the other hand [in contrast to other accounts of truth], asks its usual question. "Grant an idea or belief to be true," it says, "what concrete difference will its being true make in anyone's actual life? How will the truth be realized? What experiences will be different from those which would obtain if the belief were false? What, in short, is the truth's cash-value in experiential terms?"

The moment pragmatism asks this question, it sees the answer: *true ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify; false ideas are those that we cannot.* That is the practical difference it makes to us to have true ideas; that, therefore, is the meaning of truth, for it is all that truth is known-as. This thesis is what I have to defend. The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself, its veri-*fication*. Its validity is the process of its valid-*ation*. (James 1975 [1907], 97)

Note how easy it is to interpret such ideas in the "vulgar" way. One might think that truth "happens" to an idea when that idea leads to useful or satisfactory results in one's life – such as one's becoming rich and powerful, for instance. However, it should be obvious that, no matter how careless James's formulations were, such crude pragmatism was never even close to his own view. He is unclear and controversial, to be sure, but he is certainly not recommending that we just replace truth with our subjective wishful thinking or political and economic pursuit of power.[12]

---

[12] Note also that James is here speaking about the potential consequences of our ideas or beliefs (actually) "being true," not about the consequences of their being believed to be true. The passage just quoted is therefore one of the more realistic formulations of the pragmatic conception of truth by James, even presupposing his commitment to something like (a minimalist version of) the correspondence theory truth. Generally, however, James is presumably less clear than Peirce in formulating his pragmatism as a principle concerning not just the consequences of the truth of our ideas but of those ideas being believed or entertained by us (cf. Pihlström 2015). But he is certainly

Several outstanding James scholars have already shown how nuanced James's view on truth is – also in the political sphere – so I only need to cite a few readings to emphasize this point. For example, in his discussion of James's theory of truth, which I find highly pertinent to these concerns, Jose Medina (2010) defends Jamesian pluralism in a politically relevant manner (cf. also Pihlström 2013, chapter 4). In ethics and politics, Medina tells us, we can never reach an "absolute" conception of what is universally best for human beings and societies, but different suggestions, opinions, experiential perspectives, and interests must have their say – that is, must be acknowledged as (at least potentially) truthful. A conception of political solidarity can, then, be grounded in Jamesian ideas about truth. James maintains not only pluralism and individualism but also (on Medina's reading) a *relational* conception of individual identities: nothing exists in a self-sustained manner but everything that there is finds its place in reality only as part(s) of networks of mutual interdependence. Such a metaphysics of diversity and relationality needs, furthermore, something like the concept of acknowledgment: we must sincerely (which is not to say uncritically) respond to even those perspectives on life that we find alien or even repulsive, though this is much more easily said than done. While James's pluralism and relationalism are, according to Medina, elements of a metaphysical view according to which everything must be understood in relation to other things, in terms of ubiquitous relationality, they are irreducibly ethical and political ideas, applying even to the reality of the (epistemic, ethical, political) self.

It is precisely in this context that we should, according to Medina, appreciate James's theory of truth. True beliefs are, as James says, "good to live by"; when maintaining a belief, any belief, we are responsible for its consequences in our lives, and in those of others. The pragmatic "theory" of truth – which should not be called a "theory," in order to avoid seeing it as a rival to, say, the "correspondence theory" – invokes not only, say, the satisfactory or agreeable consequences of true beliefs but also ethical ideas such as solidarity and justice in terms of which the functionality of our beliefs ought to be measured. Therefore, we may say that truth (in the pragmatic sense), truthfulness, and the acknowledgment of otherness are conceptually tied to each other in James's pragmatism. One cannot genuinely pursue truth in the Jamesian sense unless one also acknowledges, or at least truthfully seeks to acknowledge, others' perspectives on reality –

not as careless as he has standardly been taken to be among his critics. Even James's informal pronouncements on truth are usually carefully considered.

indeed, the uniqueness of such individual perspectives, and their poten-
tially opening up genuine novelties. If we take this articulation of Jamesian
pragmatic truth seriously, then we can immediately see how vulgar
a "Trumpist" version of pragmatism is. Trump's views may in some
sense be "satisfactory" or "agreeable" for him and his opportunistic (or
cynical and disillusioned) supporters, but they can hardly be said to truly
acknowledge other perspectives on the world, let alone to honor any
commitment to pursuing the truth independently of personal or political
benefit. The Jamesian pragmatist may also say that there is no *sincerity* in
vulgar pragmatism at all – and hence no truth, either.

   The pragmatist account of truth is insightfully connected with James's
moral philosophy by Sarin Marchetti (2015, 33), one of the most perceptive
recent commentators of James. It is easy for us to agree with his general
claim that pragmatism as a philosophical method also incorporates
a fundamentally ethical intention based on a conception of ethics as self-
transformation and self-cultivation.[13] He maintains that James is not pri-
marily advancing a theory of truth but "using pragmatism to unstiffen our
views on truth and put them to work" (Marchetti 2015, 169). We are invited
to rethink the meaning of truth "in our lives," and James is therefore offering
us a "genealogical phenomenology" of this concept (Marchetti 2015, 177).[14]
Truth is something that processually functions in our ethical world-
engagement, not a static relation between our beliefs (which are not static,
either, but dynamically developing habits of action) and an allegedly inde-
pendent external world. The concept of truth is also interestingly entangled
with James's important but often neglected metaphor of *blindness*: "We are

---

[13] In addition to being an application of the "pragmatic method," we might say that in a sense the
   Jamesian approach to *metaphysics* is an application of the pragmatist conception of truth. On James
   (1975 [1907]) as engaging in a pragmatically shaped metaphysical inquiry (rather than rejecting
   metaphysics altogether), see, for example, Pihlström 2009, 2013. Our ideas expressed or expressible
   by means of concepts like substance, God, freedom, and so on – our metaphysical views and
   commitments – are pragmatically "true" or "false" insofar as they put us in touch with ethically
   significant experiences. The truth of a metaphysical view can be assessed by means of the pragmatic
   criterion of its ability to open us to what James (1979 [1897]) called "the cries of the wounded" (see
   also Kivistö and Pihlström 2016, chapter 5). It is right here, in a pragmatist ethically structured
   metaphysics, that truth, in James's memorable phrase, "happens to an idea."
[14] Pragmatism, James maintains (according to Marchetti), "transforms the absolutely empty notion of
   correspondence in a rich and active relationship between our truths and the way in which we can
   entertain them and thus engage the world" (Marchetti 2015, 184). For a non-empty correspondence
   theory, see, however, for example, Niiniluoto (1999). Certainly the pragmatist must *not* ridicule the
   correspondence theory of truth by claiming, for example, that it requires a one-to-one correspond-
   ence between our propositions or beliefs and facts obtaining in the world (as if those facts had
   already been pre-organized into a propositional structure); there are much more sophisticated
   versions of the correspondence theory available, including Niiniluoto's.

morally blind when we fail to see how the sources of truth are nested in the very meaning those experiences have for those who have them . . ." – and the most serious blindness is our losing touch "with the meaning of our own truths and experiences." (Marchetti 2015, 202, 205)[15]

In a more recent paper, Marchetti persuasively argues that James, who is not conventionally read as a political thinker, stands in an original manner in the tradition of liberal thought, largely due to his conception of the self "as contingent and mobile" (Marchetti 2019, 193). According to James, we live in a world of risk and uncertainty, and understanding human freedom as an ethically and politically (and not merely metaphysically) loaded concept is a practical necessity in this situation. Marchetti goes as far as to claim that James's "entire philosophical vision" can be regarded as "a positive response to chance, possibility, and probability" (Marchetti 2019, 197). I find this suggestion compatible with my own proposal to view James's pragmatism as framed by an "antitheodicist" attitude to evil and suffering as something contingent (i.e., avoidable) to be fought against, never to be just accepted as a necessary element of a deterministic universe (see Chapter 6). I find it extremely important for our understanding of James's pragmatism to insist, with Marchetti, that the Jamesian conception of "freedom as self-transformation" offers us no metaphysical grounding for morality but on the contrary reminds us that our moral reactions to the world we live in contribute to (re)shaping our reality into whatever structure it may take (Marchetti 2019, 200).[16] Therefore, the concept of truth, as pragmatically construed, is also inseparably linked with our duty to view the world taking seriously the contingencies of evil and suffering we find around us (cf. also Pihlström 2020a, as well as Chapter 6).

Marchetti's remarks on James can also be read as a warning against tendencies to overlook the thoroughly ethical character of the concept of *freedom*. From the perspective of (Marchetti's) James, it makes little sense to try to settle the metaphysics of freedom independently of the – often painful – ethical employment of freedom (see also Chapter 4). The Jamesian pragmatist pursuit of truth is *never* a pursuit of pure metaphysical truth in abstraction of ethical concerns about how to live in this world.[17]

---

[15] As Marchetti notes, James sees the "possibility of overcoming" such blindness as a "transformation of the self" (Marchetti 2015, 206). The relevant reference here is James 1962 [1899]; see also Pihlström 2019b, 2020a, as well as Chapter 2.

[16] This notion of freedom also challenges some of the received ideas of liberal thought and thus helps to rethink the very tradition of liberalism, as Marchetti (2019) suggests.

[17] Incidentally, we may note that (Jamesian) pragmatism is interestingly analogous to Wittgensteinian philosophy in this respect. From both standpoints, it would be extremely problematic or even absurd to suggest that our practices of moral responsibility and deliberation would be dependent on

   The scholars I have briefly cited (Medina and Marchetti) are of course only individual voices among many. They nevertheless help us appreciate a certain approach to Jamesian truth that is inherently ethical. I have tried to capture this basic idea by using the concept of truthfulness, but that is obviously only one possible concept that can be employed here. Regarding the active union of truth and ethics, I find myself mostly in agreement with Medina's and Marchetti's readings (without going into any more detail here).[18] However, we will now have to move on to the worry that James's pragmatist account of truth might be easily developed into a direction that turns problematic, especially in our "post-truth" era.

1.3   Rorty (on Orwell) on Truth

Rorty is famous for advocating a version of pragmatism that endorses *ethnocentrism* ("we have to start from where we are," acknowledging our historical contingency) and *antirepresentationalism* (which rejects any representational relations between language and reality, claiming that the traditional problems of realism and skepticism, among others, only arise in the context of representationalism). Here we cannot deal with the complex development of Rorty's pragmatism, or even its approach to truth, since his early work in the 1960s and 1970s to his late proposals to replace systematic philosophy by "cultural politics".[19] I will merely focus on a specific strand of Rorty's pragmatism, relevant to the worries about

---

[18] See Pihlström 2008a, 2013 for my more comprehensive discussions of James's pragmatism and its conception of truth especially in metaphysics and the philosophy of religion.

our (purely) theoretical beliefs about, say, the metaphysics of free will that would be allegedly independent of ethics. Clearly, free will is a notion that is absolutely crucial for ethics – only free actions can be morally evaluated – but this does not mean that we would or even could *first* settle the epistemological and metaphysical issues concerning free will in order to *then* turn to ethical considerations (see Chapter 4). On the contrary, I entirely agree with Timo Koistinen (2019) and Wittgensteinians like D. Z. Phillips that our moral practices involve notions such as the freedom of the will in a *constitutive* sense. However, I would be prepared to take the crucial step of understanding such constitutivity in a Kantian-inspired transcendental sense, without sacrificing its pragmatic character, though (cf. Chapter 3).

[19] I have written critically on Rorty from early on (see, e.g., Pihlström 1996, 1998), so here I will confine myself to a brief discussion of truth in the context of his remarks on Orwell. (For my later criticisms of Rorty, see Pihlström 2013; Kivistö and Pihlström 2016.) This book is not a scholarly study on Rorty, and therefore Rorty's views, as formulated in his Orwell essay, only function here as a placeholder for a position somewhere in between James and Trump (and his emphasis on the significance of Orwell's O'Brien refers to the horror we may expect awaiting us, beyond Trump, at the end of the slippery slope I am imagining). For Rorty's earlier formulations of pragmatism as an account of truth characterized as what our "cultural peers" let us say, see Rorty 1979; for his antirepresentationalist understanding of pragmatism, see Rorty 1991; for his denial that truth can be usefully considered an aim of inquiry, see Rorty 1998; and for philosophy as cultural politics, see Rorty 2007. It is also important to note that other neopragmatists, most prominently Hilary Putnam, have defended

post-factualism and the pragmatist's potential "slippery slope" raised in this chapter. As was suggested earlier (and as other James commentators like Marchetti have emphasized), the concept of truth, far from being restricted to the oft-ridiculed "pragmatist theory of truth," is fundamentally important in pragmatist moral thought in general. It is in this context that we will now expand our horizon from James's pragmatism to Rorty's neopragmatism and especially to Rorty's treatment of George Orwell.

While discussions of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) have often primarily dealt with Winston, the main protagonist of the novel, Rorty's treatment of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* finds O'Brien, the Party torturer, the most important character of the novel.[20] In his essay on Orwell, "The Last Intellectual in Europe" (in Rorty 1989), Rorty rejects the standard realistic reading of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, according to which the novel 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 philosophical "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" (Rorty 1989, 173). Orwell's significance lies in a novel redescription of what is possible: he convinced us that "nothing in the nature of truth, or man [*sic*], or history" will block the conceivable scenario that "the same developments which had made human equality technically possible might make endless slavery possible" (Rorty 1989, 175). Hence, O'Brien, the "Party intellectual," is Orwell's key invention, and Orwell, 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*." (Rorty 1989, 176)

While O'Brien is, of course, an extreme character, it may not be too farfetched to speculate that today people may increasingly recognize the thoroughgoing contingency of our form of life by recognizing, alarmingly, that things could, even in stable Western democracies, turn really bad

conceptions of truth very different from Rorty's; Putnam, in particular, has consistently emphasized – even across the numerous changes in his views on realism and truth over the decades – that truth is an irreducibly normative notion we cannot deflate in Rorty's manner (see, e.g., Putnam 1981, 1990; for some of his late reflections on truth and realism, see Putnam 2016, especially chapters 1 and 4). (See also, again, Misak 2013 for highly relevant historical comparisons.)

[20] My discussion here partly relies on the chapter on James, Rorty, and Orwell in Kivistö and Pihlström 2016, chapter 5.

really rapidly. Whether O'Brien is possible or not (and in what sense), there are certainly possible and extremely dangerous scenarios that might imaginably change our lives into truly Orwellian-like dystopic directions. The rise of "post-truth" populist politics, the inability of world leaders to come up with any clear and sufficiently efficient strategies to combat the deepening environmental crisis, and unexpected threats such as the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 may all have increased our awareness of the precariousness of our cultural situation.

The key idea we should arrive at by contemplating the Orwellian situation, 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".[21] In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Winston's self is 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 that Winston "could not utter sincerely and still be able to put himself back together" (Rorty 1989, 179). The notion of *sincerity* is highly central here, as it obviously establishes a link to the key idea of truthfulness that I above claimed to find at the heart of James's account of truth.

Maintaining a basic distinction between truth and falsity – a distinction not messed up by any vulgarization of the pragmatist account of truth – is, however, necessary for the concepts of sincerity and truthfulness to function. Insofar as Rorty's pragmatism carries Jamesian pragmatism into a certain extreme, we will be 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, first post-factualists like Trump and then Orwell's O'Brien). Reality must still be contrasted with unreality, while truth and truthfulness must be opposed not only to falsity but also to lying and self-deception, as well as other kinds of loss of sincerity that may follow from the collapse of the truth vs. falsity distinction itself. What we find here is, as we might say, the problem of realism in its existential dimensions. This is, arguably, the core *pragmatic meaning* of the problem of realism and truth, and therefore the very possibility of ethical truthfulness is a key pragmatist issue to be dealt with in any critical examination of the Jamesian-Rortyan engagement with truth. While pragmatists have had very interesting things to say about realism and truth in the more conventional areas of this discussion, including, for example, scientific realism and

---

[21] This is followed by the well-known Rortyan one-liner, "If we take care of freedom, truth can take care of itself." (Rorty 1989, 176)

moral realism, the full-blown pragmatic significance of realism and truth is brought into the focus only when we approach the matter in this Orwellian context rightly emphasized by Rorty.[22]

By destroying Winston's capacity for sincerely uttering something and still being able to "put himself back together," O'Brien leads us to imagine the possibility of evil that renders truthfulness itself impossible. Our problem now is that this will then collapse the Jamesian pragmatist conception of truth 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 may find characteristic of James's ethically grounded metaphysics of truth, and his pragmatism generally, as inherited by Rorty.[23]

While James only resisted certain metaphysically realistic forms of metaphysics, especially Hegelian monistic absolute idealism (and corresponding metaphysical realisms), without thereby abandoning metaphysics altogether (see Pihlström 2008a, 2009, 2015), Rorty's reading of Orwell is deeply grounded in his rejection of *all* forms of metaphysics. According to Rorty, Orwell is urging 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, 187–188). Now, this is hard to deny; various minor contingent facts have enormous influence on how our world and societies develop. We should certainly join Rorty in maintaining that our form of life does not

---

[22] On (pragmatic) realism in religion and theology, see Pihlström 2020a, especially chapters 1–2.

[23] Let me again note that I am certainly not saying that either James's or Rorty's view would entail a rejection of truth such as Trump's. I am, rather, emphasizing the (pragmatist's) self-critical worry that such a slippery slope might be opened up. This is particularly relevant not so much in the political area (where populists are busily constructing their lies and "alternative facts") but in the highly personal area of religious and existential commitments. The Jamesian pragmatist needs to analyze the kind of sincerity we must attach to our pursuit of truth in this context – this, indeed, is what this entire book is all about – and while my discussion of Rorty here is relatively brief, I am convinced that the Rortyan deflated understanding of truth is normatively insufficient to account for such sincerity. Certainly (and here I am again responding to an anonymous reviewer's highly relevant comment) Rorty denies objective truth only in the sense that there is according to him (see, e.g., Rorty 1989, 4–7) no truth antecedent to, or beyond, the human life with language within which we formulate all truths (as well as falsehoods). Rorty would obviously be in favor of truthfulness and sincerity just as James would, and he never denies that there is an external world of objects "out there" about which we can make true or false statements. (See, e.g., his 1986 essay, "Pragmatism, Davidson, and Truth," in Rorty 1991.) The problem is whether, given what he says about the relation between freedom and truth in the Orwell essay, in particular, he is in the end entitled to all these, or any, genuinely normative claims about the role played by the concept of truth in our practices. For a detailed critical engagement with Rorty's responsibility for "post-truth" politics that I find supportive of my criticism, see Forstenzer 2018.

depend on "big" metaphysical Truths or Facts but is constantly shaped by "small" historical contingencies. This is also a very important message of Rortyan *ironism*: our firmest moral commitments, our "final vocabularies," are historically contingent, and we ought to fully acknowledge this contingency even when resolutely defending such final vocabularies, including, say, the idea of universal human rights.[24] 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' Newspeak seeking to justify not merely lies but also evil, suffering, and torture.

It is, indeed, one thing to accept, reasonably, historical contingency and to reject any unpragmatic overblown metaphysics of "deep facts about human nature"; it is quite another thing to give up even a minimal pragmatic sense of objective truth required not only for truthfulness and sincerity but for their very possibility (and, hence, for the possibility of insincerity as well, because insincerity is possible only insofar as sincerity is possible, and vice versa), that is, the very possibility of keeping in touch with "the meaning of our own truths and experiences" (quoting Marchetti's apt phrase again). The fact that this discussion rapidly rises onto a meta-level invoking the conditions for the *possibility* of, among other things, individual sincerity can be regarded as a preliminary reason for considering pragmatism from a Kantian transcendental point of view – a suggestion I will get back to in the later chapters.

I want to emphasize that I am not claiming Rorty (or James) to maintain, in any straightforward sense, an erroneous conception of truth (or facts, or history). However, if Rorty is right in his comments on truth (whatever it means to say this, given the alarming disappearance, in his neopragmatism, of the distinction between being right and being regarded as being right by one's cultural peers),[25] then we may be in a bigger trouble regarding the place of truth in our lives than we may have naively believed. We may lack not only political but also sufficient philosophical resources for dealing with people like Trump. Jamesian pragmatism seems to take

---

[24] One problem for Rorty is how such an "oughtness" can ever take off the ground, if the contingent development of our practices is ultimately reducible to mere causal clashes of uses of vocabularies in historico-political contexts. See Chapter 5 for my attempt to view the normativity of our social practices as irreducible. I am not saying that Rorty necessarily has to deal with this problem insofar as he just bites the bullet and makes no claim to this type of "oughtness" at all, merely proposing his "ironism" about final vocabularies as a replacement for any (explicit or implicit) remnant of metaphysics that more strongly normative views may still be committed to.

[25] I am not here even speculating on what exactly it could mean to say that Rorty's statements (about, e.g., truth) are "true".

the correct, indeed vital, step toward integrating the ethically and existentially normative notion of truthfulness into the pragmatist account of truth itself, as we briefly saw. However, insofar as this kind of 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[26] but also the possible fragmentation of truthfulness itself, which seems to depend on a relatively robust distinction between truth and falsity. What this shows is a quasi-Rortyan point: Orwell is more important, and O'Brien more dangerous, than we might have thought; and so is, arguably, someone like Trump. Therefore, furthermore, Rorty's version of pragmatism as an intermediary stage between James and full-blow post-factualism is also more important than many pragmatism scholars might want to admit. Paradoxically, precisely due to the insightfulness of his claims, Rorty in effect deprives us of the linguistic, literary, and philosophical resources that we might have seen Orwell as equipping us with.

This criticism of Rorty comes close to James Conant's (2000) in my view devastating attack on Rorty's reading of Orwell.[27] According to Conant, Rorty is committed to (or even obsessed by) the same philosophical prejudices as his metaphysically realist[28] opponents in claiming that notions such as objectivity, facts, or historical truth are not in the focus of Orwell's worries. Conant argues that Rorty fails to see that there is an "ordinary"[29] way of using these and related concepts that need not be construed either metaphysically realistically or antirealistically (or in a Rortyan deflated manner); hence, "when our intellectual options are

---

[26] As well as the role of literature in showing us fascinating, and dangerous, contingent possibilities (see also the other relevant essays in Rorty 1989; cf. Conant 2000).

[27] See also Rorty 2000. Conant's essay is one of the best critical discussions of Rorty's project in general, by no means restricted to the interpretation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – yet, as it focuses on that book and Rorty's reading of it, it does show us something about the fundamental philosophical relevance of Orwell's novel. (My criticism of Rorty is, implicitly, a qualified criticism of Jamesian pragmatism, too, though *not at all* a proposal to give it up but to carefully rethink its lasting value, being aware of its potential problems.)

[28] When speaking of *metaphysical realism* in this book, I primarily mean something like what Putnam (1981) meant in characterizing metaphysical realism as the combination of the theses that there is a "ready-made" world of mind- and discourse-independent objects and properties, that there is, at least in principle, a single complete truth about the way that world "absolutely" is, and that truth is to be defined as a non-epistemic relation of correspondence between linguistic items and the items of the mind-independent world our language-use refers to. For critical discussion, see, in addition to Putnam's seminal writings (e.g., 1981, 1990, 1994, 2016), Pihlström 2009.

[29] The significance of the concept of "the ordinary" would deserve a more comprehensive treatment in relation to both Jamesian and Rortyan pragmatism. See, for example, Saito 2019 (to be briefly discussed in Chapter 2).

confined to a forced choice between Realist and Rortian theses [. . .] we are
unable to recover the thoughts Orwell sought to express [. . .]" (Conant
2000, 279–280). Conant obviously does not dispute Rorty's (or Orwell's)
emphasis on historical contingency, but he argues that in a perfectly
ordinary sense, "the demise of 'the possibility of truth'" could still be an
extremely scary scenario (Conant 2000, 285–286). In Conant's view,
Orwell's novel is primarily "about the possibility of a state of affairs in
which the concept of objective truth has faded as far out of someone's
world as it conceivably can" (Conant 2000, 297),[30] and therefore it is
directly relevant to our concerns here.[31]

   Conant contests in a thoroughgoing manner Rorty's deflated reading of
O'Brien's character as someone who *simply* enjoys torturing Winston and
seeks to "break him" for no particular reason (see Conant 2000, especially
290). Truth and truthfulness do, he maintains, occupy a central place in
Orwell's analysis of what is really frightening in totalitarianism; in this way,
the debate between Rorty and Conant on these notions in the context of
Nineteen Eighty-Four directly continues the general pragmatist elaborations
on truth and truthfulness.[32] O'Brien's "unqualified denial of the idea that
(what Orwell calls) 'the concept of objective truth' has application to the
past" (Conant 2000, 308) can be directly applied to Jamesian sincerity and

---

[30] He also says the novel "is perhaps as close as we can come to contemplating in imagination the
implications of the adoption of a resolutely Rortian conception of objectivity (i.e., a conception in
which the concept of objectivity is exhausted by that of solidarity)" (Conant 2000, 307). This
formulation is perhaps better than the one quoted in the main text above as it avoids involving the
notion of a state of affairs which might itself be regarded as a remnant of old "Realist" metaphysics.

[31] Among the innumerable critical discussions of Rorty's pragmatism, I would, in addition to Conant's
criticisms, like to recommend Dirk-Martin Grube's (2019) recent essay. If Grube is correct, the
Rortyan attempt to replace the realism vs. antirealism debate by the one between representationalism
and antirepresentationalism, allegedly moving beyond the realism issue in neopragmatism, is mere
rhetoric. I also agree with Grube that Rortyan neopragmatists need to choose between antirealism
and naturalism, as they cannot get both (Grube 2019, 95) – but then again I am not entirely
convinced that Grube's own discussion does justice to Rorty's in many ways complex overall
position, either. Some of the undeniably simplistic rhetoric that Rorty uses may serve genuinely
philosophical goals, after all. While I agree with Grube's dictum that "*[w]e pragmatists relativize
without succumbing to relativism*" (Grube 2019, 96, original emphasis), I also believe that Rorty's
ironism emphasizing the historical contingency of our final vocabularies is something that pragma-
tists (of any kind) ought to take seriously even when not following Rorty into "ethnocentrism," or
any other neopragmatists into what is more often called relativism.

[32] Note how different Orwell's views on totalitarianism, at least on Conant's reading, are from Hannah
Arendt's well-known ideas, in which the concentration camp is the epitomization of totalitarianism.
(See Arendt 1976 [1951].) For Orwell, such atrocities are peripheral; hostility to truthfulness is the
"really frightening" thing. (Conant 2000, 295.) While Rorty charges Conant of confusing truth with
truthfulness (Rorty 2000, 347), Conant perceives that the "capacity of individuals to assess the truth
of claims on their own" threatens "the absolute hegemony of the Party over their minds" (Conant
2000, 299).

truthfulness. It must be possible for the Jamesian pragmatist to argue that O'Brien has given up any ethical commitment to truthfulness through his arbitrary reduction of truth to the opinion of the Party. But then, *pace* Rorty, freedom and the availability of the concept of objective truth are inseparable:

> What [Orwell's] novel aims to make manifest is that if reality control and doublethink were ever to be practiced on a systematic scale, the possibility of an individual speaking the truth and the possibility of an individual controlling her own mind would begin simultaneously to fade out of the world. The preservation of freedom and the preservation of truth represent a single indivisible task for Orwell – a task common to literature and politics. (Conant 2000, 310.)

No matter how exactly we should interpret Orwell and Rorty, this is a fundamentally important link between freedom and truth, a link also needed to make sense of the very idea of truthfulness in its pragmatist meaning. In particular, the preservation of individual freedom and truth – the task Conant argues is shared by literature and politics – is inseparably intertwined with the need to fight against "the corruption of language," which corrupts our concepts and, thus, thought itself (Conant 2000, 313). This inseparability of freedom and truth also indicates how important it is to examine the pragmatist conception of truth in relation to individuals' existential pursuits, as we will do in the later chapters.

Even so, in the interest of being fair to Rorty, we can still try to understand the situation in Rortyan terms. Rorty, famously, rejects the very idea of our being responsible or answerable to any non-human objective reality – traditionally presupposed, he believes, in realist accounts of truth – and emphasizes that we can only be answerable to human audiences.[33] This could be analyzed as a relation of acknowledgment: we acknowledge human audiences as our potential rational critics in a way we cannot acknowledge any non-human reality, thereby also acknowledging a shared normative form of life (cf. Chapter 5). Thus formulated, Rorty is not very far from Jamesian truthfulness, which involves the continuous challenge of acknowledging others' perspectives on the world. However, part of our response to a (relevant) audience is a response to an audience (at least potentially) sincerely using the concepts of objective reality and truth. We have to recognize the relevance of those concepts by recognizing the

---

[33] This theme runs through Rorty's entire thought (cf. Rorty 1991, 1998, 2007), but *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, the book containing the Orwell essay, is one of its best articulations. Our answerability to other human beings merely, instead of any non-human remnant of God, is the core of Rorty's "deep humanism" (see Bernstein 2010, chapter 9; cf. Višňovský 2020).

relevant audience. This is a case of what has been called "mediated recognition" (cf. Koskinen 2017, 2019): we recognize the normatively binding status of the concepts of objective reality and truth by recognizing the appropriate audience(s) and our responsibility or answerability toward it/them. We thus derivatively acknowledge objective reality itself by being answerable, and recognizing ourselves as being answerable, to an audience (e.g., our potential rational critics) that might challenge our views on reality or our entitlement to the truth we claim to possess. Rorty's well-known rhetoric emphasizing our answerability to other human beings in contrast to our answerability to an imagined deity or the realist's mind- and language-independent "world" is simplistic and misleading, because it is precisely by being answerable to other human beings that we indicate our sharing a normative form of life with them in a shared world – or, in brief, our sharing a common world.

Now, one major problem here – to recapitulate our worries once more – is that our relevant audience could change in an Orwellian manner. The *use* and (thus) meaning (recalling the broadly pragmatist and Wittgensteinian idea that "meaning is use")[34] of the concept of objective truth could even be destroyed. Then the kind of mediated recognition alluded to here would no longer work. In some sense there would no longer be any audience we would be responsible to anymore. And there would then be no views to have on anything anymore. Rational thought would collapse. In other words, we can recognize each other as using the concept of an objective reality (and a related concept of truth), and thereby acknowledge each other and ourselves as being normatively – truthfully – committed to pursuing objective truth about reality – but only until O'Brien gets us. Then that commitment collapses, and so does our acknowledgment of each other as genuine users of the notion of truth. So does, then, our commitment to sincerity and truthfulness, which are needed for any moral and political seriousness. All this reminds us that our pursuing the truth, as well as our merely thinking, takes place in a contingent and precarious world whose structures may unpredictably and uncontrollably change – even beyond recognition.

Rorty, then, seems to be right in reminding us about how dangerous O'Brien is – and, thus, about how fragile our life with truth is. But for this same reason he is wrong about the idea that defending freedom would be sufficient for defending truth. It is certainly necessary but hardly sufficient. In particular, *negative freedom* from external constraints is not enough:

---

[34] The best-known *locus* of this is Wittgenstein 1953, I, §23.

what is needed is *positive freedom* and the responsibility that goes together with such freedom, hence sincere commitment to truth-seeking, something that the Jamesian integration of truth with truthfulness takes some steps toward articulating. There certainly is a kind of unrestricted (negative) freedom in American politics, for instance, but truth apparently has not been able to "take care of itself".[35] Moreover, Rorty (1989, 188) himself needs to use the concept of truth – and related concepts such as the ones of fact and reality – when telling us that "[w]hat our future rulers will be like will not be determined by any large necessary truths about human nature and its relation to truth and justice, but by a lot of small contingent facts".

Interestingly, Rorty also maintains the following: "If we are ironic enough about our final vocabularies, and curious enough about everyone else's, we do not have to worry about whether we are in direct contact with moral reality, or whether we are blinded by ideology, or whether we are being weakly 'relativistic.'" (Rorty 1989, 176–177.) This is, indeed, a very big "if". We do need to worry about these matters because we can never be sure that we are, or will remain, able to be "ironic enough" and "curious enough" – indeed, precisely because of the kind of contingency and precariousness Rorty himself brilliantly analyzes.[36] These attitudes themselves require a commitment to truthfulness; they are inherently normative attitudes that presuppose a comprehensive context of genuine epistemic and ethical commitments. Our need to maintain a pragmatic conception of truth more realistic than Rorty's can thus be seen to be based on Jamesian pragmatic reasons. Moreover, this need emerges as a result of our taking seriously a crucial Rortyan lesson about the fundamental contingency of even our most basic conceptual commitments. It is precisely due to the fragility of truth – the possibility that O'Brien might arrive, as Orwell warns us, destroying our ability of distinguishing between truth and falsity – that we must cherish our Jamesian capacities of responding, with ethical sincerity and truthfulness, to others' perspectives along with our own continuous commitment to pursuing the truth. The most important moral we must draw from our reading of Rorty is the seriousness – the sincerity – we should attach to our realization of such

---

[35] For an insightful historically based political argument for the view that without taking care of truth (and truthfulness), we will slide down the "road to unfreedom," see Snyder 2018. We may view Snyder's discussion as an extended attempt to show that the Rortyan conception of truth is wrong: taking care of freedom presupposes taking care of truth.

[36] This Rortyan pragmatist analysis of our natural and historical contingency can be traced back to, for example, Dewey's pragmatic naturalism emphasizing similar themes (see especially Dewey 1986 [1929], chapter 4, titled "Nature as Precarious and Stable").

contingency and fragility constitutive of the human condition. We need not agree with Rorty's analysis of truth and freedom in order to incorporate this moral into our (more Jamesian) pragmatism.[37]

1.4   Reflexivity, Pluralism, and Critical Philosophy

In order to further emphasize the political significance of the issue of truth, let me, before concluding this chapter, very briefly compare these pragmatist elaborations on our need to be committed to the pursuit of truth – and the related integration of truth and truthfulness – to Hannah Arendt's views on truth (and Richard Bernstein's useful reading of Arendt), especially as they are articulated in Arendt's "Truth and Politics," an essay originally published in 1967 (see Arendt 2003).[38]

Arendt not only offered us an analysis of totalitarianism of lasting relevance and an equally lasting defense of human spontaneity in its ethical and political dimensions but also an ever more timely account of the significance of the concept of truth. In "Truth and Politics," she carefully examines the often antagonistic relation between truthfulness and political action, drawing attention to deliberate lying as a political force – and one may argue that her views are, for well-known reasons, even more relevant today than they were half a century ago (see also Bernstein 2018, 67–83). She reminds us that while truth itself is "powerless," it is also *irreplaceable*; political force, persuasion, or violence cannot substitute it, and "[t]o look upon politics from the perspective of truth [. . .] means to take one's stand outside the political realm," from "the standpoint of the truthteller" (Arendt 2003, 570). This kind of *critical distance* necessary for an adequate understanding of the relation between truth and politics requires the age-old project of "disinterested pursuit of truth" (Arendt 2003, 573). It is, of course, this very project that the populist culture of "post-truth" raising into power people like Trump seeks to suppress.

---

[37] I believe my analysis is congenial with Haack's (2019) – albeit slightly more friendly to Rorty than hers – in the sense of acknowledging that we inevitably need an objective concept of truth insofar as the post-truth phenomena of lies, half-truths, misleading and unwarranted claims, and various other forms of unconcern for truth that we witness everywhere around us are to be so much as possible. This could be rephrased as a pragmatic transcendental argument (which Haack does not do): even in order for it to be possible for us to violate the norms of truth(fulness), truth itself is necessarily required as an element of our discursive practices. What I have tried to argue here is that there is no reason why the kind of truth needed here could not be Jamesian pragmatic truth, appropriately interpreted.

[38] A slightly more comprehensive comparison between Arendt and Jamesian pragmatism will be postponed to Chapter 2.

Now, is such disinterestedness available in pragmatism? Isn't pragmatism, especially the Jamesian version of pragmatism we are preoccupied with here (let alone the Rortyan one), inevitably "interest-driven," and doesn't its individualism therefore open the doors for political manipulation and disrespect for truth? Why, more generally, is the concept of truth important for a sound appreciation of pragmatic pluralism and human diversity, after all (see also Chapter 2), and why exactly should we aim at a pragmatist articulation of this concept in the first place?

A key to this issue is *reflexivity*: pragmatism – better than other philosophical approaches, I believe – is able to acknowledge the meta-level "interests" guiding our pursuit of disinterestedness itself. We pragmatically *need* a concept of truth *not* serving any particular need or interest – or, perhaps better, a concept of truth only, or primarily, serving the need or interest of maximal disinterestedness. This is compatible with maintaining that we pragmatically need a deep pluralism (but not shallow relativism) about truth. The reflection we are engaging in here, with the help of Arendt as well as James and Rorty, is in a crucial sense internal to pragmatism. We are asking what kind of purposes our different philosophical conceptualizations of truth, including the traditional realist (correspondence) one and the more comprehensive pragmatist one, are able to serve. In this sense, Jamesian pragmatism, I would like to suggest, "wins" at the meta-level. Its potential collapse to Trumpist populism or O'Brien's destruction of truth is definitely a threat to be taken very seriously – especially if one is willing to take seriously Rorty's ways of developing Jamesian and Deweyan pragmatism – but there is no reason to believe that a slide down the slippery slope is unavoidable. By drawing attention to the continuous meta-level critical (and self-critical) inquiry into our own commitments, and the truthful commitment to ameliorating our practices of truth (in science, ethics, politics, and everywhere else as well), we should be able to stop that slide. But where exactly it can be stopped is a question that needs to be asked again and again in varying historical and cultural contexts.

One important aspect of pragmatic pluralism about truth is that very different human discourses and/or practices can indeed be taken to be "truth-apt" in the sense of engaging with truth and seeking truths about the ways things are (as seen from the perspectives of those discourses or practices). For example, the pragmatic pluralist should not, in my view, claim that "moral truths" are only second-rate in relation to, or derivative from, more fundamental scientific truths about the natural world. Nor should the pragmatic pluralist maintain that the truths we pursue in, say, humanistic scholarship concerning history, religion, or literature

are second-rate in comparison to the truth of natural-scientific theories. There can be genuine and full-blown truth available in all these areas as much as there is in the sciences,[39] but the concept of truth need not function exactly in the same way within all those very different practices. Moral truths, for instance, can be quite as genuine, as "really true" as scientific truths, or truths about the everyday world around us. The pragmatist point here is a contextualizing one: truths are true in different contexts based on, or driven by, our purposive practices. It is only within such contexts and practices that any "truthmaking" takes place – or is even possible.[40]

In the end, I believe, we should at a meta-level defend a *pragmatically pluralistic view about truth itself*:[41] there are many truths about truth, including realism and the related correspondence theory of truth, to be defended *within* pragmatism. These truths about truth are themselves context-embedded; for instance, we may need a realist correspondence-theoretical account of truth within a political discourse opposing populism (and O'Brien), but we may, and in my view do, need a pragmatist account within a more purely academic discourse on truth.[42] A kind of *pragmatic realism* is certainly worth striving for: in the "post-factual" era of powerful populists, we should not *too much* emphasize the pragmatic "plasticity" of truth but, rather, the objectivity and realism inherent even in the Jamesian pragmatic conception of truth.[43] The "truth" about these issues is itself

---

[39] Pragmatism, of course, embraces thoroughgoing *fallibilism*: all our truth-claims are fallible, and any such claims may need to be corrected as our experience and inquiry unfold. On fallibilism in relation to scientific realism, see Niiniluoto 1999; see also, for example, Haack 1998, 2019.

[40] For my attempt to accommodate the concept of truthmaking (usually employed only by metaphysical realists) within a pragmatist metaphysics, see Pihlström 2009, chapter 2.

[41] For alethic pluralism (though in a form not based on pragmatism), see, for example, Lynch 2009. Incidentally, Wittgenstein (1980b, 75) once suggested that we should not choose between the classical "theories" of truth, as all of them contain valuable insights into truth, and none of them is the whole truth about truth.

[42] In principle, Rorty's neopragmatism may offer us valuable resources for switching between different context or "vocabularies" and for developing a self-critically ironic attitude to them, even the most "final" ones. Therefore, my assessment of Rorty here is not at all purely negative, though I do think we should be concerned with its potential dangers. Rorty himself was laudably active in promoting pragmatism in the former communist East-European countries that opened up to Western ideas of freedom and democracy in the late 1980s and the 1990s. The fact that the current situation in Europe does not look equally promising regarding, say, the development Deweyan ideas of democracy is of course one of the background factors that needs to be taken seriously by pragmatists now critically inquiring into the nature of truth in the contingent political and historical circumstances we find ourselves in.

[43] Critics of pragmatism also need to be constantly reminded that James (1975 [1907], 1978 [1909]) himself repeatedly emphasized that he is denying neither the "standing reality" external to us nor the idea of truth as a relation of "agreement" between our ideas and that reality; rather, James's investigations of truth are attempts to tell us what these notions can be taken to pragmatically mean – that is, what they are "known as" in terms of human experience. Another matter that needs

a pragmatic, contextual matter. This, I would like to suggest, is how the pragmatic conception of truth operates at the meta-level. Far from encouraging us to slide down to irresponsible relativism or populism, Jamesian pragmatism urges us to take responsibility for our practice-laden employments of the concept of truth within our everyday, scientific, ethical, political, and religious lives (and any other sectors of human life for that matter). This irreducibly ethical nature of truth, integrated with the explicitly normative notion of truthfulness, is something that arguably only a sufficiently deeply pragmatic account of truth can fully accommodate. Moreover, pluralism does not entail that *all* discourses that we may take as potentially truth-apt in the end are truth-apt. As I will suggest in Chapter 6, there are reasons – pragmatic reasons – to remain uncertain and undecided about the truth-aptness of religious discourses, for example, but this is, again, to respect the notion of truth instead of downgrading it.

It might be asked whether truth itself is "really" pragmatically "plastic" in the sense that any truths about truth depend on our pragmatic contexts or whether this contextuality or plasticity is, so to speak, merely epistemic in the sense that it only concerns our conceptions of truth (and their justifiability) instead of the nature of truth itself. Rather than backing out of this game, the pragmatist should, in my view, push pragmatism further, arguing that it is the nature of truth itself (not merely our conception of that nature) that contextually depends on our practices of living with truth and accounting for what we take to be its "nature" within our epistemic and ethical inquiries. We need more, not less, pragmatism; creating our concept of truth, we are also responsible for creating realistic (correspondence-theoretical) contexts for its employment.

As soon as we have climbed onto a meta-level viewing our practices of truth at a critical distance, there are many kinds of further reflexive questions that may be posed: can we really say, for instance, that philosophical theories (about truth, or about anything else), such as pragmatism, are themselves true or false, and in what sense exactly (e.g., in a pragmatist sense)?[44] Is it sufficient for a pragmatist to maintain that pragmatism itself

---

further elucidation is the fact that the contexts we operate within are constantly in flux; they cannot be just naively taken as self-standing fixed realities. Our ways of using the concept of truth themselves constantly shape the contexts within which we may employ different discourses on truth. This is a crucial element of the kind of pragmatic reflexivity emphasized above. On pragmatist (ontological) contextuality and reflexivity, see also Pihlström 2009, 2016, 2020a.

[44] This, in any case, is hardly a problem just for the pragmatist. The correspondence-theoretician might also have to hold, equally reflexively, that the correspondence theory of truth corresponds to reality (or is made true by the objective facts about what truth is, or something along these lines). Again, note, however, that I am not (unlike some other pragmatism scholars) claiming that the

is pragmatically true? This is related to the question how far a form of *pragmatic naturalism* can be carried in metaphilosophical reflections. According to philosophical naturalists, even realism may be an empirical theory about science and truth.[45] Whatever kind of naturalism is available to the pragmatist, it should at least be self-consciously *non-reductive*, and thus the pragmatic naturalist must constantly face the challenge that it may be problematic to use the concept of truth in the same sense when applied to philosophical theories as it is used when applied to, say, scientific theories. I must leave this issue open here.[46]

In any event, something like *critical philosophy* is vitally needed to stop the slide along the slippery slope from James via Rorty to Orwell's O'Brien (cf. also Skowroński and Pihlström 2019; see further Chapter 3). Critical philosophy (in my sense here) is both pragmatist and Kantian in its willingness to take seriously the reflexive questions that haunt us whenever we employ the notion of truth or other concepts we are normatively committed to in the very activities of using or presupposing any concepts whatsoever. In quasi-Kantian terms, I would like to phrase the main result of this chapter as follows: just like Kant saw empirical realism as possible only on the assumption of transcendental idealism, a reasonable form of realism in our contemporary society (and academia) not only needs to embrace a qualified (correspondence) account of objective truth but must at the meta-level be grounded in *transcendental pragmatism* that makes such realism and objectivity possible. It is a historical irony of pragmatism that already the founder of the tradition, Peirce (1877), appreciated the profound link between our very ability of fixing belief and the concept of truth. Even though we need not, as pragmatists today, stick to the Peircean version of pragmatism – and certainly this book does not argue for a Peircean approach but, rather, a (broadly) Jamesian one – we must never fail in the manner of Rorty, or Trump, to find that link important.

correspondence theory presupposes the naïve idea of "one-to-one" correspondence. When considering the relation between pragmatism and the correspondence theory, we should examine the most careful formulations of the latter (e.g., Niiniluoto 1999).

[45] In philosophy of science, such a naturalized scientific realism is taken to *explain* the success of science, just as "first-order" scientific theories would explain any empirical data.

[46] For my earlier engagements with naturalism in relation to pragmatism, see especially Pihlström 2003. For a highly relevant recent collection of essays on pragmatism and naturalism especially with regard to the philosophy of religion, largely inspired by Wayne Proudfoot's seminal contributions to these topics, see Bagger 2018. For an intriguing Jamesian examination of what it means to maintain that a philosophical theory is "true," see Gunnarsson 2020 (I will return to Gunnarsson's version of Jamesian pragmatism in Chapter 4).

Obviously, while I hope to have provided reasons for a moderate step toward realism that I think the pragmatist needs to take when considering the notion of truth along the lines proposed here, the more general realism issue at the core of pragmatism will not be settled in this chapter, or this book. A number of questions related to this overall theme will remain open. Let me, by way of closing this chapter, briefly comment on just one of them. Critically engaging with attempts to integrate realism with pragmatism in a (quasi-)Kantian context (including some of my own earlier proposals in this framework), Ilkka Niiniluoto (2019, 32–33) maintains that there is a tension between the pragmatist view that metaphysical theses about the "world in itself" are "fruitless," as we do not possess the metaphysical realist's imagined "God's-Eye View," on the one hand, and the claim that we should not draw any metaphysical distinction between the Kantian noumenal and phenomenal "worlds," as the two are "identical," on the other hand. This is, he argues, because our knowledge of the phenomenal world – the world empirically knowable by human beings through our epistemic practices, particularly science – would also yield knowledge of the metaphysical noumenal world if the two "worlds" are indeed one and the same.

While interpreting Kant as a "two worlds" thinker here, Niiniluoto is sensitive to the possibility of a "one world" reading, too.[47] I am not convinced, however, that the basic identity of the "two worlds" (from the perspective of the "one world" interpretation) causes the kinds of difficulties he suggests, because the identity claim should not (I would prefer to say) be understood as an ontological statement from a standpoint that would be prior to a *transcendental* analysis of the necessary conditions for the possibility of cognizing an objective reality in the first place – an analysis which includes, if this chapter is on the right track, also an ethical dimension. The "identity" here is something that a pragmatically conducted transcendental inquiry (rather than any ontological inquiry that would be methodologically and/or metaphysically prior to it) yields, instead of being available to us independently of

---

[47] I have suggested earlier that the pragmatist Kantian ought to defend the one-world reading of Kant's transcendental idealism, regarding the relations between things in themselves and appearances (see Carr 1999; Allison 2004; as well as Pihlström 1996, 2003). An important background for this discussion in the context of the realism debate of the past few decades is of course Putnam's (1981, 1990) struggle with "internal realism" in contrast to "metaphysical realism" – something that Putnam later significantly reconsidered (e.g., 2016). See Chapter 3 for some brief remarks on the relation between (Jamesian) pragmatism and Kantian transcendental idealism.

the transcendental standpoint. It is *not* an identity claim that we can make from a "God's-Eye View" that we might imagine to be somehow external to both of those "worlds".[48] When viewing our commitment to the concept of truth *from within* our practices of employing this concept, that is, in a context thoroughly structured by that commitment itself, we cannot take a step back and "measure" our realism against how things stand in the real world independently of our practices of pursuing truth about it. Our pragmatist investigation of truth is then *ipso facto* transcendental. I will try to clarify this thought in the later chapters more explicitly defending a "Kantian" account of (Jamesian) pragmatism.

I am tempted to view the pragmatic commitment to realism as a kind of necessary commitment to a *Grenzbegriff* we cannot avoid postulating as soon as we start inquiring (pragmatically and/or transcendentally) into what the objectively existing reality is "for us," or what is true about it. In sum, pragmatic realism in the sense in which I am prepared to be committed to it will have to be formulated in an unashamed Kantian way, as a kind of transcendental thesis, or combining transcendental pragmatism with empirical realism. The active interplay of pragmatism and transcendental philosophy will come up throughout the chapters to follow, while detailed systematic engagements with this issue are beyond the scope of the present investigation.

This chapter has, I hope, set the tone for the inquiries to follow. We will need to elaborate, guided by Jamesian pragmatism, much further on individual (especially religious) diversity and pluralism in truth-seeking (Chapter 2), sincerity and transcendental inquiry in the Kantian context of critical philosophy (Chapter 3), individual existential choices of life (Chapter 4), the very structure of our shared normative frameworks making any individual choices possible for us, already alluded to here

---

[48] Moreover, *pace* Niiniluoto, I do think we should remain committed – as this chapter hopefully to a certain degree demonstrates – to a minimally realistic assumption of pragmatic realism when inquiring into the relation between pragmatism and realism (cf. Niiniluoto 2019, 36), though undoubtedly I haven't always been careful enough to emphasize this. Even so, I warmly welcome Niiniluoto's argument that there is considerable unclarity and ambiguity in leading neopragmatists' like Putnam's, Nicholas Rescher's, and (of course) Rorty's views (as well as, presumably, my own) regarding the status of the existence of the realist's mind-independent world. (On Rescher's version of pragmatism and realism, see also Pihlström 2017.) From the point of view of the Kantian pragmatism I favor, one problem in Putnam's and many other neopragmatists' views is precisely their unwillingness to understand their own positions in transcendental terms. While Putnam's views on realism progressed toward an increasingly realistic position in his late years, he unfortunately seems to have moved farther away from any Kantian understanding of pragmatism – as laudable as his defense of irreducible normativity (Putnam 2016) in my view is.

(Chapter 5), and the heavy ethical burden of making sincere commitments when it comes to religious and other existential matters, in particular (Chapter 6). We will thus next turn to a deeper reflection on our individual, especially religious, pursuit of truth, thereby enriching our picture of Jamesian pragmatic pluralism.