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# Pragmatism as a Mediator – Seeking an Illusory Harmony?

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## Abstract

This paper examines the well-known pragmatist claim to mediate between philosophical disputes. While recognizing the reconciliatory and harmonizing role that pragmatism plays in traditional debates between, for example, realism and antirealism, naturalism and culturalism, or science and religion, it is argued that the pragmatist also needs to acknowledge that there are situations in which no such mediation is reasonably possible, such as the conflict between racism and antiracism. The metaphilosophical question to be raised is how – in terms of pragmatism itself – we are able to distinguish between these different cases and what exactly it means to apply the pragmatic method to resolving *this* meta-level issue. Pragmatism here emerges as a thoroughly fallible and antifoundationalist reflexive inquiry into what it means, and what it ought to mean, for us to view philosophical issues in terms of their conceivable practical consequences. The project of mediation must be subordinated to this more fundamental understanding of pragmatist methodology.

## Keywords

pragmatism – mediation – reconciliation – harmony – realism – philosophy of religion – holism – reflexivity – William James

## Introduction

General characterizations of pragmatism as well as various applications of pragmatism in specific sub-disciplines of philosophy frequently emphasize the “mediating” role played by pragmatism in a number of philosophical debates, including the oppositions between the tough-minded and the tender-minded temperaments (as William James memorably called them), realism and idealism (or antirealism), the transcendental and the empirical, naturalism and culturalism, naturalism and non- or supernaturalism, evidentialism and fideism (in the philosophy of religion), liberalism and communitarianism (in political philosophy), and many others. Pragmatism also mediates between meta-level disputes, such as the one between the pursuit of metaphysics and the criticism of metaphysics (we can clearly find elements of both in different pragmatists), as well as the one between constructive philosophical theorizing and deconstructive dissolution of (at least some) philosophical theories and disputes as mere pseudo-problems. For most (though not all) pragmatists, philosophy is *both* a critical activity of revealing and deconstructing presuppositions (e.g., those of traditional metaphysics) that we can, or should, give up *and* a constructive activity of establishing a theoretical edifice, even if this must be done in a way shunning all traditional foundationalisms.

Generally, the phrase of inclusion, “both ... and”, suits the pragmatist temper better than the exclusivist “either ... or”. Pragmatism, especially in the sense in which those of us indebted to James are willing to develop it, hopes to reconcile apparently mutually exclusive alternatives into a harmonious synthesis. The idea of pragmatism as a mediating philosophy is thus primarily associated with James’s characterization of the pragmatic method (as we will see below). This reconciliatory project even extends to moderating between apparently conflicting practices that need to be understood in terms of the human needs and interests they serve: for example, many classical and contemporary pragmatists have sought to render science and religion compatible with each other, constructing a broad philosophical approach that can accommodate both.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, some pragmatists may even suggest that pragmatism can mediate between entire philosophical traditions, such as the analytic tradition

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1 This James-derived conception of pragmatism as an essentially mediating philosophy is discussed in various general introductions to pragmatism, both earlier (e.g., Scheffler 1974, 1) and later ones (e.g., Legg 2021 [2008], §1). For my own formulations, see, e.g., Pihlström 2009.

and what is known as “Continental” philosophy, that is, phenomenology and existentialism, integrating the best ideas from all of them.<sup>2</sup>

However, there are also, clearly, situations in which pragmatism *cannot* act as a mediator. Just recall a classical case: we may be tolerant up to a certain degree, even when it comes to tolerating views we sharply disagree with, but there are limits to how far this is possible, as we should refuse to tolerate intolerance; otherwise the intolerant will eventually reign by wiping out the tolerant.<sup>3</sup> There is no “third way” between tolerance and intolerance in the sense that intolerance could reasonably be claimed to be part of a compromise position mediating between the two “extremes”. The liberal pragmatist temperament of listening to as many different “voices” as possible – especially “the cries of the wounded”, adopting another phrase from James<sup>4</sup> – must eventually be constrained by the duty to *stop* listening when the voices become intolerant or simply unacceptable due to their extremity, let alone hateful, threatening, or violent. We definitely need not, and must not, mediate between racism and antiracism, for instance, but must obviously firmly choose antiracism – regardless of whether we subscribe to some form of pragmatism or not.<sup>5</sup> Listening to the racist’s voice is, in brief, to fail to listen to the cries of those wounded by the racist. Similarly, we cannot aim at any compromise between democracy and antidemocracy but must embrace democracy as a (possibly Deweyan-inspired) “way of life” to be vigorously defended against its opponents.<sup>6</sup>

That we need to be antiracist and democratic is a premise of my discussion in this paper, not anything I am hoping to justify – or, indeed, anything that would need justifying. This I take to be simply part of relatively everyday reasonableness. As we know, social media in particular increasingly tends

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2 Several essays in Baghrarian and Marchetti 2018 explore pragmatist ways of bridging the gaps between these traditions of twentieth-century philosophy.

3 This paradox of tolerance has been voluminously discussed – mostly outside pragmatism, though. An important modern classic here is Karl Popper’s *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945); see chapter 7. How exactly the paradox is formulated and possibly resolved depends on how tolerance and intolerance are defined (which is not my issue in this paper).

4 James uses this phrase in the 1891 essay, “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life”, in James 1979 [1897]. See also several essays on James’s ethical thought in Putnam and Putnam 2017.

5 Issues of race and racism have been widely discussed within pragmatism; for an overview, see, e.g., Sullivan 2024.

6 Obviously, as in the case of tolerance, there are different views on how exactly to interpret the meaning of the concepts of racism and democracy, for instance. I am assuming a relatively widely shared understanding (in Western liberal societies) of the basic meaning of such concepts, while allowing for the possibility of conceptual change and reinterpretation. As this paper addresses a meta-level issue, we can leave such matters open here.

to polarize our political discussions today, and this may lead many of us to erroneously believe that perfectly ordinary views about, say, equal human rights or the fundamental value of basic democratic processes would need justification against extremists challenging them. There is no way of mediating between the false extremes of what might simply be described as lunatic and non-lunatic types of thinking. However, the key philosophical problem here is how to stop along the slippery slope that might lead toward one or another form of (philosophical, ethical, or political) lunacy. How to distinguish a pragmatic process of finding a place to stop such a destructive slide from the false idea of mediating between extremes that are alleged to be equally valuable?

This paper is, accordingly, concerned with the metaphilosophical question of how to distinguish, within pragmatism itself, between different types of cases of mediation. When exactly should we seek a middle way, or a compromise between the extremes, and when should we simply reject the other pole of the conflict, realizing that no mediation is possible – in particular, for ethical reasons, but also in some cases for epistemic reasons (without presupposing any strict dualism between the two)? The pragmatist, in other words, needs to be able to determine when it is reasonable to hope to find a reconciliatory harmony of the opposites and when such a harmonization is fictitious or illusory at best and unethical or dangerous at worst. What is required here, I believe, is a metaphilosophical inquiry – driven by pragmatism – into the pragmatic method itself (in its “mediating” use), especially into its remarkable *reflexivity*. To anticipate the outcome of my argument, it is only by means of pragmatism itself that we can decide how far the pragmatist’s tolerant harmonization of “extremes” should go; there is no firm absolute foundation for this on-going pragmatic inquiry, nor an end point fixed in advance.<sup>7</sup>

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7 I have previously repeatedly discussed pragmatism and the pursuit of a *via media* in, e.g., Pihlström 2009, 2013; looking back, it now seems to me that those earlier treatments only insufficiently acknowledge the fact that there are important cases in which no middle-ground-seeking is reasonably possible. This paper is partly (but only partly) sparked by the rise of extreme right-wing nationalisms in various countries, including obviously the US (especially after Donald Trump’s infamous 2016 election) but also many EU countries. Specific cases vary significantly from one another, but a certain pattern is familiar in many of these cases: the intolerant extreme right requires tolerance and sympathy from others, demanding that its opponents let its supporters’ (allegedly suppressed) voice to be heard in political discussions in the name of the freedom of speech, and accusing (traditional) media of taking sides in this situation, even (at a certain extreme) calling the media “an enemy of the people” (as Trump’s quasi-Stalinist expression goes). In this situation, the liberal and tolerant pragmatic pluralist, on the one hand, finds it necessary to let as many political voices and expressions of identities as possible to be heard, while, on the other hand, realizing that such tolerance necessarily has its limits, because the uncontrolled expression of intolerant,

Let me also note, by way of introduction, that I am simplifying considerably when discussing pragmatism as a mediator between *two* opposites. The first simplification is that we could face issues where our problem is not a choice between two alternatives but a choice among three, or more. I will just set such “triple” cases aside, assuming that they cause no principled additional difficulty for the metaphilosophical discussion I am about to begin – any more than the simpler twofold choices do. Secondly, there are various complexities (which I will also mostly have to ignore here) even regarding cases where we do seem to face just two alternatives. For example, both options could be false while there could be a true (third, possibly hitherto overlooked) alternative available, as the agnostic might claim to be the case in the debate between theism and atheism. However, it could also happen that both are false but there is no third option available. It could, furthermore, be the case that only one of the extremes is true (perhaps in some revised form), and it could even turn out – as the pragmatic mediator might hope to show – that both of the opposed views are, or might be interpreted as being, true, given that they are, for example, contextualized in a relevant way and their true pragmatic meaning is thus brought to the view. (A further issue is what exactly “true” should be taken to mean when applied to, say, philosophical positions.)

The pragmatic method may be employed in the service of clarifying and resolving a dispute in all such situations, and clearly we have to be careful to distinguish, for example, those cases in which the opposition between two “extremes” is one of contradictory (mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive) opposites from those in which it is only a matter of contrary opposites. In the latter kind of cases, there could be a continuum between the extremes, and the pragmatic reconciliation might aim at finding the most plausible point on that continuum. A considerably more comprehensive inquiry into the nature of philosophical debates in general would be needed to sort out all these different situations. My metaphilosophical argument does not depend on any specific examples in this regard but aims at a generality that I hope is relevant across the board of different cases of this kind. My main question is how, or *from where*, we can distinguish between the different cases there may be, and how the pragmatic method functions in this regard. I will begin with some examples of “mediating” pragmatism, moving on to cases where mediation is

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antidemocratic, and even hateful or violence-driven identities threatens to take us to a society no longer allowing the full expression of liberal and tolerant voices. However, while I suppose my reflections are politically relevant, I am not explicitly dealing with politics or even political philosophy in this essay; my discussion will remain at a more abstract metaphilosophical level of reflecting on the methodology of pragmatism.

impossible for the kind of reasons outlined above. I will then more explicitly examine the reflexive question of how to understand the pragmatic method at work in these different contexts and how to develop that methodology further – also in critical dialogue with transcendental methodology.

### Mediating Pragmatism: Some Examples

Let us begin with some rather obvious historical examples. Without offering any new interpretation of the classical pragmatists, we may recall that a *locus classicus* of the “pragmatism as a *via media*” idea can be found in William James’s *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways or Thinking* (James 1975 [1907]), where James explicitly refers to pragmatism as a “mediator” (ibid., 43).

After having defined the *pragmatic method*, or the *pragmatic maxim* (with appropriate references to his friend Charles S. Peirce) in Lecture II, James famously applies pragmatism to resolving classical metaphysical debates in Lectures III and IV. In many such cases, pragmatism is able to mediate between the extremes by recognizing what their actual pragmatic meaning is. It is by drawing attention to the conceivable practical outcomes of the possible truth of different metaphysical conceptions – that is, by applying the Peircean maxim of considering “what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have”, and realizing that “our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object” – that we can trace out their true meaning and the real bone of contention between rival positions.<sup>8</sup> When thus understanding what those views really – that is, pragmatically – mean, we may be able to avoid finding them inescapably opposed to each other.

Some of the metaphysical debates James was concerned with are closely related to the philosophy of religion (from which I will draw other examples as well in the course of this discussion). Most explicitly, James investigates the conflict between *materialism* and *theism* (ibid., 48–56). Applying the pragmatic method to this controversy does not yield the positivist view that the dispute is empty or meaningless; on the contrary, when we specify the pragmatic meaning of the rival views, we can see what they are really about and how they might be reconciled. In this case, however, James is not particularly reconciliatory, after

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8 For Peirce’s classical 1878 formulation of this pragmatic maxim, see the essay, “How to Make Our Ideas Clear”, in Peirce 1992–98, vol. 1 (the quote is on page 132). On the historical development and various versions of the pragmatic maxim, see, e.g., Burke 2013 and Pihlström (ed.) 2024.

all: he finds theism more satisfactory than materialism, because it offers us a hopeful relation to the universe. But he certainly does not reject naturalism, or the scientific way of thinking motivating materialism, either, and he never claims that we could rationally demonstrate God's existence. Rather, it is by acknowledging human beings' natural religious needs – the need for an “eternal moral order”, a kind of cosmic harmony with the universe, being one of “the deepest needs of our breast” (ibid., 55) – that he rejects overblown scientific naturalism, finding supernaturalism and theism more plausible.<sup>9</sup> James is not telling us that we should not listen to what science says about the material universe – of course we should. But he is telling us that we should not let that scientific worldview become absolute in the sense of depriving us of the pragmatic hope for the reality of an “unseen order” that could provide meaning and value to our existence. This *is* a kind of reconciliation between the extremes of dogmatic, uncritical, or anti-scientific religious belief, on the one hand, and equally uncritical militantly anti-religious scientism, on the other; in this case, both extremes are wrong and need to be avoided.

James's procedure is more or less similar in the other cases he considers (in ibid., Lectures III and IV), such as the problem of *free will* and *determinism* and the conflict between *monism* and *pluralism*. While he does take a stand in these issues – the pragmatist clearly prefers freedom and pluralism to determinism and monism – he does this manifesting a deep understanding and appreciation of the kind of philosophical reasons that might lead us to adopt the other extreme. The choices between the opposites are genuine issues for him, and pragmatism is needed in order for us to properly contextualize the relevant concepts and theories in order to be able to arrive at a balanced account of their harmonious co-existence. This reconciliatory project is very different from the positivist claim that the controversies are empty. The conflict may only *seem* empty when the different positions are not interpreted in terms of their true pragmatic meaning – that is, when we are not entirely clear about them. Such inability to apply the pragmatic method may lead us to completely idle and avoidable disputes, such as the one between the campers in the mountains (in one of James's more everyday examples) who disagree about whether the man who circles around a tree while a squirrel constantly moves on the other

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9 Note, in comparison to James, that a more resolutely naturalist pragmatic philosopher such as George Santayana did not really seek a compromise between, say, naturalism and Christianity. He maintained, more straightforwardly, that naturalism is true and religion is a useful “poetic” fiction. This is to be clearly distinguished – despite Santayana's elaborate formulations of the matter in his large *oeuvre* – from James's complex discussion of the sense in which religious beliefs might be pragmatically “true”. See, e.g., Santayana 1989 [1900] for the kind of fictionalism typical of his views on Christianity.

side of the tree-trunk hidden from the man's view "goes round" the squirrel or not. The answer to this question depends on the pragmatic meaning of "going round". (See *ibid.*, 27–28.)<sup>10</sup>

As a mediator, pragmatism, then, "unstiffens all our theories" and "harmonizes with many ancient philosophic tendencies" (*ibid.*, 32). It "has [...] no prejudices whatever, no obstructive dogmas, no rigid canons of what shall count as proof", but "will entertain any hypothesis" and "consider any evidence" (*ibid.*, 43–44). Accordingly, James's pragmatic hope of finding harmonizing compromises between extremes is not restricted to specific metaphysical debates (let alone to everyday examples such as the squirrel). He is, arguably even more importantly, seeking a middle ground at the meta-level, when it comes to our individual *philosophical temperaments* through which we approach those metaphysical debates. Whether we view the world in terms of freedom or determinism, or in terms of pluralism or monism, is to a significant degree dependent on our temperamental inclinations, and pragmatist mediation is, he argues, vitally needed in this respect as well. It is actually in the context of his distinction between the two basic kinds of philosophical temperament – in the opening pages of *Pragmatism* – that he introduces the idea of pragmatism as a mediating philosophy. In particular, pragmatism, he tells us, can function as a mediator between the "tough-minded" and the "tender-minded" temperaments individual philosophers may have, not only between the particular philosophical or metaphysical positions those temperaments may yield (see *ibid.*, Lecture I). Thus, pragmatism seeks to reconcile entire holistic worldviews, or ways of investigating whatever facts or metaphysical (or other philosophical) problems there may be.<sup>11</sup>

It is in this metaphilosophical context that we find, for example, this canonical formulation of a Jamesian conception of pragmatism as a mediating philosophy:

What *you* want is a philosophy that will not only exercise your powers of intellectual abstraction, but that will make some positive connexion with this actual world of finite human lives.

You want a system that will combine both things, the scientific loyalty to facts and willingness to take account of them, the spirit of adaptation and accommodation, in short, but also the old confidence in human

<sup>10</sup> On the squirrel example as illustrating James's conception of pragmatism as a "mediating philosophy", see again, e.g., Legg 2021 [2008], §1.

<sup>11</sup> This is what makes, according to many contemporary pragmatism scholars, the pragmatist tradition particularly relevant in discussions concerning "comprehensive worldviews" (such as science and religion) in our complex world today (see, e.g., Jung 2019).

values and the resultant spontaneity, whether of the religious or of the romantic type. And this is then your dilemma: you find the two parts of your *quaesitum* hopelessly separated.

JAMES 1975 [1907], 17.

This separation will be overcome by pragmatism, the “oddly-named thing” that James offers “as a philosophy that can satisfy both kinds of demand”: “It can remain religious like the rationalisms, but at the same time, like the empiricisms, it can preserve the richest intimacy with facts.” (Ibid., 23.)<sup>12</sup>

While I have cited James’s well-known views at some length, it would be a mistake to conclude that the conception of pragmatism as a mediating approach would be restricted to classical pragmatism.<sup>13</sup> As a more recent (neo)pragmatist example, consider (though for the lack of space only very briefly) Hilary Putnam’s work on *realism*. It can also be regarded as an attempt to steer a reasonable critical middle course between excessively strong forms of realism (“metaphysical realism”), on the one hand, and extreme antirealisms (e.g., radical constructivism or relativism), on the other. According to the former, there is a “ready-made” absolute way the world is, while the latter claim that there is no mind- or language-independent reality at all. What Putnam at various stages of his career called “internal realism” or “natural realism” – or even, albeit rarely, “pragmatic realism” – acknowledges that there is in some obvious sense a real world “out there” that was never made by means of any mysterious powers of the human mind (or, equivalently, by our language-use or scientific theories).<sup>14</sup> Yet, we can form no useful conception of the way(s) that world is without categorizing it in terms of our thinking, conceptualization, and theorization – or our human practices of inquiry, to employ a favorite

12 See also James 1975 [1907], 126–128, on pragmatism as a mediator between the tough- and the tender-minded ways of thinking.

13 I have not dwelled on Peirce’s, Dewey’s, or other old pragmatists’ views here at all, and certainly they would deserve a fair hearing in this context, too. In particular, Dewey’s way of contextualizing philosophical problems socially and historically – rather than in terms of individual temperaments in James’s fashion – is a distinctive way of applying the pragmatic method in a mediating way. When we look carefully at the contexts (and, to use a Deweyan term, problematic situations) within which certain views or problems are formulated, we see more clearly what they mean and how they might be reconciled or synthesized. While Peirce is perhaps not as clearly a reconciliatory thinker, it is not far-fetched to find elements of “mediating pragmatism” in his thought as well. Importantly, he had his own way of integrating science and religious metaphysics.

14 While internal realism was canonically formulated in Putnam 1981, chapter 3, the later volume, *Realism with a Human Face* (Putnam 1990), is in my view the most sophisticated articulation of the phase of Putnam’s thought centered around the idea of “internal” or “pragmatic” realism. See, e.g., Pihlström 2009, 2022 for further discussion.

concept of many pragmatists. The world is a co-product of both the mind and the world, which “jointly” create both the mind and the world (see Putnam 1981, xi). While Putnam’s views on realism developed, to the extent that he was a “moving target” for his critics, he always sought to mediate between the extremes of strong realism and uncritical antirealism, subscribing to neither. His reflections on realism can be read as a decades-long process of applying pragmatism to harmonize apparently conflicting extremes that need to be synthesized in order to arrive at a plausible middle-ground form of realism.

As a somewhat different example, consider the debate between *evidentialism* and *fideism* in the philosophy of religion. Here pragmatists are usually not simply evidentialists in the sense of maintaining that religious beliefs are to be backed up by evidence in the same way in which we expect our scientific hypotheses to be supported by evidence (or otherwise to be rejected or revised). Nor are they simply fideists in the sense of suggesting that reason and evidence have nothing whatsoever to do with religious faith. Certainly religious beliefs need to be discussed as reasonably as possible, and they are not immune to rational considerations – thus not immune to scientific-like evidence, either. Yet it would be a profound misunderstanding of religious practices to simply confuse religious faith with scientific theorization and thus to expect religious worldviews to be explanatory in the way scientific theories are. A critical middle path between evidentialism and fideism is needed, and pragmatist philosophers of religion have, early and late, supplied versions of such a middle path (see, e.g., Pihlström 2013).

In the philosophy of religion, the pragmatist may also, more generally, aim at reconciling faith and reason, or religion and science, without operating in terms of the polarized opposites that seem to define the debate. This does not simply mean that we should adopt an agnostic position taking no stand in the dispute between theism and atheism. Instead, pragmatism may acknowledge the concerns of both faith and reason in a holistic assessment of the human condition: we live in a world that is most reliably studied and explained by means of empirical science, but we also existentially seek value, meaning, and harmony in this precarious natural world, and religious ways of doing so cannot be a priori abandoned due to their non-scientific character. John Dewey’s philosophy of religion could, despite its firm rejection of supernaturalism, be interpreted in this mediating spirit, because Dewey did value the religious quality in experience, as distinguished from institutionalized religions (see Dewey 1991 [1934]; for discussion, cf. Pihlström 2013, chapter 2). More generally, Dewey is famous for having developed a naturalist philosophy which does not reduce the humanly experiential and cultural elements of reality to mere scientifically conceived “nature”. Dewey’s pragmatic naturalism can thus be

regarded as a pragmatic reconciliation of naturalism and (what might be labeled) culturalism.<sup>15</sup>

In contemporary philosophy of religion, pragmatists, then, typically adopt a mediating stance (or various mediating stances), defending neither traditional theism nor traditional atheism. The chief promise of pragmatist philosophy of religion in the polarized science vs. religion discussions today is precisely its ability to maintain a sense of the relative autonomy of religious faith (in relation to science) without claiming religion to be immune to criticism, even science-based criticism. Putnam (1997, 182) puts this succinctly when suggesting that religious ideas can indeed be “empirically tested” – but tested “in the laboratory of life”, not in a scientific research laboratory. Again we easily see “mediating pragmatism” at work here. Pragmatism, as James already emphasized, may provide us with resources for appreciating both scientific rationality and religiously relevant experiences of existential meaning and value.

### Non-mediating Pragmatism

The “mediating” use of the pragmatic method, as described in the previous section (with a focus on metaphysics and the philosophy of religion, but with considerably wider applicability), is in my view one of the most attractive features of pragmatism as a philosophical tradition, and I am sure I am not alone in this judgment. It is both intellectually and ethically tremendously valuable to learn to listen to what others – including people representing radically different ideas – may have to say about a given matter and to develop one’s own position through such listening, with a sincere commitment to pursuing the truth as a middle path enriched by both of the extremes that may as such remain one-sided or too narrow. However, there are obvious circumstances where pragmatism *cannot* act as such a mediator, cases in which it would be wrong (to put it mildly) or even unthinkable to adopt a mediating position at all. I will begin this discussion by continuing to reflect on cases drawn from the philosophy of religion (these are perhaps less obvious than some others), proceeding to even clearer cases adopted from ethical and political contexts.

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15 One of the main sources for this reconciliation is Dewey’s *Experience and Nature* (1925, 2nd ed. 1929). For a broadly Deweyan philosophical anthropology reconciling naturalism and culturalism in this spirit, thus continuing the mediating project of pragmatism, see especially Dreon 2022.

For example, in contemporary philosophy of religion, pragmatism (in my view) cannot and should not accept, even in a revised form, the apologetic approach characteristic of both hard-core evidentialism and reformed epistemology – as well as their militantly atheist critics.<sup>16</sup> Pragmatism does *not* mediate between *apologetic* and *non-apologetic* philosophies of religion but remains firmly non- or even anti-apologetic. Accordingly, even though pragmatism does mediate between realism and antirealism, as well as (at least in some sense) between evidentialism and fideism, and though the former pairs of these opposites are often closely associated with apologetic endeavors (both theistic and atheistic), it does not follow that pragmatism would or should also mediate between apologetic and non-apologetic projects. This is a complex issue and needs careful scrutiny, but it is safe to note that no apologetic view is simply entailed by either realism or evidentialism, both of which do need to be taken seriously as options in order for the reconciliatory pragmatic project of finding a plausible position on the scale between those extremes (in both cases) to be possible. It might follow, however, that the strongest forms of realism (“metaphysical realism”) do have to be ruled out because they would seem to enable an apologetic philosopher of religion to engage in ethically problematic apologetics. If there is, in principle, only one true religious or theological “theory” to be discovered, the apologetic thinker who believes to have found it may be tempted to declare their discovery to everyone. The non-apologetic nature of pragmatist philosophy of religion willing to listen to others’ voices instead of imposing any “one true theory” upon them would then yield an indirect argument against the strongest forms of metaphysical realism in the field. Metaphysical realism would be rendered problematic, or even pragmatically false, by its tendency to encourage apologetics.<sup>17</sup>

Accordingly, pragmatism does *not* mediate between religious *exclusivism* and *inclusivism* (or pluralism), either, but stays firmly on the pluralist side. This is clearly a Jamesian position, although even James manifested a certain appreciation of what might prove sound in monism, viewing the choice as fundamentally empirical:

Pluralism [...] [in comparison to monism] has no need of this dogmatic rigoristic temper. Provided you grant *some* separation among things, some tremor of independence, some free play of parts on one another,

16 The main figures with whom these views are associated in recent philosophy of religion are Richard Swinburne (e.g., 1979) and Alvin Plantinga (e.g., 2000), respectively.

17 I cannot develop this argument further here, but for pragmatist reflections on truth and realism in relation to the issues of religious diversity and (anti-)apologetics, see Pihlström 2021, chapter 2.

some real novelty or chance, however minute, she is amply satisfied, and will allow you any amount, however great, of real union. How much of union there may be is a question that she thinks can only be decided empirically. The amount may be enormous, colossal; but absolute monism is shattered if, along with all the union, there has to be granted the slightest modicum, the most incipient nascency, or the most residual trace, of a separation that is not 'overcome.'

Pragmatism, pending the final empirical ascertainment of just what the balance of union and disunion among things may be, must obviously range herself upon the pluralistic side. [...] [P]ragmatism must turn its back on absolute monism, and follow pluralism's more empirical path.

JAMES 1975 [1907], 78–79.

James thus reminds us that sometimes we do have to “turn [our] back on” extreme views that cannot be rendered even partly plausible by reconciling them with their opposites.

Furthermore, pragmatism does *not* mediate between *theodicism* and *antitheodicism* – another controversy in the philosophy of religion – but must, as I have argued on a number of earlier occasions, remain firmly antitheodicitist. James himself rejected Leibnizian and Hegelian theodicies – not because he would have followed the atheist's “argument from evil”, drawing atheist conclusions from the evidential role of the empirical reality of evil, but rather because he seems to have found the entire theodicistically driven controversy potentially ethically problematic from the victims' perspective (see *ibid.*, Lecture I, especially 19–22).<sup>18</sup> While this discussion has hardly ever been a major theme in pragmatism, we may find a clearly antitheodicitist thrust also in Putnam's James-inspired philosophy of religion (see Putnam and Putnam 2017; cf. Pihlström 2023, chapter 2). Pragmatism may appreciate the reasons why some thinkers might be tempted by theodicies, but in order to take the issue of innocent suffering seriously at all it has to rule theodicies out in advance. Using Jamesian terms, they cannot be *genuine options* for us if we seek an ethically

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18 In my usage (see Pihlström 2023), *theodicism* denotes the normative view according to which theism (or its secular analogies, such as a Hegelian or Marxist faith in the meaningfulness or progressiveness of history) ought to deliver a theodicy, while *antitheodicism* rejects this presupposition and proposes to examine the ethical reality of evil and suffering without seeking to justify or legitimize that reality. The theodicitist presupposition is shared by standard forms of theism and atheism; they only disagree on whether the normative requirement is satisfied by theism (or its secular analogies) or not. The distinction between theodicism and antitheodicism thus cuts across the one between theism and atheism and must not be conflated with the latter.

sensitive philosophical (or theological) view of suffering. I cannot argue for this position in any detail here, but the point, again, is that applying pragmatism to this specific debate in the philosophy of religion – or to its secular analogies, as there can also be secular theodicies seeking to justify or excuse the reality of evil and suffering with reference to, say, historical teleology instead of divine providence – does not require or even enable the pragmatist to approach this debate in terms of a mediating strategy.

Furthermore, in many cases there is a possibility of reconciliation at the “first-order” level but no corresponding possibility at the meta-level. For example, as emphasized above, pragmatism can mediate between realism and antirealism or evidentialism and fideism in the philosophy of religion, seeking a reconciliatory path between these extremes. But it cannot similarly mediate between the view that it is possible (or advisable) to seek such a middle way option and the view that this is not possible (or advisable). Moreover, even though some particular views may be put forward as candidates for a middle ground position, pragmatism may have hard time accepting them. For instance, Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion may claim to occupy the middle ground between realism and antirealism, but from a certain kind of pragmatist perspective at least (including, possibly, Putnam’s) their proposal may arrive too close to antirealism, insofar as they absolutely deny the possibility of religious language referring to any non-linguistic reality.<sup>19</sup>

Turning from the philosophy of religion to more explicitly political examples,<sup>20</sup> it is even clearer that there can be no reconciliation between the alleged extremes of racism and antiracism or antidemocracy and democracy (as already tentatively noted above). On the contrary, it is seriously misleading to call such views “extremes” comparable to each other in the first place. The one who maintains that all people share fundamental human dignity grounding their universal human rights and the one who denies this do not occupy extreme spots along a continuum that would allow a space for legitimate mediating views. There is only one extreme view in such cases, and rejecting it is obviously the duty of any reasonable and ethically responsible person,

19 Some of Putnam’s writings on the philosophy of religion (e.g., Putnam 1997) criticize such extreme Wittgenstein approaches while seeking – in a reconciliatory spirit – to maintain what is healthy in them, especially regarding the need to avoid scientific evidentialism. See further Pihlström 2013, 2023.

20 This is not to suggest that the examples of mediation and non-mediation in religious or theological contexts would be non-political. It is obviously a most profoundly political issue whether, for example, we approach issues of religious diversity in contemporary multicultural societies from a standpoint defined by religious exclusivism (assuming that at most one religion can be true and any religion’s being true excludes the possibility of others’ being true) or a standpoint defined by religious inclusivism.

pragmatist or non-pragmatist. This I take as self-evident, and I am certainly not going to argue here that we would have to justify our ruling out racism or antidemocracy from the set of views to be seriously considered. We do, and ought to, find such views not simply wrong or misguided but unthinkable to begin with, which means that we will not seriously consider them at all, insofar as we are engaging in a sincere discussion or argument in the first place. The person who would consider being a racist but would decide against it on the basis of an argument would hardly use the canons of sound argument in any ordinary sense (shared by them and us) but would already have slid beyond any reasonably arguable range of views.<sup>21</sup>

What we need to investigate is the question of how, given that there are cases like this in which no reconciliatory project is advisable or even possible (maintaining ethical decency, or any commitment to serious argumentation), pragmatism enables us to distinguish between these different situations. How do we, or how can we, decide, on pragmatist grounds, that the pragmatic method is to be applied in its mediating or reconciliatory incarnation in some cases while acknowledging that it has to be applied in a non-reconciliatory incarnation in other cases, taking seriously the fact that some views are simply unthinkable, not to be considered, and certainly not to be reconciled with their opposites, which it is misleading to call “extreme” views at all?

### How to Distinguish Between These Cases?

The hard question for the pragmatist (and for anyone), then, is how to tell the cases where mediation or reconciliation is possible (and perhaps advisable or desirable) from those where it isn't. How should we, as pragmatists, answer this question? How should we investigate the metaphilosophical problem of drawing, or recognizing, the boundary between the mediating project of pragmatism and *its* opposite? Well, by applying the pragmatic method – that is, by self-applying it. There is no other way. This short answer needs elaboration, however.

What this self-application of pragmatism means in this metaphilosophical case is that we have to investigate, by means of the pragmatic method drawing attention to the conceivable practical bearings of (the objects of) our concepts

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21 I am here indebted to Raimond Gaita's (2004 [1991]) partly Wittgenstein-inspired lucid discussions of racism and the need to acknowledge “our common humanity” as part of what it means to understand “the meaning of the ethical”. Gaita explicitly employs the concept of “the unthinkable” in elaborating on these ideas (e.g., *ibid.*, chapter 17). His approach is not pragmatist, however.

and conceptions in order to determine their true meaning, what kind of conceivable consequences can be associated with a reconciliatory synthesis of the opposites, on the one hand, and with the rejection of the advisability or even the very possibility of such a synthesis, on the other. More straightforwardly, a pragmatist could ask whether a reconciliation of the opposing views could be pragmatically “true” in the sense of being satisfactory in our philosophical, especially ethical, experience. Can we, for example (revisiting examples briefly discussed above), live with the pragmatic “truth” of a certain form of pragmatic realism after having found both extreme realism and extreme antirealism as views that may contain some truth even if they, as such, cannot really be lived with and must therefore be regarded as pragmatically “false”? Can we, furthermore, consider pragmatically “true” the claim that a reconciliatory harmony of the opposites in some given philosophical debates is itself true (in a pragmatist sense, or some other relevant sense)?

In particular, the pragmatic method, when self-applied, leads us to observe that the conceivable pragmatic consequences that need to be considered are irreducibly ethical. In Jamesian terms, what is at issue is what the different views “promise” (see again James 1975 [1907], Lecture III). We have to be particularly careful to examine how the “cries of the wounded” are heard when (or if) supposed extremes are harmoniously reconciled or critically synthesized. For example, unlike in the realism vs. antirealism case, such cries are clearly *not* heard if we seek a middle ground between racism and antiracism, because that means tolerating at least some (“milder”) form of racism – that is, tolerating the intolerably intolerant. Nor are they heard if we seek a middle ground between theodicism and antitheodicism, because that would mean tolerating at least some form of the idea that innocent and experientially meaningless suffering could have a (divine or secular) purpose or function unknown to, or even unknowable by, the victims of such suffering and that such a purpose or function would, or at least might, justify or excuse the suffering in question.<sup>22</sup>

We might say that in order for a pragmatic mediation between two (or more) extremes to be possible, and for a pragmatist inquirer to be able to sincerely engage in the reconciliatory project, both options have to be regarded as candidates of serious thinking. They have to be “genuine options”

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22 The theodicism vs. antitheodicism issue is obviously much more complex than these brief remarks can convey. I am here only referring to this conflict as an example of an important problem in the philosophy of religion where no mediation is advisable, or even possible, but providing adequate reasons for this suggestion would require a considerably more comprehensive discussion. See, again, Pihlström 2023.

(in something like James's sense),<sup>23</sup> and it must thus be “thinkable” for the person – the pragmatist inquirer – to responsibly consider choosing a view along the continuum between the extremes. That is to say, it cannot be the case that one of the extremes is already ruled out in advance. In other words, what we *do* rule out in advance, or what we find “unthinkable” (cf. again Gaita 2004 [1991], chapter 17), determines the legitimate area of the application of the pragmatic method in reconciling the (or any) opposites. We might also say that the fact that in some cases, as in the case of racism or antidemocracy, no such reconciliation is possible means that we do not and cannot, on pain of maintaining our decency, seriously consider those views at all; they do not even enter into any genuine competition for being right, and thus no harmonizing synthesis between those views and their opposites is possible, or needed, either.

### Illusion and Reality

The assumption that there must *always* be a harmony between opposites is, then, an assumption of a kind of *illusory* harmony, as fictional as the theodist assumption that all sufferings must be eventually healed and reconciled. Pursuing such an illusory harmony is not “real” mediation in the sense that the opposites could continue to live in peaceful coexistence or be genuinely reconcilable into a synthesis (like, say, the tough- and the tender-minded temperaments can, according to James's pragmatism). They must either be critically overcome, in which case their eventual supposed harmony disappears from our view, or we must choose the right one among the opposites, in which case the harmony, along with the entire mediating project, again disappears. Pragmatism – either as a mediator or as a non-mediator – should not cherish the illusion that opposites can always live in a harmony but should encourage critical inquiry into the sources of such a presumably humanly natural illusion, which could even be compared to the “transcendental illusion” that, according to Kant, human reason inevitably produces (cf. Pihlström 2023, chapter 6) – without claiming, of course, that these types of illusion would be identical.

In other words, it is, arguably, a mere fiction that we can always or inevitably find a harmonious compromise between extremes. How, for example, would a compromise between democracy and antidemocracy be even *possible*? Clearly, the pragmatist should encourage empirical inquiry into the social

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23 The vocabulary of “genuine options” is, of course, drawn from “The Will to Believe” (see James 1979 [1897], especially 15–18).

conditions that lead some people to harbor antidemocratic ways of thinking in contemporary societies (asking why, for instance, tens of millions of voters continue to support Trump or his European populist authoritarian analogies, as unbelievable as it is), but there is no way pragmatism could support a compromise between liberal democracy and antidemocratic authoritarianism. There is no need for, and no open space for, any “mediator” here, and no possibility for any compromise solution.

We can call certain compromises illusory or fictitious, but we can also call some of them “rotten”, following Avishai Margalit’s (2009) apt terminology according to which, roughly, rotten compromises destroy the values we were seeking to protect by entering into the compromise in the first place. Consider, now, another both epistemically and ethically pregnant example, *Holocaust denialism*. What should we think of someone who suggested that we should “pragmatically mediate” between the “extremes” of maintaining that the Holocaust did take place more or less as historical scholarship says it did, on the one hand, and of denying (or skeptically questioning) this, on the other?<sup>24</sup> The view that there *are* these two extremes to be considered (and, possibly, reconciled) is itself an outrageously extreme view, something that just cannot be taken seriously at all by anyone having the slightest understanding of historical reality and of the ethical and political conditions enabling our inquiries into history. Not only would pragmatists (or others, for that matter) be ill-advised to take Holocaust denialism seriously at all; they should not take seriously even the suggestion that Holocaust denialism could possibly be found on a continuum of views that could be reconciled or synthesized by means of a Jamesian “mediating” use of the pragmatic method. It would be a completely illusory reconciliation, as well as a rotten compromise, to claim to mediate between views affirming the reality of the Holocaust and those claiming it to be, even possibly, some kind of fabrication. The fact that the Holocaust did take place is, for us, not a simple empirical fact (though it is undeniably empirical) but – to use a Wittgensteinian simile – one of the hinges upon which our ethical thinking depends.

Another way of finding a philosophical compromise illusory – one different from the decision to rule something, like Holocaust denialism, out from consideration – is to find the original debate between the “extremes” in some way a pseudo-problem. This was the logical positivists’ way of scorning

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24 Gaita’s (2004 [1991]) discussions of the meaning of the ethical also focus on compelling historical examples such as the Holocaust, and Holocaust denialism is for him an example of an “unthinkable” view we just do not argue against because it is not within the horizons of reasonable argumentation.

philosophical controversies, such as the one between realism and idealism, but it was also, in the pragmatist tradition, Richard Rorty's radically neopragmatist way of doing so. Rorty did not find realism and antirealism interesting but exaggerated views to be bridged by a compromising pragmatic realism (as in some sense Putnam seems to have done in his life-long engagement with different realisms, as briefly discussed above) but found them pragmatically empty or meaningless to begin with, though of course not meaningless in terms of any positivist theory of meaning grounded in verificationism. He basically found them uninteresting and thoroughly unhelpful due to their joint commitment to the confused view he called representationalism. At the meta-level, the conflict between *representationalism* and *antirepresentationalism* was not, for Rorty, something that should be philosophically mediated; his version of pragmatism unhesitatingly embraces the antirepresentationalist position, finding it essential to pragmatism.<sup>25</sup>

In comparison, in this case, Putnam's (and arguably many other pragmatists') choice would, precisely, be the mediating search for a compromise solution: there is something right in traditional representationalism (yes, our language-use really does, in some sense, seek to hook onto the world, or to describe the ways the world is), but Rorty's antirepresentationalist critique is nonetheless worth taking seriously, too. As there are no self-standing ready-made objects out there as referents of our linguistic expressions, our descriptions of reality are always human conceptualizations of whatever there may be "out there" independently of us. Radical neopragmatists like Rorty and somewhat more moderate neopragmatists like Putnam would then hold different views on whether a pragmatist mediation is possible (or desirable) in this case. While Putnam's own program of developing a pragmatic form of realism is far from unproblematic, I would be happy to side with Putnam instead of Rorty in the attempt to find a middle ground between excessive antirepresentationalism and traditional representationalism. This would be a pragmatist mediation project at its best. At least it can be reasonably discussed *whether* a mediation between representationalism and antirepresentationalism ought to be pursued. If, however, one were to open such a meta-level discussion in the Holocaust denialism case, one's philosophical thinking would already have taken a "rotten" turn, and this is a distinction that our pragmatist account of the methodology of mediation ought to recognize.

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25 Among Rorty's many works, Rorty 1991 is one of the best articulations of pragmatism as antirepresentationalism. My use of the word "essential" here is deliberate; as a radical antiessentialist, Rorty, of course, could hardly have found anything, even antirepresentationalism, as essential to pragmatism.

We have so far only identified a relatively loose criterion – that is, something like the need to listen to the “cries of the wounded” – for distinguishing the appropriate cases of pragmatic mediation from cases in which no reconciliation is possible (and where the expectation of an eventual harmony is therefore fictitious or illusory). This criterion needs further pragmatist articulation, and this is where the self-referential character of pragmatism enters the picture.

### Reflexivity and Holism

What I am recommending is a certain way of self-applying pragmatism. It is only by means of pragmatism itself that we can determine where, and how far, the pragmatist methodology of reconciliation between extremes can function. This leads us to view pragmatism as a *transcendentally reflexive* yet thoroughly *antifoundationalist* methodology.<sup>26</sup> There is no firm foundation for our choice whether to seek a reconciliatory mediation or whether to embrace one of the poles of the debates in any given situation. This is a question that needs to be assessed pragmatically case-by-case, and in order to do so our pragmatist inquiry must constantly reflexively turn toward its own conditions and limits. Sometimes, at the meta-level, there may be a middle path between the different ways of assessing *this* question itself. That is, we may be advised to find a middle ground between “extreme” views on what it means to maintain that occasionally a middle-ground option is to be pursued while in

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<sup>26</sup> The concept of the transcendental must be understood in a (broadly) Kantian sense here. Elsewhere, I have repeatedly defended an account of pragmatism as a naturalized and historicized version of Kant-inspired transcendental philosophy (see Pihlström 2009, 2013, 2021, 2023). It is important to note that a kind of reconciliatory project is also at work in Kant's own transcendental philosophy. Moreover, Kant's criticism of the Antinomies of Reason in the *First Critique* is analogous to the pragmatist reconciliation of metaphysical alternatives (as suggested in Pihlström 2009, chapter 4). However, just as Kant certainly does not propose to reconcile or find a harmonious middle ground between transcendental and non-transcendental philosophies, but argues that transcendental philosophy is the only appropriate way to go (and the only way we can mediate between, say, realism and idealism, or empiricism and rationalism), the pragmatist does not seek to reconcile pragmatism with non-pragmatism (though they might carefully listen to what non-pragmatists, including traditional analytic philosophers or more orthodox Kantians for that matter, may have to say about various matters of philosophical discussion) but obviously argues for the superiority of pragmatism itself to any other philosophical approach (conceived in these general terms) – indeed a superiority partly based on the fact that pragmatism *is*, better than most rival philosophies, able to reconcile alternatives or at least critically consider (as I am doing in this paper) when and how such reconciliation or harmonization ought to be pursued.

some cases it must not and cannot be pursued. Such meta-level mediation must take seriously the contexts within which we claim to find mediation advisable or non-advisable, contexts that contain irreducibly ethical and also “temperamental” factors.

Pragmatists must, then, be able to investigate the context-laden necessary conditions for the possibility of the exercise of the pragmatic method itself in its mediating function. It is not implausible to argue that this method itself depends on individual freedom, democracy, tolerance, openness to critical inquiry, and other ethical and political values that pragmatists usually defend. For example, the kind of ideas James himself associates with, say, the tough-minded and the tender-minded temperaments are all valuable but (according to James) by themselves narrow and inadequate expressions of human being-in-the-world; in order for them to be harmoniously reconciled via pragmatism, they need to be available for free and sincere expression by human individuals seeking to make sense of the universe they live in.

This arguably leads us to a quasi-transcendental argument against not merely the truth or plausibility but the very consistency and thus the genuine availability of inherently oppressive views such as racism.<sup>27</sup> Such positions are not only deeply wrong but in a certain sense performatively inconsistent: the racist cannot hold any normative views about our (or anyone’s) duty to hear other voices (including the racist’s own) precisely because they suppress many of those voices right from the start. Racism and related discriminatory ideas undermine their own capability of being taken seriously as (extreme) positions a reasonable person might possibly hold, views that might be reconciled with their alternatives in a pragmatic compromise spirit.<sup>28</sup> Conversely, it might be suggested that the rejection of racism and the related affirmation of the fundamental equality of all human beings is such a key assumption in our inquiries into and argumentation for anything whatsoever – in any sincere pursuit of truth possible for us within what we are able to recognize as a shared human form of life – that it would be an illusion even to begin to rationally consider whether a middle path between racism and antiracism might be available. If we actually did believe in the possibility of justifying racism, even partially, we would have stepped outside the area of serious argumentation

<sup>27</sup> See Pihlström 2021, chapter 5, for a more detailed development of this line of argument.

<sup>28</sup> This is not to say that *all* views that pragmatism must reject would be exactly of this kind (viz., performatively inconsistent). The matter needs to be investigated further, again in a case-by-case manner, but I suppose it is safe to say that there are plenty of positions – ethical and epistemic alike – that the pragmatist may and should simply abandon for the reason that they are wrong, or implausible, even if they cannot be shown to be transcendentally (and thus pragmatically) incoherent or “unthinkable”.

capable of addressing any genuine ethical issues at all. Our being able to engage in the practice of reason-use depends on our acknowledging all other human beings as potential partners in dialogue, conversation, inquiry, and criticism. A reconciliation of racism with anything else is *unavailable* to us, as claiming such a reconciliation to be possible would already be to fail to acknowledge the dignity of some of our fellow human beings and would thus be to fail to engage in serious inquiry at all. In particular, the reconciliation-seeking would-be-partial-racist pragmatist would fail to engage in a mediating inquiry listening to the cries of the wounded and would thus be disqualified from sincerely seeking a harmonious middle ground.

The use of the pragmatic method in reconciling extremes is, accordingly, constrained by the ethical need to recognize the “voices” to be reconciled. Racism (for example) violates the constitutive conditions of applying the pragmatic method in ways that are responsive to the cries of the wounded. Antiracism is thus a transcendental condition for the possibility of employing the pragmatic method of inquiry, or even a transcendental condition for the possibility of serious discourse in general. However, this transcendental argument – if we can call it such – is itself grounded in a pragmatic recognition of others, and their “voices”, within our practices of (ethical) argumentation, reflection, and inquiry. Pragmatism itself guides and constrains the employment of such a transcendental argument appealing to the constitutive conditions of inquiry. The availability of a transcendental antiracist argument itself depends on our already pragmatically exercising sound judgment in our analysis of the concrete ways in which we need to be responsive to other human beings. Pragmatism, in this sense, functions as the ultimate metaphilosophy here, assigning even the transcendental method to its own “place” in our holistic inquiry into appropriate philosophical methodology. Yet, it must obey its own transcendental conditions to be able to do so. This eventually leads to a reflexive spiral – or an oscillating movement between the pragmatic and the transcendental in a potentially endless inquiry into, in brief, *who we are* – that is, what it means for us to be committed to the practices of inquiry we find ourselves committed to.

Emphasizing this reflexivity of the pragmatic method in determining when the method is a method of mediating, compromise-seeking harmonization and when it isn't leads us to appreciate the resolutely antifoundationalist nature of pragmatism. There is no way of grounding the pragmatic method in anything more basic or more fundamental than pragmatism itself, because even the transcendental conditions for the possibility of an inquiry employing the pragmatic method depend on pragmatism itself in the sense of being available (qua transcendental conditions) only within, and as grounded in, our

engagement in the practices we do engage in. All our uses of the pragmatic method must then be pragmatically assessed.

In more concrete ethical terms, this means that we have to continue to critically examine any attempts to mediate between philosophical conflicts in terms of how the mediating effort responds to the “cries of the wounded”. We must not – to use yet another Jamesian metaphor – be “blind” to others’ legitimate concerns,<sup>29</sup> and therefore we can never simply assume the mediating or compromising role. Our ethical practice of living with others is, then, the ultimate test of any pragmatist theory, including the methodology of pragmatism. These will, in the end, have to be developed *holistically* as an interdependent totality.

One important pragmatist way of cashing out this idea is Morton White’s (e.g., 2002) *holistic pragmatism*, which centrally employs the concept of a *reflective equilibrium* as a core of pragmatist methodology. There is nothing new in this concept as such, but in the context of our investigation, we might say that the mediating pragmatist effort must reach an equilibrium with what remains sound in the opposites it seeks to mediate; in some cases (e.g., when mistakenly believing that we should, or could, find a compromise between racism and antiracism or Holocaust denialism and its unthinkability) that very effort collapses our entire inquiry into one of those extremes (in this case, into tolerating racism or Holocaust denialism, a “rotten” compromise amounting to a slide into the kind of intolerance that makes the reconciliatory project itself impossible). In the spirit of holistic pragmatism, we need to continue to critically test even our best pragmatist theory of mediation in terms of how well it succeeds in its compromise pursuits (whenever applied to such pursuits), sincerely seeking to determine when those pursuits themselves have to be revised or even given up.

A holistic antifoundationalist yet transcendently reflexive understanding of the pragmatic method itself is therefore needed in order for us to be able to apply pragmatism to an on-going critical consideration – seeking a reflective equilibrium – determining whether the options we are considering are reconcilable in terms of a harmonizing middle ground position or whether no such *via media* is reasonably and responsibly defensible. Deciding between these two meta-level options – and deciding whether they are (in a Jamesian sense) “genuine options” for us – is again a matter of exercising sound pragmatic judgment. What this amounts to is, again at a meta-level, a conception of pragmatism as a philosophical approach bridging the gap

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29 This Jamesian phrase comes from his lecture, “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings” (see James 1983 [1899]).

between the view that we should (always) seek a middle ground when faced with philosophical conflicts or debates, on the one hand, and the view that we should (at least sometimes) bite the bullet and choose one of the options (the right one, what we consider to be the right one, or what we can only find thinkable), without aiming at any lazy compromise. Philosophizing has its moderate, compromising, and mediating moments, but it also has its more sharply critical moments, and a good pragmatist uses (and develops) the pragmatic method in such a way that the need to distinguish between these is recognized as fully as possible whenever relevant, while maintaining the meta-level possibility of reconciling *these* pursuits with each other when possible.<sup>30</sup>

### Conclusion: Stopping the Slide to Lunacy

In political debates in particular, we often hear people suggest that we should avoid “extreme” views and seek compromises when possible. A president may hope to “unify the nation”. The obvious problem is that this is not always possible; nor is it, as we have seen, always advisable, ethically sound, decent, or even “thinkable” (again using a term I have borrowed from Raimond Gaita, thus in a way bringing it to pragmatist employment). Finding democracy and antidemocracy two “extreme views” to be harmoniously reconciled is itself an extreme view. Seeking to “unify” the democrats and the antidemocrats is to fail to be a democrat. Only an authoritarian extremist can maintain that the struggle between democracy and its opposite is a struggle in which we need a

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30 Another – related but not identical – mediation issue in developing the pragmatic method is the need to overcome conflicts between those uses of the pragmatic method (or the pragmatic maxim) that emphasize, with Peirce, the conceivable practical bearings that the *objects* of our conception may have, on the one hand, and those that emphasize, with some of James’s pronouncements on the maxim, the potential practical consequences of *those ideas or conceptions themselves*. James occasionally slides between these (cf. James 1975 [1907], Lecture 11), although it would be a mischaracterization to claim that he simply replaced the original Peircean view by a more subjectivist reference to the consequences of our ideas (or of our holding them). A related distinction within pragmatism is the one between emphasizing, with Peirce, general and conceivable habituality, and emphasizing, with James, the concrete and the particular manifested in our actions themselves. While this paper started out from Jamesian considerations of pragmatism as a mediator, I have not taken any side in these tensions that largely define the pragmatist tradition. The reflexive and holistic development of pragmatism as a method needs to be aware of such tensions and find ways of reconciling them if possible, or reasons for not doing so, if reconciliation turns out to be inappropriate.

“middle way”. Such a pursuit for a middle-ground option in cases like this is a pure fiction. No pragmatist should harbor any such illusion. Or if they do, they will already have lost the kind of sound judgment whose exercise is needed for *any* serious reconciliatory mediation and will therefore have started a slide to something like philosophical or political lunacy. The alleged need to mediate between racism and antiracism is an equally clear case, and so is the imagined mediation between Holocaust denialism and its rejection. However, these examples should not deprive us of the acceptable mediating uses of the pragmatic method in cases such as the Jamesian tough- and tender-minded temperaments, between which we do have to, or may at least legitimately try to, find a harmonizing compromise.<sup>31</sup>

I have, while providing ample examples of different cases (all of which would need considerably more detailed scrutiny), primarily examined the meta-level question concerning our grounds for deciding, pragmatically, when we can pursue pragmatic mediation and when we cannot. I have found no firmer basis for answering such questions than pragmatism itself, albeit transcendently articulated. Is *this* an extreme view, an extreme form of pragmatism? Perhaps in a sense it is: pragmatism ultimately – even when transcendently reconceptualized – recognizes *only* a pragmatist approach to exploring the question of what exactly the pragmatic method comes down to, viz., whether it should be developed as a method of seeking a mediating compromise or whether it shouldn't. Even when identifying constitutive transcendental conditions for the possibility of employing the pragmatic method, we can only reflexively rely on pragmatism itself. The transcendental is the pragmatic.

On the other hand, the extremity of such thoroughgoing pragmatism is always softened by its willingness to hear what non-pragmatists (and non-transcendental philosophers) have to say about these matters. In nothing that I have said have I claimed that non-pragmatists are simply wrong. Pragmatism should remain a philosophical approach genuinely willing to listen to what others, including non-pragmatists, might have to say – within certain (non-extremist) limits.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Nor should the unthinkability of some alleged mediations lead us to reject the reasonable reconciliation of extremes in, say, the philosophical debates on realism and (anti)representationalism very briefly considered above.

<sup>32</sup> I am grateful to John R. Shook for constructive and encouraging comments on this paper.

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