

## CONTINGENCY, DEMOCRACY, AND THE HUMAN SCIENCES: SOME CHALLENGES<sup>1</sup>

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### 1. Introduction

I see basically three challenges – I prefer to talk about “challenges” instead of “threats” – facing the human sciences<sup>2</sup> in today’s socio-cultural and academic life. I will briefly discuss these three challenges, which are all very familiar, starting from the most general one and ending up with the one most clearly internal to the human sciences themselves, and consider how they should be met by the academic community dedicated to pursuing and advancing humanistic research and education. This will lead us to a critical discussion of the relation between science and democracy, with special emphasis on contingency, novelty, and pluralism.

In particular, I hope to be able to show how a pragmatist approach, by being able to take seriously the *contingency* inherent in human life, may lead to a richer notion of “innovativeness” than the one standardly employed in contemporary science policy. No comprehensive discussion of pragmatist views on democracy – say, the Deweyan conception of democracy as a way of life – is possible in this paper; nor are the problems I will take up merely problems for pragmatists. However, I do believe that the pragmatist tradition provides us with unique resources for an

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<sup>2</sup> By “the human sciences”, I mean the traditional humanistic disciplines, the social sciences, education, theology, law, and philosophy, all of which are represented, for instance, at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies and similar interdisciplinary institutes of advanced research worldwide.

enhanced understanding of the complicated relations between scientific inquiry, democracy, and contingency.

## **2. Three challenges for the human sciences today**

First, a major challenge coming *from outside the academia* is the increasing tendency to view universities in general instrumentally as means to certain extra-academic ends. Let us call this the challenge of (naïve) *instrumentalism*. Universities, as well as other institutions of research and higher education, are more and more considered valuable merely, or at least primarily, because they produce useful knowledge – “innovations” that may eventually support the enviroing society and the economic system – not because of their intrinsic value or the value of truth and knowledge as such. This challenge is very familiar from, e.g., the lively public debate surrounding the process of establishing new university legislation in Finland in 2009.<sup>3</sup> The worry is by no means unique to the human sciences but concerns also the natural sciences: basic research, we increasingly feel, is threatened by the strengthening demand for immediately applicable results. Universities, and academic life generally, tend to be subordinated to the needs of the “innovation system”, national and global.

We can only hope that the desire to protect academic freedom – the autonomy of the universities and scholars and teachers working in them – really is, as politicians tend to claim, the driving force behind this reorganizing of academic life and practices. Critics have, I believe with some justification, seen the matter in a different light (though here I am not taking any stand on this particular hotly debated issue). This first challenge can be met, and should continuously be met, by reminding the political leaders (upon whom at least state university funding depends) and the general public that the very notion of “useful knowledge” ought to be broadened from narrow usefulness in relation to certain specific goals to a much more inclusive notion of usefulness in relation to human life generally. The human sciences are clearly “useful” for us, as they investigate some of the most basic problems in being human.<sup>4</sup> By replacing instrumentalism with

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<sup>3</sup> Similar processes have taken place in other European countries as well.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. here the LERU (League of European Research Universities) report, “What Are Universities for?” (2008), by Geoffrey Boulton and Colin Lucas (available at [www.leru.org](http://www.leru.org)), arguing that universities are primarily places dedicated to the pursuit and dissemination of critical understanding and that all of their other tasks, including contributions to innovation, are derivative from this primary purpose.

a richer *pragmatist* perspective on research as a human practice, we can maintain both the traditional view of academic autonomy and the idea that scientific research (whether within humanities or generally) is “useful”. This, at least, would have been all the classical pragmatists’ perspective on the matter. None of them was a narrow instrumentalist in the sense I have described it here. The kind of relevance to human practices that the classical pragmatists were interested in when developing their views on meaning, knowledge, inquiry, and truth was significantly broader than the technocratic relevance familiar from recent political jargon.

In addition, academics and other defenders of basic research have, with good reason, repeatedly reminded the instrumentalistically and technocratically oriented politicians that the most profound innovations and applications can be reached in the long run only if basic research is granted a significant degree of autonomy. Looking forward rather than backward, we never know what will turn out to be useful. Accordingly, it is the notion of useful knowledge itself, rather than traditional academic freedom, that requires (possibly pragmatist) reconceptualization and rearticulation. On the other hand, this rethinking also concerns the notion of basic research: we should not deny the “usefulness” of the kind of research whose motivation arises from concerns internal to the academic world.

The technocratic demand for applicable results foreseeable in advance (“where to invest money and resources most effectively”) is contrary to the celebration of *contingency*, *novelty*, and *plurality* characteristic of academic institutions and genuine academic innovativeness. Our human ability to freely create new ideas and put them into work, in a broad sense of “work”, is taken seriously by pragmatism, which encourages us to test all of our ideas and theories by future experience and to fallibilistically admit the permanent possibility of error and the resulting need to learn from one’s mistakes. This is the spirit of scientific inquiry as conceived by thinkers like Charles S. Peirce and John Dewey. As Richard Bernstein has shown in his profound small book on the “abuse of evil” in contemporary political and religious discourse, such *pragmatic fallibilism* has relevance outside the philosophy of science, too.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> On the political relevance of the acknowledgment of human contingency, see especially Bernstein’s discussions of the heritage of Hannah Arendt in Bernstein, *The Abuse of Evil: The Corruption of Politics and Religion since 9/11* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005/2008). I will return to Bernstein’s views in due course. Peirce’s tychism and William James’s pluralistic pragmatism would provide us with more metaphysical examples of the significance of contingency. For perceptive studies of the fundamental importance of contingency in human life, I especially recommend Paul Auster’s novels, e.g., *The Brooklyn Follies* and the more recent *Man in the Dark*. The ways in which these various ways of characterizing contingency might be related to one another would deserve a separate study. The worry relevant in the present context is that our current science policy, with its emphasis on innovation, may not leave sufficient room for the proper kind of contingency – and the right kind of innovativeness – vitally

The second challenge I want to focus on comes *from within the academia* but basically *from outside the human sciences*: one frequently hears natural scientists, physicists among others, claiming that it is up to the natural sciences, especially physics, to describe and explain reality at the most fundamental level. Let us call this the challenge of *scientism*. Physics, we are told, offers “full coverage” (to borrow a phrase from W.V. Quine).<sup>6</sup> Certainly I am not claiming that physicists themselves, or the majority of them, would inevitably view physics as the most important science, or more important than the humanities. Rather, this challenge is very strong in contemporary philosophy: for example, philosophy of mind today is strongly physicalistically oriented. On the other hand, several philosophical orientations, including phenomenology and Wittgensteinian approaches, have been sharply critical of such physicalist and scientific tendencies to reduce human experience and normative conceptual capacities to something that is finally and completely explainable in causal, natural-scientific vocabularies.<sup>7</sup>

The threat here (if we want to use that word, too) is an increasing polarization of the academic world – the “two cultures” debate all over again, to some extent paralleling the traditional *Erklären vs. Verstehen* opposition. For us within the humanities, the challenge is to maintain *both* a healthy respect for the very important work done within the natural sciences *and* an anti-reductionist perspective on whatever it is that the human sciences are doing. Here it would be impossible to defend in any philosophical detail the view that human experience, subjectivity, language- and concept-use, values, etc., cannot be either ontologically or explanatorily reduced to entities and processes describable by natural science. Again, I do see hope in the pragmatist attempt to integrate *non-reductive naturalism* with a deeply *culturalist* understanding of human beings as irreducibly cultural and social creatures. Yet, obviously, I do not want to give the impression that I would view pragmatism as the magic solution to all the troubles we have; I am just here drawing on my own starting point as a pragmatism scholar.<sup>8</sup>

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needed for the flourishing of both scientific research and human life generally.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., W.V. Quine, *Pursuit of Truth*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1992). For a recent comprehensive study of physicalism, see Andrew Melnyk, *A Physicalist Manifesto: Thoroughly Modern Materialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Cf., e.g., David Carr, *The Paradox of Subjectivity: The Self in the Transcendental Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> On pragmatism and non-reductive naturalism, see Sami Pihlström, “Pragmatism and Naturalized Transcendental Subjectivity”, *Contemporary Pragmatism* 6 (2009), 1-13. The integration of naturalist and culturalist ways of understanding human beings is of course very well in line with the general pragmatist tendency to offer middle paths between implausible extremes. Cf. here also John McDowell’s controversial attempt to broaden the scope of “nature” and “naturalism” in his *Mind and World*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1996; 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1994). The relation between (Deweyan) pragmatic naturalism and McDowell’s “naturalism of second nature”, according to which human beings’ normative and generally cultural capacities are seen as fully natural to them,

We should, as the classical pragmatists did, actively seek a dialogue between natural-scientific and humanistic orientations, arguing that in an important sense *all* sciences are human sciences, committed to viewing the world from a human perspective. Instead of polarization, dualism, or dichotomies, I would argue for a continuous non-scientistic rethinking of *the unity of science* – clearly not in the logical positivists’ (scientistic) sense but in a sense continuously learning from both sides of the supposed dichotomy.<sup>9</sup> All sciences, according to this radically revised picture of the unity of science, are value-laden in the sense that any normatively constrained inquiry presupposes a context of value commitments, and is indeed *possible* only in such a context. An ethical orientation in the world is necessary for anything like scientific inquiry to be so much as possible for us. This insight could even be developed into a Kantian-like transcendental argument, but I must skip such an exercise here.<sup>10</sup> The important point here is that physicalism (or scientism generally) has a “blind spot”: it is incapable of understanding itself, or the kind of reasoning resulting to such a position, as an outcome of an ethically – and more generally normatively – oriented scientific inquiry and argumentation. The relevant kind of unity of science at issue here is obviously highly general, accommodating a plethora of differences. One aspect of this unity is the usefulness of knowledge commented on above: such usefulness unites all scientific inquiry, but in very different concrete ways.

Finally, the third challenge we must consider is *internal to the human sciences themselves*. What I have in mind is the tendency – closely related to the above-described threat of polarization – of some people within the humanities (including philosophers) to give up all objective or even intersubjective standards of methodological rigor. Let us, lacking a better term, call this the challenge of *relativism*.<sup>11</sup> This familiar issue arises from a legitimate need to protect the autonomy of the human sciences from both technocracy and the scientistic (imperialist) pressures that are felt to come from the side of the natural sciences. The critique of scientism may, however, go too far. Sometimes it goes as far as the claim that there are no normative criteria for good and bad research at all, no methodological norms that could be set up from any

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would clearly deserve further scrutiny.

<sup>9</sup> Among contemporary pragmatists, such a program of a non-scientistic and non-reductive unification of the sciences has been defended by Joseph Margolis. See, e.g., his books *Pragmatism without Foundations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986) and *Historied Thought, Constructed World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Sami Pihlström, *Naturalizing the Transcendental: A Pragmatic View* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus/Humanity Books, 2003); and Pihlström, *Pragmatist Metaphysics: An Essay on the Ethical Grounds of Ontology* (London: Continuum, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> For an up-to-date introduction to the problem of relativism, see Maria Bahgramian, *Relativism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

meta-perspective over and above whatever it is that individual researchers and groups of scholars are contingently doing. Science, then, would be just one narrative among others, just one way of telling stories about ourselves (in the case of the human sciences) or about the environing world (the natural sciences). Radical philosophers of science like Paul Feyerabend and controversial neopragmatists like Richard Rorty have been seen as advancing this position, though it is debatable whether their actual views can be interpreted in such a way.<sup>12</sup> At least the classical pragmatists were not guilty of relativism in the sense in which, say, Karl Popper has called it the “myth of the framework”;<sup>13</sup> instead of relativism, they may be said to have embraced an “engaged pluralism”.<sup>14</sup>

There is no easy way out of the problem framework of relativism; it is something we have to live with. However, *continuous critical methodological self-reflection* is needed as the (only) way of responding to this challenge. Again, I see the pragmatists as offering plenty of resources for such reflection. The kind of dialogue between the human and the natural sciences promoted above can be seen as an important element of this methodological self-reflection. Obviously, a reflective attitude to the methods one uses – contrary to the habit of some scholars of just sticking to the methods one has contingently learned and come to employ – is something that ought to unite all scientific disciplines; hence, again, I am recommending a new way of maintaining the unity of science amidst all the undeniable differences in concrete methods employed.

Another unifying feature is the commitment to the value of *truth* – the virtue of *truthfulness*, encompassing sincerity and related moral characteristics – that is equally important in the human and the natural sciences. A pragmatist should, then, never join those whom Bernard Williams calls the “deniers” (i.e., nihilists about truth), although he associates such an attitude with Rortyan pragmatism; yet, as pragmatists, we should continuously seek to resolve the tension between truth and truthfulness that Williams is concerned with.<sup>15</sup>

### **3. Pragmatic fallibilism, pluralism, and democratic contingency**

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<sup>12</sup> See Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* (London: Verso, 1975; 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1993); Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>13</sup> See Karl R. Popper, *The Myth of the Framework* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> See Bernstein, *The Abuse of Evil*, p. 34.

<sup>15</sup> Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2006; first published 2002).

I will now again briefly turn to Richard Bernstein's position, as developed in his above-cited book, *The Abuse of Evil* (2005).<sup>16</sup> As he finds both Hannah Arendt and John Dewey among the main sources for his ideas, I will indirectly say something about their views as well. The basic idea to be examined is the way in which democracy as a "way of life" (as Dewey used to put it), both generally and in the scientific community in particular, may be able to maintain the kind of contingency and, accordingly, the possibility for novelty – again, for true innovations instead of the kind of foreseeable, planned pseudo-innovativeness familiar from some politicians' comments on science and research – that not only scientific inquiry but also, say, genuine political deliberation and religious practices require.<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, though Bernstein focuses on the latter two fields, while in this paper I have focused on the first, the spirit of pragmatic fallibilism needs to be carried through in all of them. This insight further highlights the fact that we are not only dealing with scientific culture here; our concern extends through human life and culture much more generally. The threats and challenges we have located in the field of (human) science find their parallels in the fields of politics and religion, too (and presumably in many other areas of reflection as well).

Bernstein helpfully distinguishes the "mentality" of pragmatic fallibilism from the opposed mentality of absoluteness, of rigid dichotomies, of moral certainty based on a religious (or some other) authority. He notes, for instance, that "we can (and must) learn to live without 'metaphysical comfort,' to live with a realistic sense of unpredictable contingencies – and at the same time to have a passionate commitment to understand, resist, and fight concrete evils and oppose injustices".<sup>18</sup> It is striking how well this insight, which in my view successfully resolves the tension Williams identifies between truth and truthfulness,<sup>19</sup> applies not just to politics and religion (Bernstein's concern here) but also to science. The scientific analogy to the lack of metaphysical comfort is the hopelessness of any naïve form of scientific realism according to

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<sup>16</sup> For Bernstein's earlier explorations of the concept of evil, see his book, *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002). The more recent volume is more relevant to pragmatism, though the previous one is presumably philosophically more profound as a study on the "inscrutability" of evil.

<sup>17</sup> I am not trying to tell you what Dewey meant by democracy (Richard Bernstein and others have done that much better); here, I am only interested in the possibility of seeing Deweyan democracy, understood richly and "thickly", as a way of life, as *opening up a creative space* for the kind of contingency that academic freedom requires. I am not attempting to *ground* democracy in anything (e.g., epistemic norms), or to justify it to someone not already committed to it, but only to pragmatically *employ* this Deweyan ideal in the special problem area I am concerned with.

<sup>18</sup> Bernstein, *The Abuse of Evil*, p. 13.

<sup>19</sup> See again Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*.

which our theories simply correspond to the way the world mind- and theory-independently is.<sup>20</sup> The relevant kind of unpredictable contingency is based on human creativity and (genuine) innovativeness, on the fact that, given the ways in which we differ from each other and are, each one of us, unique persons and unique inquirers, our ideas and thoughts cannot be predicted in advance. Without such contingency in life and science there would be no science at all. Bernstein would, I hope, agree with me when I suggest that pragmatism is, perhaps uniquely, capable of integrating living without metaphysical comfort (both in science and in general) with “passionate commitment” – whether to the fighting against evil or to the pursuit of truth. For pragmatists, the truth vs. truthfulness tension is a pseudo-opposition, because our commitment to a critical attitude toward the beliefs we take as true is inseparable from our very pursuit of truth itself. The virtue of truthfulness and the critical spirit of pragmatic fallibilism lead to a nihilist attitude to the concept of truth only if truth is regarded, unpragmatically, as a metaphysically immutable absolute.

Note also how Bernstein draws on Arendt’s conception of *plurality*: “[...] Arendt gives plurality a distinctive political meaning. Plurality involves individuality, distinction, and equality. There is distinctiveness about each and every individual who brings to a common world a unique perspective. And this plurality is rooted in our *natality*, the capacity to begin, to initiate action spontaneously. [...] Human plurality is the basic condition of action and speech, because they take place *in between* human beings in their singularity and plurality.”<sup>21</sup> Arendt, as is well known, analyzed totalitarianism and the concentration camps as attempts to liquidate such plurality and distinctiveness. On a considerably less dramatic scale, attempts to force scientific inquiry and the creativity it requires into clearly foreseeable structures subordinated to strictly planned innovation and technology policies might be regarded as another, different but to some extent analogous, attempt to chain human plurality.

From a pragmatist perspective, there is actually a plurality of pluralisms. For example, one might ask what exactly William James’s famous pluralism amounts to. It could be argued that pluralism, in *A Pluralistic Universe*,<sup>22</sup> ultimately amounts to a metaphysical theory according to which there are bits and pieces of “pure experience” pretty much everywhere, and that it is

<sup>20</sup> The issue of scientific realism is extremely complex, however, and I cannot engage in it here. See, e.g., Ilkka Niiniluoto, *Critical Scientific Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). At least Niiniluoto’s critical scientific realism is far from being naïve in the sense described here.

<sup>21</sup> Bernstein, *The Abuse of Evil*, p. 73.

<sup>22</sup> William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909), eds. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977).

therefore inseparable from James's radical empiricism. James's theory can undoubtedly be read in this way. However, a somewhat different approach may also be proposed: perhaps pluralism, for James, is not primarily a *metaphysical* doctrine but a *metaphilosophical* one, emphasizing the possibility of a plurality of different "correct" metaphysical positions maintained from different practice-embedded perspectives. This alternative comes closer to the argument of *Pragmatism* (as well as the later defense of "conceptual relativity" by Hilary Putnam and other neopragmatists).<sup>23</sup> In fact, it is hard to see how the metaphysical doctrine of pure experience, analogous to the view known as "neutral monism", favored at some point by Ernst Mach and Bertrand Russell, among others, could be seriously regarded as "pluralistic". *Could* such a monism really be a form of pluralism? Shouldn't we, rather, maintain the possibility for metaphysical monism(s) only within a pluralism of different metaphysical frameworks? Such frameworks would all be pragmatically accountable within a more inclusive pragmatic pluralism.

This, then, is what I mean by talking about a plurality of pluralisms. There are both metaphysical and (at a meta-level) conceptual, methodological, and metaphilosophical versions of pluralism. But there is also a social and political aspect to James's treatment of pluralism, possibly indebted to R.W. Emerson's version of individualism. We should understand that complete unification is a false ideal, and "resist undue centralization and excessive organization"; we should let individual human potentialities "grow from their own resources".<sup>24</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

I have not argued that the challenges I have identified exhaust the challenges we have to meet in today's world. For instance, I have left out the obviously crucially important *global* (e.g., ecological) challenges we must face as a human community worldwide. Discussing such topics, central though they may become for humanistic researchers, too, would, however, lead me too far

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<sup>23</sup> 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: Harvard University Press, 1975), as well as Hilary Putnam, *Ethics without Ontology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

<sup>24</sup> I am quoting from the introduction of H.G. Callaway's recent "study edition" of James's *A Pluralistic Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2008), p. xxxi. It would be an important task for the historian of pragmatism, and twentieth century philosophy more broadly, to investigate the relations between Bernstein's and Arendt's essentially political and cultural conception of pluralism and James's more metaphysical (and to some extent metaphilosophical) pluralism. Callaway's edition of this classical work does include an interesting editor's introduction to the cultural context of James's pluralism.

from the basic topic of this presentation. The three challenges I have briefly described do, I hope, give an impression of the multiply layered way in which the human sciences may be in a somewhat problematic, though certainly not hopeless, situation today. Successful research strategies within these fields ought to be designed to meet these challenges.

There is also a meta-level issue that invites a final comment. Arguably, the relation between the natural and the human sciences is itself a matter to be debated and resolved within the human sciences, from an irreducibly human perspective. It is not just a merely scientific issue but a broader philosophical, cultural, social, and political issue. One fruitful analogy here is the way in which Margolis argues that the relation between “first-order” issues internal to, say, the scientific discourse and “second-order” normative issues about the legitimation of that (or any) discourse (in contrast to the mere first-order issues themselves) is itself a second-order issue.<sup>25</sup> In a very different but again analogous manner, Rorty suggested in his last writings that philosophy ought to be reduced to cultural politics – a reductive position I do *not* share and do not encourage pragmatists to adopt – and that the relation between traditional philosophical (e.g., ontological and epistemological) issues and their “merely” cultural-political transformations is itself a cultural-political issue: it is ultimately a cultural-political problem whether philosophy ought to be just cultural politics or something else.<sup>26</sup> While I do not share Rorty’s views but feel considerable sympathy toward Margolis’s position, I find both interesting ways of expressing the kind of *reflexivity* the pragmatist is invited to accept. It is ultimately only in and through our on-going inquiry into the ways in which we draw the distinctions between the natural and the human sciences that we are able to understand the significance of those distinctions in our lives and culture, and ourselves as creatures to whom such distinctions may matter.

The challenge of maintaining genuine contingency in human life, scientific life included, is a major challenge for such an inquiry in particular. If Dewey and the other classical pragmatists were correct, this challenge can be met only by supporting democracy, not just as a political system – either generally or in science policy – but as a deep, substantive way of life, an ethical ideal requiring internal moral development. Again, I find myself in agreement with Bernstein:

Those who share a democratic faith that abhors the appeal to rigid ideologies must seek alliances with like-minded individuals throughout the world. There is also a lesson to be

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<sup>25</sup> See Margolis, *Pragmatism without Foundations*, cited above.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

learned from Dewey and Arendt. Both teach us how *fragile* democracy really is – how its fate is always uncertain. There are no guarantees that it will persist and flourish. [...] There is a *democratic ethos* that must be kept alive. And this takes constant attention, work, and practice. The creation and sustenance of what Dewey called “creative democracy” is *always* a task before us.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, at a meta-level, the question of how best to keep alive the “democratic ethos” can itself be adequately approached *only in a democratic spirit*, listening to a plurality of voices. There can be no undemocratic way of experimentally testing the “hypothesis” of democracy.<sup>28</sup>

This project, this reflexive inquiry, is endless, if only because the project of *self-applying* pragmatic fallibilism is endless. We must be constantly wary of not constructing oversimplified dichotomies – also those between, say, the two Bernsteinian mentalities (that is, pragmatic fallibilism and the dogmatic search for absolutes), either in science or elsewhere. This, in fact, is what I see as slightly problematic in Bernstein’s admirable discussion. We should never be certain that our own pragmatically fallibilist position is the absolutely correct one but must constantly seek to self-critically examine *its* fundamental presuppositions. Indeed, we cannot be sure it is fallibilistic enough. This is our permanently groundless predicament, our contingency – the kind of contingency the pragmatists never failed to acknowledge. Let us therefore finally recall the following words by James, whose active, life-celebrating, melioristic pragmatism was always surrounded not only by the acknowledgment of the reality of evil<sup>29</sup> but also by a full realization of the fragility of our human projects: “Must not something end by supporting itself? Humanism is willing to let finite experience be self-supporting. Somewhere being must immediately breast nonentity. Why may not the advancing front of experience, carrying its

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<sup>27</sup> Bernstein, *The Abuse of Evil*, p. 122.

<sup>28</sup> Although the main inspiration for views like this comes from Dewey, I see no reason to resist the recent Peircean attempts to formulate a somewhat different pragmatist philosophy of democracy. For some recent debate on this issue, see Robert Talisse’s, David Hildebrand’s, and Henrik Rydenfelt’s contributions to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Nordic Pragmatism Conference (available at [www.nordprag.org](http://www.nordprag.org)). Yet, I am suspicious of grounding democracy in the epistemic norms of scientific inquiry, as Talisse seeks to do – and ultimately of grounding *any* moral principle or ideal in any non-moral one. Democracy as an ethical ideal, in the Deweyan sense, is deeper than our commitment to scientific belief-fixation.

<sup>29</sup> On pragmatism and evil, see Sami Pihlström, “*The Trail of the Human Serpent Is over Everything*”: *Jamesian Perspectives on Mind, World, and Religion* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America [Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group], 2008), ch. 4.

immanent satisfactions and dissatisfactions, cut against the black inane as the luminous orb of the moon cuts the caerulean abyss?”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> William James, *The Meaning of Truth* (1909), eds. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), pp. 55-56.