

Forthcoming in the proceedings volume of the NOS-H workshop series, *Rearticulations of Reason*, ed. by Leila Haaparanta.

SEEKING A *VIA MEDIA*

A Challenge for Philosophical Reason

Sami Pihlström

Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

Department of Philosophy, University of Helsinki, Finland

E-mail: sajopihl@cc.jyu.fi, sami.pihlstrom@helsinki.fi

1. Introduction

The “reasonable” philosophical position, in various areas of dispute, often lies in between implausible extremes, although the extreme positions may be more interesting and may stimulate discussion and criticism in a way the more moderate ones never can. This paper seeks to identify and defend some *methodological* (and thus *metaphilosophical*) options for the philosophical moderator, the “middle-ground-seeker”. It will be argued that a *pragmatist* methodology is a (though surely not *the*) plausible approach for the one who seeks to maintain the middle ground and that a promising version of such methodology can be found in William James’s pragmatism, especially his treatment of some traditional metaphysical problems in *Pragmatism*.¹ Moreover, it turns out that Immanuel Kant’s resolution of the “Antinomy of Pure Reason”² is a crucial historical background for such a pragmatic attempt to occupy the middle ground. Although Kant and James have occasionally been compared, Kant’s account of the antinomial conflicts of reason has seldom, if ever, been directly juxtaposed to James’s pragmatic resolution of metaphysical worries.

This is not to say that the one who seeks a *via media* in a particular philosophical controversy will necessarily have to be a Kantian, or a Jamesian pragmatist. However, more modestly, what I am suggesting is that a pragmatist, especially a pragmatist who takes her/his

¹ See William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (1907), eds. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1975), especially Lecture III: “Some Metaphysical Problems Pragmatically Considered”. (Hereafter cited as P, followed by page numbers, in the text.)

² Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1st ed. 1781 = A; 2nd ed. 1787 = B), ed. Raymund Schmidt (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1990), A405/B432 ff. (Hereafter cited in the standard A/B fashion in the text.)

Kantian roots seriously (or who is even prepared to view pragmatism as a descendant of Kantian transcendental idealism), may be better equipped for such a search for the middle ground than the representatives of many other (meta)philosophical orientations.³ This paper will thus make both metaphilosophical (methodological) and historical points. However, the former are, for my purposes here, more vital than the latter; if it turned out that my scholarly reading of Kant and/or James is mistaken, that would scarcely affect my methodological remarks on what seeking a *via media* in philosophy amounts to.

2. Examples of “antinomial” conflicts calling for a *via media*

First, it will be useful to simply list a number of examples, drawn from different fields of philosophical (including metaphilosophical) inquiry, of the need to take the middle course, to occupy the middle ground. The following list is by no means exhaustive but is, I hope, illustrative:

- rationalism vs. empiricism
- dogmatism vs. skepticism
- (scientific) realism vs. its alternatives (constructivism, idealism, relativism)
- naturalism vs. antinaturalism
- materialism vs. antimaterialism (dualism, idealism)
- determinism vs. indeterminism
- evidentialism vs. fideism
- liberalism vs. communitarianism
- metaphysics vs. antimetaphysics
- constructive, systematic philosophy vs. deconstructive, therapeutic philosophy

³ For my earlier attempts to examine the Kantian background of (Jamesian) pragmatism, see Sami Pihlström, *Pragmatism and Philosophical Anthropology: Understanding Our Human Life in a Human World* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), especially chs. 5-6; *Naturalizing the Transcendental: A Pragmatic View* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus/Humanity Books, 2003); and, with an eye to the historiography of the pragmatist and transcendental traditions, “Synthesizing Traditions: Reconciling Pragmatism and Transcendental Philosophy”, forthcoming in *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 23 (October 2006). Of course, I do not claim to be in any way original in referring to a convergence of ideas between Kant and James. Major pragmatism scholars, including Murray G. Murphey and Bruce Kuklick, have discussed James’s transformation of Kantianism. For a convincing argument to the effect that James replaces Kant’s transcendental idealism with a “transcendental humanism”, see Thomas Carlson, “James and the Kantian Tradition”, in Ruth Anna Putnam (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to William James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 363-383. Where my approach possibly differs from other commentators’ in this regard is in my emphasis on (i) the central role played by the problem of realism in James and (ii) the equally central role played by metaphysics in both Jamesian pragmatism and Kantian transcendental philosophy. These broader themes cannot be commented upon in any detail in the present essay.

Some of these issues are extremely general, to be found in various fields of philosophy (e.g., the realism issue in its several guises), while others are specific to a certain area of discourse (e.g., the opposition between evidentialism and fideism in the philosophy of religion). Regardless of their degree of generality, it seems that a *via media* is desirable in many or most, if not all, of them. Another, not unrelated, list of oppositions is given by James, when he offers pragmatism as a mediator between the “tender-minded” temperament, which is rationalistic, intellectualistic, idealistic, optimistic, religious, free-willist, monistic, and dogmatical, and the “tough-minded” one, which is empiricist, sensationalistic, materialistic, pessimistic, irreligious, fatalistic, pluralistic, and skeptical (P 13).

For example, in the philosophy of science it seems that most of the reasonable positions to be seriously developed lie between the extremes of strong (more or less scientific) scientific realism (e.g., Wilfrid Sellars) and radical relativism and/or constructivism (e.g., Paul Feyerabend). For example, pragmatist philosophy of science, all the way from William James’s and John Dewey’s account of theories as “instruments” up to, and including, such neopragmatists as Hilary Putnam’s and Thomas Kuhn’s engagement with the realism issue, has struggled with (at least) two essential tensions, or gaps that need to be bridged: between realism (affirming the objectivity of scientific truth-seeking) and instrumentalism (which denies truthvalues to theories, treating them as *mere* instruments of prediction and control of observable phenomena), on the one side, and between realism and relativism or constructivism (which denies the objectivity of the scientific pursuit of truth, declaring rival theories and/or paradigms good for their own purposes, acceptable on their own standards, or even incommensurable), on the other.⁴ Plausible pragmatist views seem to offer one or another way of bridging the gap, or resolving the tension. Thus, they all, possibly in very different ways, seek a *via media*. Classical pragmatism, especially James’s and Dewey’s, can be seen as a middle path between realism and instrumentalism, whereas for neopragmatism the need to find a middle way between realism and relativism (and/or constructivism) seems to be more pressing.⁵

⁴ I try to tell this complex story, with plenty of references to relevant literature (which I must here omit), in Sami Pihlström, “How (Not) to Write the History of Pragmatist Philosophy of Science?”, forthcoming in *Perspectives on Science* (2007). I admit that it may sound odd to call Kuhn a neopragmatist. I am not, of course, making any historical claims about his pragmatist background, but referring to his generally pragmatist tendency to understand science as a processual (and social) practice instead of a completed product of such a practice. A similar problem of the criteria of applying the label “pragmatism” arises with W.V. Quine, who had an enormous influence on the neopragmatist views that Putnam and Richard Rorty developed in the 1980-90s; see here Heikki J. Koskinen and Sami Pihlström, “Quine and Pragmatism”, forthcoming in *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 42 (2006).

⁵ By no means do I want to downplay the importance of Charles Peirce as the founder of the pragmatist tradition, of course. On the tension between realism and idealism in Peirce (and, through his work, in the later pragmatist tradition),

Most, if not all, of the conflicts mentioned above can be described, in Kantian terms, as *antinomial* ones. Reason sets us conflicting demands. On the one hand, we should – to continue the example drawn from the philosophy of science – listen to what experience tells us and be extremely cautious in speculating about the existence of any facts, entities, or lawlike regularities that transcend immediate experience. Hence the appeal of empiricist instrumentalism. On the other hand, we should view science as a pursuit of objective truth, even about the unobservable entities and processes there undoubtedly are “behind” the experienceable phenomena – i.e., about the entities, processes, facts, and laws that are postulated in order to explain observable facts. Hence the appeal of scientific realism. The middle-ground-seeker, e.g., the pragmatist philosopher of science following the footsteps of Dewey, should somehow attempt to reconcile these conflicting demands.

Similarly, in the philosophy of religion, a conflict of intellectual demands seems to arise between evidentialism, which requires that religious beliefs ought to be examined and evaluated on the basis of similar rational criteria as all other kinds of belief and thus be subjected to neutral, objective standards of rationality, and fideism, which argues that evidentialists (theistic and atheistic alike) misunderstand the distinctive nature of religious faith, reducing it to hypotheses testable by empirical (or in general intellectual) means, even though a genuinely religious person does not conceptualize her/his faith in that way at all but sees it as a fundamental existential attitude to the world and life as a whole. Thus, again, the need to reconcile these different standpoints seems to arise. The evidentialist seems to be right in saying that we cannot simply give up all intellectual considerations when examining religious beliefs and/or ways of life, because otherwise we end up with shallow relativism, with the principle that “anything goes”. (The same outcome obviously threatens to follow from Kuhnian considerations in the philosophy of science.) But the fideist seems to be right in countering this argument by the insight that there is something special in religious beliefs and religious ways of using language, something that cannot be fully captured if those beliefs are understood as essentially similar to scientific ones. The seriousness of a truly religious perspective on the world seems to be lost, if religious beliefs and statements are understood in terms of the evidential considerations familiar from science.

Just as in the philosophy of science, the pragmatist usually tries to occupy the middle ground in the philosophy of religion, too. This is not the right place to examine how s/he attempts to do it or whether such attempts are successful.⁶ It is just important to realize, via these brief

see Sami Pihlström, “Peirce’s Place in the Pragmatist Tradition”, in Cheryl Misak (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Peirce* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 27-57.

⁶ See my above-cited book, *Pragmatism and Philosophical Anthropology*, ch. 6; cf. also Sami Pihlström, “Pragmatic and Transcendental Arguments for Theism: A Critical Examination”, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 51 (2002), 195-213.

examples, that the need to find a *via media* is often pressing and may even seem to be required by the intellectual respectability of a particular philosophical discipline. Indeed, from a pragmatic point of view, it may even seem to be a condition for the adequacy of a philosophical inquiry into the nature of religion that it somehow reconciles the conflicting perspectives of eventialism and fideism. Philosophies of religion that do not even try to do so will be deemed hopeless from the start.

The dialectical situation of the middle-ground-seeker is, in conflicts such as these, very difficult. The one who defends a *via media* – e.g., a “pragmatic realism” as an alternative between extreme realism (“metaphysical realism”, strong scientific realism) and irresponsible postmodern constructivism(s) and relativism(s), either in the philosophy of science or in the philosophy of religion; or, in a more metaphilosophical case, a “soft naturalism” as an alternative between radical reductionist naturalism and an uncompromising antinaturalism dreaming of pure philosophy absolutely independent of empirical science – usually faces severe criticism from both sides. Thus, s/he will have to steer the middle course between Scylla and Charybdis and will find her/his own position constantly insecure. What is to be done in such a challenging situation?

My proposal, in brief, is that the middle-ground-seeker is in such cases justified in using the argumentative resources of both of her/his enemies, or more specifically, in using the weapons of one enemy against the other, and *vice versa*. That is, each of the extreme positions can be pragmatically employed in order to refute the other, and thereby eventually to refute both. This will then secure, or at least indirectly contribute to the defense of, the more plausible middle way. This view, bearing some resemblance to Kant’s famous resolution to the Antinomies in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, in which the opposing theses are shown to rest on a common, mistaken, assumption (viz., transcendental realism, which the Kantian transcendental thinker ought to reject in favor of transcendental idealism),⁷ is essentially a pragmatist, though not for that reason flatly instrumentalist, position.

The key novelty in the pragmatist suggestion of how to deal with the dialectical situation (and of how to fruitfully combine Kantianism with pragmatism) is that the pragmatist can, for good pragmatic reasons, *tolerate* the (apparent) contradiction of the opposing arguments, and thus use those arguments to combat both extremes, though only for a restricted period of time, until the end of the dialectical inquiry and the emergence of the desired middle way. This is because beliefs and arguments used to support them are, for the pragmatist, dynamic and evolving things, processes

⁷ Regarding Kant’s Antinomies, I am crucially indebted to the interpretation by Henry E. Allison; see his *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defense – Revised and Enlarged Edition*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT & London, 2004 (1st ed. 1983), ch. 13. See also Michelle Grier, *Kant’s Doctrine of Transcendental Illusion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

rather than states. This is a central premise in the metaphilosophically pragmatist defense of the right of the middle-ground-seeker to engage in dialectical argumentation *pro et contra*, an argumentation whose ultimate purpose is to overcome the entire debate, or at least the conflicting theses presupposed in the beginning of the debate, in order to finally occupy an *aufgehoben* pragmatic *via media*.

3. James's pragmatic method and Kant's antinomies: an historical excursus

After having illustrated the need and the legitimacy of a pragmatic, critically and restrictedly tolerant approach to the challenge resulting from the conflict of extreme positions calling for a moderate middle path, I will move on to a more historical question concerning the role played by such a metaphilosophical idea in the actual pragmatist tradition. Did the classical pragmatists, we may ask, employ anything like the method I have been outlining? I cannot here engage in any thoroughgoing historical scholarship regarding this matter; obviously, further investigation is needed. I will, however, make a few historical points about the ways in which William James did use at least something closely resembling the method I am recommending.

I refer, specifically, to the examples he used to introduce the “pragmatic method” – a method he derived from Charles S. Peirce's writings in the 1870s⁸ – as a philosophical way to settle disputes that might otherwise remain unsettled. For James, philosophical (as well as scientific) ideas and theories are essentially “instruments”. As such instruments, they should never be dogmatically embraced but can be *used* for finding the middle ground in a dispute which would otherwise remain an interminable conflict between extreme views that can hardly communicate with each other. We may thus extrapolate what James says about science to a metaphilosophical discussion of the status of philosophical views and theories; given James's overall pragmatist account of thought and inquiry, this is not at all difficult. What may be slightly more difficult is to demonstrate the interpretive claim that his project is essentially Kantian – not only in the positive sense of providing (naturalized and pragmatically contextualized) transcendental conditions for the possibility of cognitive experience in terms of human practices,⁹ but in the more negative or critical sense of

⁸ The most important papers by Peirce at the background of James's pragmatism are “The Fixation of Belief” (1877) and “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” (1878), both in *The Essential Peirce* (2 vols), The Peirce Edition Project, ed. Nathan Houser *et al.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992-98), vol. 1.

⁹ For such a naturalized reconceptualization of the Kantian transcendental tradition, see Pihlström, *Naturalizing the Transcendental*.

resolving the antinomial conflicts that (philosophical) reason more or less naturally arrives at when carelessly employed.

After having introduced the pragmatic method in Lecture II of *Pragmatism*, James goes on, in Lecture III, to explore pragmatically “some metaphysical problems”.¹⁰ The first of these is the problem of *substance*. James applauds Berkeley’s criticism of the concept of a *material substance* and Locke’s and Hume’s in his view equally pragmatic criticisms of the notion of a *spiritual substance* (P 46-48). In each case we ought to give up, he argues, Cartesian and other traditionally metaphysical assumptions about fundamental substances underlying experiential reality (e.g., “souls” as spiritual substances), since the work for which such a traditional notion of substance seems to have been needed can very well be done with the experiential characteristics or attributes in terms of which the substance is “known as” some particular thing.¹¹ James seems to be saying that we need not reject the notion of substance completely, if we are prepared to understand it in terms of such experiential attributes merely. This is, then, a case in which a reconciliation of extremes – that is, traditional substance metaphysics, on the one hand, and a thoroughgoing elimination of whatever job the concept of substance was needed to perform, on the other – is required and pragmatically achieved.

James’s second, in my view much more illuminating and successful, example is the dispute between *materialism* (or *atheism*) and *spiritualism* (or *theism*) (see P 48-56). When the pragmatic method is applied to this problem of whether the world is “guided” by its “lower” or “higher” elements (P 49), it will not be treated in a “stagnant intellectualist fashion” but dynamically, with an eye to the *future* of the world: “What do we *mean* by matter? What practical difference can it make *now* that the world should be run by matter or by spirit?” Here he crucially notes: “It makes not a single jot of difference so far as the *past* of the world goes, whether we deem it to have been the work of matter or whether we think a divine spirit was its author” (P 50). Accordingly, the mistake of both extremes, traditional atheistic materialism and traditional theism, is the assumption that the world is “finished”, complete as it is. The dispute is “purely verbal”, if there is no future, no experiences to expect (P 51). “[I]f no future detail of experience is to be deduced from our hypothesis, the debate between materialism and theism becomes quite idle and insignificant. Matter

¹⁰ The following discussion is partly indebted to the one offered in Sami Pihlström, “Metaphysics with a Human Face: William James and the Prospects of Pragmatist Metaphysics”, forthcoming in *William James Studies* 2 (2007) (online).

¹¹ Thus, James writes (P 47): “Berkeley’s criticism of ‘matter’ was consequently absolutely pragmatistic. Matter is known as our sensations of colour, figure, hardness and the like. They are the cash-value of the term. The difference matter makes to us by truly being is that we then get such sensations; by not being, is that we lack them. These sensations are its sole meaning. Berkeley doesn’t deny matter, then; he simply tells us what it consists of. It is a true name for just so much in the way of sensations.”

and God in that event mean exactly the same thing – the power, namely, neither more nor less, that could make this completed world [...]” (P 52).

The middle path, the pragmatic position, can be reached only when that assumption is given up and when it is realized that the merits of the rival standpoints must be inquired into in terms of the future they promise for the world, the future experience that may result, if one of them is true and the other false. That is an application of the pragmatic method,¹² which advises us, in order “[t]o attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object”, “only consider what conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve – what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare”, and to conclude that “[o]ur conception of these effects, whether immediate or remote, is then for us the whole of our conception of the object, so far as that conception has positive significance at all” (P 29). When it is admitted that the world has a future, and that the two rival hypotheses, materialism and theism, offer quite different future expectations, then the dispute can be pragmatically considered, and it will be immediately seen that it is “intensely practical” (P 52).¹³

After having examined in some detail the materialism vs. theism case, in its practical and to a large extent ethical dimensions,¹⁴ James moves on to his third example, which also helps us to appreciate his Kantian orientation. This is the “*question of design in nature*” (P 56-59, original emphasis). Here the metaphysician who inquires into “design” (or the lack thereof) in an abstract way, having in mind a general principle of design, is led astray. “Pragmatically”, we are told (P 58), “the abstract word ‘design’ is blank cartridge. It carries no consequences, it does no execution. What sort of design? and what sort of a designer? are the only serious questions, and the study of facts is the only way of getting even approximate answers.” The analysis is thus similar to that of the previous problem.¹⁵ The pragmatist, as James emphasized throughout his pragmatist writings, turns her/his gaze away from abstract principles and toward concrete facts of experience.

¹² For a discussion (with further references) of the differences in Peirce’s and James’s characterizations and applications of the pragmatic method, see Pihlström, “Peirce’s Place in the Pragmatist Tradition”.

¹³ When the dispute *is* thus considered, James’s sympathies are, unsurprisingly, on the theistic side, because the “need for an eternal moral order is one of the deepest needs of our breast” (P 55), and James always acknowledged the pragmatic importance of such deep human needs (cf. also Pihlström, *Pragmatism and Philosophical Anthropology*, ch. 6).

¹⁴ On the profoundly ethical thrust of James’s pragmatist metaphysics, see Sami Pihlström, “William James on Death, Mortality, and Immortality”, *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 38 (2002), 605-628; “William James’s Pragmatist Metaphysics of the Mind and Other Minds”, forthcoming in Sara Heinämaa and Martina Reuter (eds.), *Psychology in Philosophy* (proceedings of a conference organized in Helsinki in October, 2003); and “Metaphysics with a Human Face” (cited above).

¹⁵ Again, James does sympathize with the theistic idea of design, though not with any of the traditional arguments for God’s existence (including the “argument from design”), when he writes (P 59): “If not a blind force but a seeing force runs things, we may reasonably expect better issues. This vague confidence in the future is the sole pragmatic meaning at present discernible in the terms design and designer.”

Finally, James raises his fourth problem – the most Kantian of the problems he discusses in the third lecture – the problem of *free will* (P 59-62).¹⁶ Again, things go wrong if the problem is stated as a metaphysical question about the fundamental structure of reality, considered apart from human experiences and interests. The problem of freedom must rather be tied to our human points of view, particularly to how (again!) we are oriented to the future, in order to find out its true pragmatic significance.¹⁷ Determinism “assures us that our whole notion of possibility is born of human ignorance, and that necessity and impossibility between them rule the destinies of the world” (P 61), but the free will theory “pragmatically means *novelties in the world*” (P 60) and is thus “a general cosmological theory of *promise*” (P 61), “a doctrine of *relief*” (P 61), and is thus connected with a broader religious – for James, essentially “melioristic” – metaphysics in which the world is governed by genuine aims and purposes (whose satisfaction is possible but not guaranteed) and in which human beings can do their share in the world’s “moral salvation”.

Proceeding to the conclusion of his chapter on these four metaphysical problems, James recapitulates his main point:

See then how all these ultimate questions turn, as it were, upon their hinges; and from looking backwards upon principles, upon an *erkenntnisstheoretische Ich*, a God, a *Kausalitätsprinzip*, a Design, a Free-will, taken in themselves, as something august and exalted above facts, – see, I say, how pragmatism shifts the emphasis and looks forward into facts themselves. The really vital question for us all is, What is this world going to be? What is life eventually to make of itself? The centre of gravity of philosophy must therefore alter its place. The earth of things, long thrown into shadow by the glories of the upper ether, must resume its rights. (P 62)

When the pragmatist performs this “turning around”, or “shift of emphasis”, s/he, however, lets the opposing traditional viewpoints each have their say. On my reading, the Jamesian pragmatist feels free to employ the insights of the old metaphysical disputes, drawn from both sides, in order to

¹⁶ In addition, Lecture IV is entirely devoted to yet another metaphysical problem, “The One and the Many”, which James famously considered “the most central of all philosophic problems, central because so pregnant” (P 64). I will neglect that problem here, because it is not a good example of James’s concern with middle paths. James, after all, resolutely affirmed pluralism, rejecting monism. This obviously shows that his attempt to find a *via media* was itself undogmatic: in some cases he strived for a middle path, but not always. For James’s developments of his pluralist, radically empiricist metaphysics, see William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909) and *Some Problems of Philosophy: A Beginning of an Introduction to Philosophy* (1911), both eds. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1977 and 1979, respectively).

¹⁷ Notably, the pragmatist is not only interested in short-term future but, “so far from keeping her eyes bent on the immediate practical foreground, as she is accused of doing, dwells just as much upon the world’s remotest perspectives” (P 62).

locate the weak points of the opposing theses. The reason why this is possible is precisely the future-oriented, dynamic procedure of pragmatist inquiry. Metaphysical puzzles are not viewed as conflicts between two views complete and finished as they stand. Rather, a metaphysical problem is always an individual human being's – in the end, my – attempt to come to terms with the different considerations reason offers in favor of the antinomically conflicting positions in the midst of experience. It is such an individual inquirer who asks, "What is life eventually to make of itself?", and in the process of such an inquiry there is no permanent stopping place. The dialectics between opposing metaphysical theories cannot simply go on forever, because one must always live forward, encounter new experiential facts. But precisely for this reason, the original conflict can be transcended, and the pragmatic middle ground option may gradually (or suddenly) emerge. Typically, such a middle ground is opened when it is realized that the conflict has been premised on misleading background assumptions.

The four metaphysical disputes James examines are of course not identical to the four antinomial conflicts of reason Kant examines in his chapter on the "Antinomy of Pure Reason". Even the one also explicitly taken up by Kant, the problem of freedom vs. determinism,¹⁸ is discussed by James in a loose, informal manner very different from Kant's strictly argumentative presentation following the thesis/antithesis structure.¹⁹ James, moreover, was generally critical, even outright hostile, of many of Kant's in his view unnecessarily complex ideas,²⁰ some of which he found paradigmatic examples of abstract principles oblivious of concrete experience and facts. Yet, it must be noted that Kant, no less than James, wanted to liberate philosophy from the supposed "glories of the upper ether" which his pre-critical, especially rationalist (Leibnizian-Wolffian), predecessors had believed to be able to reach. A quick glance at Kant's resolution of the Antinomy²¹ will, I hope, render this point credible.

The crucial suggestion I wish to make is that both Kant and James insist on the need to locate and abandon a mistaken assumption – i.e., metaphysical realism, or what Kant called

¹⁸ This, of course, is Kant's Third Antinomy (see A444-451/B472-479).

¹⁹ Allison, in ch. 13 of his *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, offers a clear outline of Kant's arguments, particularly of the First and Third Antinomies.

²⁰ See, again, my above-cited paper, "Synthesizing Traditions", for some documentation.

²¹ There is, in an important sense, only one Antinomy, based on an unavoidable illusion of reason connected with a single cosmological idea, that of the world as a totality, but this manifests itself in four antinomial conflicts. The so-called "mathematical antinomies" deal with the extensive magnitude of the world (i.e., whether it is spatially or temporally bounded or not) and with the divisibility of matter (i.e., whether there is a smallest element of the world or not), while the "dynamical" ones deal with the determination of the events taking place in the world (i.e., whether there is freedom or not) and with the need to invoke a necessary being (i.e., whether there is something in the world that exists of necessity or not). In the case of the former, both the thesis and the antithesis turn out to be false, because both presuppose an incoherent view of the world as a "self-existent whole", while in the case of the latter, it is not ruled out that both the thesis and the antithesis, suitably reconstructed, might be true. See Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, p. 365, and ch. 13 *passim*.

“transcendental realism” – that sets the metaphysical issues they examine on the wrong track from the very beginning. This is the assumption that there is a prior, metaphysically fundamental fact of the matter about, say, the world as a totality or about freedom. Although reason entirely naturally falls into “transcendental illusion” by seeking the “unconditioned” ground of all conditioned phenomena,²² harmful metaphysical errors result only when this tendency of reason is connected with transcendently realistic assumptions, particularly the assumptions that there is an absolutely independent world *an sich* with its ready-made, pre-categorized ontological structure, that it makes sense to talk about such a fundamental reality, and that it could even be an object of human representation and cognition. These assumptions, closely resembling the ones Hilary Putnam later rejected under the label of “metaphysical realism”,²³ are attacked equally forcefully, though by means of quite different arguments, by Kant and James alike.

Kant argues in the Antinomy chapter that the “cosmological idea” of the world as a whole (as the sum total of appearances, that is, spatiotemporal things and events) yields equally compelling yet conflicting arguments. The “skeptical method” Kant says he uses here (A424/B451-452) amounts to a critical examination of the presuppositions of the disputes; it is not unmotivated to see James’s later employment of the pragmatic method as one way of conducting such an examination, too. In both cases, as the underlying presuppositions are denied, the conflicts are critically resolved. Moreover, just as James is above all concerned, in his chapter on traditional metaphysical disputes, with demonstrating the superiority of pragmatism to standard metaphysical (and methodological) orientations, Kant is primarily arguing indirectly for the truth of transcendental idealism in his resolution of the antinomies.²⁴ Because transcendental idealism and transcendental realism are, for him, a pair of exhaustive and mutually incompatible metaphilosophical alternatives,²⁵ and since it turns out that the antinomial conflicts depend on a transcendently realistic understanding of the (cosmological idea of the) world, it can be inferred that transcendental realism is false and transcendental idealism is true (insofar as the concepts of

²² See here especially Grier, *Kant’s Doctrine of Transcendental Illusion*.

²³ See, e.g., Hilary Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face*, ed. James Conant (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1990). The same volume of essays by Putnam also contains interesting reflections on both Kant and James, also hinting at James’s Kantianism. See also Putnam, *Pragmatism: An Open Question* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995), ch. 2.

²⁴ See Kant’s section on transcendental idealism as a “Schlüssel zu Auflösung der kosmologischen Dialektik” (A490-497/B519-525); cf. Allison, *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism*, pp. 388-395.

²⁵ This is argued in detail by Allison (*ibid.*, chs. 1-3). This conception of transcendental idealism and realism is a crucial premise in Kant’s resolution of the antinomies. While Allison’s book on Kant’s transcendental idealism is one of the best available, it suffers from the in my view serious problem of not acknowledging the metaphysically relevant status of Kantian transcendental conditions of experience – or, what amounts to the same, from too sharp a dichotomy between ontological and epistemic conditions (see *ibid.*, ch. 2). This does not affect my present argument, though.

truth and falsity are applicable to such highly general metaphilosophical principles).²⁶ As Allison explains, transcendental idealism plays a decisive methodological role in the resolution of the antinomies: it is a “critical tool” helping us to carve out “conceptual space” for the alternative that (in the case of the first two antinomies) both the thesis and the antithesis might be wrong, or for the one that (in the case of the third and the fourth antinomies) that both might be right.²⁷ This “conceptual space” amounts to what I have above called the “middle ground”; carving out such a space is to step on a *via media* between implausible alternatives.

Allison puts the matter most succinctly, so let me quote from his insightful chapter on the Antinomy:

In the cosmological case, the inadmissible condition [yielding the erroneous metaphysical theses that conflict with each other] is that the world (the totality of appearances) is given as a thing in itself (A504/B532).²⁸ [...] [B]ecause of the underlying illusion, the transcendental realist is in no position to challenge the admissibility of this condition, whereas the transcendental idealist happily is. Thus, Kant can claim that the magnitude of the world [i.e., the issue investigated in the First Antinomy] is neither finite nor infinite, for the simple reason that it is not the sort of “thing” that is capable of being assigned a magnitude or, more precisely, it is not a thing at all. From the logical point of view, this means that the theses and antitheses of the Mathematical Antinomies are contraries rather than contradictories, which again allows for the possibility (here realized) that both are false.²⁹

In the case of the Third Antinomy, transcendental idealism again creates “conceptual space”, this time for the possibility that both the thesis and the antithesis might be true and that there might, despite the universal causal law governing all empirical phenomena, be “transcendental freedom as a non-empirical mode of causality”.³⁰ It is, however, the task of Kant’s practical philosophy to show that this possibility is realized – that the conceptual space opened up by transcendental idealism is

²⁶ Similarly, we could ask whether pragmatism itself can be true, and if so, whether its truth can be accounted for in terms of the pragmatic theory of truth. For James’s affirmation of such meta-level pragmatic truth, see William James, *The Meaning of Truth: A Sequel to Pragmatism* (1909), eds. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1978), ch. 8.

²⁷ Allison, *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism*, p. 386.

²⁸ Allison’s reading of Kant is a famous defense of the so-called “one world” (“double aspect”) interpretation of the transcendental distinction between things in themselves and appearances (see *ibid.*, especially ch. 3). I sympathize with this reading (see Pihlström, *Naturalizing the Transcendental*), but I cannot, for obvious reasons, deal with it here.

²⁹ Allison, *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism*, p. 387.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 388.

non-empty – by demonstrating that freedom must be presupposed as a “postulate of practical reason”.

James actually recognized the need to invoke something like Kant’s “postulates”.³¹ Here, however, it is even more important to note the remarkable similarity between these two thinkers’ attitudes to “the world”. For James, just as for Kant, the world is (to use Allison’s above-quoted apt words) “not a thing at all” in the sense assumed by the transcendental realist seeking *the* correct answer to the kind of metaphysical questions examined in Kant’s Antinomy chapter or the chapter by James cited above. The world is not given to us as a thing in itself, complete and ready-made. Instead, it must be coped with, engaged in, shaped, constructed, and reconstructed. This is the deep reason why the abstract metaphysical principles purportedly stating eternal truths about how the world fundamentally is, or must be, cannot be satisfactory *for us*. This is why we are again and again challenged to find a *via media*, when confronted by hopelessly interminable disputes between such rival truth-claims.

Just as pragmatism offers us, according to James, a way of living forward without having to be (too much) worried about abstract metaphysical disputes, transcendental idealism, for Kant, is a “therapeutically indispensable” critical tool.³² Kant’s indirect argument for transcendental idealism, based on the Antinomy, is, as Allison puts it, “an argument for the necessity of adopting the [...] standpoint of transcendental idealism in order to deal successfully with the cosmological problematic”, relying on the transcendental distinction between things in themselves and appearances, which is to be construed as “a bit of metaphilosophical therapy” whose aim is “to prevent the misinterpretation of empirical concepts of objects as concepts of things as they are in themselves, which, in turn, leads to the attribution of objective reality to the cosmological idea and to the consequent antinomial conflicts”.³³ Thus, the “necessity” of adopting transcendental idealism is a kind of pragmatic necessity. We *need* such a (metaphilosophical) account of the world and our place in it, if we are to adequately deal with the kind of metaphysical illusions reason inevitably produces. James might easily agree. Although he would never have accepted the label, “transcendental idealism”, as a description of his own position, his rejection of metaphysical realism about “the world” is readily comparable to Kant’s.

³¹ See especially William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1902), eds. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1985), ch. 3. Lecture III of *Pragmatism*, the text we have mainly been concerned with in our discussion of James above, has also been noted to bear significant similarities to Kant’s doctrine of the postulates by Ludwig Nagl; see his paper, “Pragmatismus: Zwischen Kritik und Postulat”, in Klaus Oehler (ed.), *William James, Pragmatismus* (Berlin: Akademi Verlag, 2000), pp. 69-91. Nagl, however, views James’s approach as “de-transcendentalized”, whereas I have urged that it is, though not properly Kantian, nevertheless transcendental in a recognizable (albeit naturalized) sense.

³² Allison, *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism*, p. 394.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 395.

After having noted the similarity of Kant's and James's endeavors, we may finally ask whether they are really seeking a "third way", or a *via media*, between the implausibly extreme theses in the metaphysical disputes analyzed, or whether they are, rather, giving up the issues themselves, refusing to set themselves on *any* path or ground whatsoever in the examined cases, either mediating or not. Are they, that is, engaging in a constructive, systematic philosophical theorizing about how to think about such ultimate issues (e.g., freedom) in a way not vulnerable to the weaknesses of the antinomial arguments, or the hopelessly dialectical situation our reason-use inevitably seems to take us to – or are they proposing a philosophical therapy that enables them (and us) to avoid having any views at all regarding these cases?³⁴

We may not be in the position to finally settle this issue. However, it may be suggested that *this* metaphilosophical conflict, the conflict between systematic-constructive and therapeutic-deconstructive conceptions of philosophy (as we may call them), itself calls for a pragmatic resolution in terms of a *via media*. Like the metaphysical conflicts discussed earlier, this metaphilosophical one may not be easily eliminable; it may refuse to go away, although we might wish to collapse the dichotomy between systematic and therapeutic philosophizing or between the solving of philosophical problems by argumentative-theoretical means and the "dissolving" of them through Wittgensteinian (or, say, deconstructive) critique of language. Yet, it may be possible, again, to avoid extreme positions here. One need not embrace the standard view of philosophy as systematic and theoretical puzzle-solving that contemporary analytic philosophers, in particular, often take for granted; nor is one required to go all the way to the other extreme, i.e., Wittgensteinian (or deconstructive, or radically pragmatist, e.g., Rortyan) therapy, on the other. The pragmatist tradition itself is one of the best sources of inspiration for the metaphilosophical thinker who wants to avoid these somewhat dogmatic extremes. To show how that can be done would be a topic for another paper, however.³⁵

³⁴ Another way of putting this matter is to ask how close either Kant or James comes to the therapeutic conception of philosophy later defended by Wittgenstein, according to whom the main concern of philosophy is to lead "the fly out of the fly-bottle". See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958). It is not implausible to suggest, however, that Wittgenstein's therapeutic conception of philosophy bears both Kantian and pragmatic characteristics, although this surely is controversial; see Pihlström, *Naturalizing the Transcendental*, ch. 2. In any case, this paper is not an attempt to interpret Wittgenstein. See Thomas Wallgren, *Transformative Philosophy: Socrates, Wittgenstein, and the Democratic Spirit in Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006), especially ch. 5, for a Wittgensteinian attempt to avoid theses and doctrines in philosophy. I prefer, again, a pragmatic middle path between such strict avoidance, on the one hand, and full-blown, scientific-like thesis-construction, on the other.

³⁵ For some metaphilosophical reflections in this regard, see Pihlström, *Pragmatism and Philosophical Anthropology*, and *Naturalizing the Transcendental*.

4. Conclusion

I am not saying that James's attempts to resolve age-old metaphysical problems were always successful. He may have been too sympathetic to Berkeleyan phenomenalism, for example. His views on science might be too close to instrumentalism and/or relativism for even a moderate pragmatic realist to accept. But the important metaphilosophical point I have tried to make is that he usually attempted to find a middle path, to reconcile the (best parts of) conflicting extremes. Our discussion of James also shows that one of the (antinomial) conflicts he sought to overcome is the one between metaphysics and antimetaphysics. His pragmatism, though abandoning some of the traditional solutions to metaphysical problems, did not abandon those problems themselves. Rather, James (like the other classical pragmatists) tolerated metaphysics, seeking to discover the true pragmatic core of the metaphysical disputes that were misleadingly characterized when discussed in terms of a pre-pragmatic (and pre-Kantian) metaphysical realism.³⁶

Nor am I claiming that Kant's resolution to the Antinomy of Reason he ingenuously identified was a thoroughgoing success. To justify such a claim would require us to engage in Kant scholarship in historical detail beyond the scope of this paper. I hope that enough has been said, however, to demonstrate that (i) James's pragmatism, especially in its "critical" function, as a criticism of traditional metaphysical problems and their non-pragmatist background assumptions, is a fundamentally Kantian-like attempt to resolve, and to some extent dissolve, antinomial conflicts of reason, and that (ii) pragmatism, when articulated in such a Kantian manner (or, conversely, Kantian transcendental idealism, when pragmatically "naturalized"), is a promising framework for seeking middle-ground options – both in the specific cases James and Kant considered and more generally.

Of course, the pragmatist-cum-transcendental metaphilosophical method I have defended does not offer any royal road to the settling of philosophical disputes or to the defense of plausible in-between positions. The search for a viable *via media*, a middle path worth walking, is always an eminently fallible enterprise. This search must itself be holistically evaluated, admitting our philosophical (and even metaphilosophical) beliefs in the "web of belief" we constantly test against

³⁶ I develop this point, which should be obvious to any reader of James's *Some Problems of Philosophy*, in particular, in some of my forthcoming writings on James, e.g., "William James's Pragmatist Metaphysics of the Mind and Other Minds" and "Metaphysics with a Human Face" (both cited above). See also my earlier treatment of the status of metaphysics in James and other pragmatists in Sami Pihlström, *Structuring the World: The Issue of Realism and the Nature of Ontological Problems in Classical and Contemporary Pragmatism*, Acta Philosophica Fennica 59 (Helsinki: The Philosophical Society of Finland, 1996).

experience – in an extremely broad sense of “experience”.³⁷ Contradictions do arise in the pragmatic reconciliation of extremes; the pragmatic capabilities of a philosopher may sometimes have to be measured in terms of her/his ability to live with them, temporarily and instrumentally, and to eventually drop them, as the ladders Wittgenstein imagined in the closing remarks of his *Tractatus*.³⁸

Furthermore, when the middle ground is finally found, however fragile the process toward it may have been, and however soft and insecure the spot found is, it will have to be acknowledged as one’s own – as *mine*.³⁹ This is again something that James himself admitted and indeed insisted on. In describing the history of philosophy as a clash of “philosophical temperaments” in the first lecture of *Pragmatism*, James made the essentially Wittgensteinian point that the philosopher is always, inevitably, concerned with her/his personal view of how things are. It is only from such a personal perspective that one can so much as begin seeking the middle way. A *via media* worth walking must, then, be a personal *via*, one’s own way, the path one personally sees as one’s intellectual demand.⁴⁰

³⁷ Cf. the holistic pragmatism defended by Morton White in his book, *A Philosophy of Culture: The Scope of Holistic Pragmatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

³⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus: Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung* (1921) (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1961), § 6.54.

³⁹ In this sense, philosophical inquiry, whether middle-ground-seeking or not, is “solipsistic”, a personal project, or – to use Wittgenstein’s expression again – “work on oneself, on how one sees things”: see Sami Pihlström, *Solipsism: History, Critique, and Relevance* (Tampere: Tampere University Press, 2004). See, however, also Wallgren’s discussion of Wittgenstein in his *Transformative Philosophy*, ch. 5.

⁴⁰ [Acknowledgments.]