Introduction

The so-called pragmatist conception of truth, along with various brands of postmodern relativism and irrationalism, might be claimed to have been one of the background factors enabling the emergence of the notorious "post-factual" or "post-truth" era we seem to be witnessing today. We know very well that many people, including leading politicians, deliberately lie or at least blur the truth in pursuing their own selfish interests. In particular, some social media users tend to distort truth to the extent that one may wonder whether we have started to create a pseudo-reality of "alternative facts" no longer answerable to any independent reality external to human beings' contingent interests. Truth itself seems to be under attack in different ways: there are people who spread lies as well as people who just do not care for truth, nor for the pursuit of truth, in their public or private pronouncements. (See, e.g., McIntyre 2018.) To be sure, we have always had our private fantasies disconnected from a shared reality of objective truth, but we now seem to be living in a world where dis- and misinformation can spread with alarming speed. It is unclear whether our traditional ways of responding to such concerns about truth are sufficient. The concept of truth may have landed in new kinds of danger, and we need to rethink how to defend it. It is through pragmatism that I propose such a rethinking should proceed.

However, for us philosophers, it may, and should, come as a shock that pragmatists – among many other theorists, including postmodernists, poststructuralists, and deconstructionists – may not be innocent for the turn of events just described. In this book, I argue that pragmatist philosophers should indeed be self-critically concerned about a potentially problematic slippery slope from the idea that (in William James's words) "truth is only the expedient in our way of thinking" to the downgrading and fragmentation of truth in populist (e.g., Donald Trump's and many others') politics of power. However, I also argue that the tradition of pragmatism provides us with considerable intellectual and ethical resources

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to enrich and deepen our critical thinking in the interest of finding a place to stop on such a slippery slope, in a way that honors the diversity of our sincere individual pursuits of truth in the plurality of our social practices. In order to deal with truth today, we need *more* pragmatism, not less.

Accordingly, this book is a critical inquiry into how pragmatists should approach the concept of truth and the practices of pursuing the truth, avoiding threatening vulgarizations of pragmatism. I cannot offer any cultural or political diagnosis of the "post-truth era", though; my discussion will remain at a philosophical level. Nor will I keep my explorations strictly focused on the concept of truth itself but will inquire into the complex interrelations between a number of philosophical concepts surrounding it. I will argue that, while pragmatism itself must, for pragmatic reasons, be subjected to thoroughgoing self-criticism, this does not mean that pragmatism ought to be abandoned (in favor of, say, metaphysical realism and its traditional correspondence-theoretical account of truth). On the contrary, pragmatism prevails at the meta-level by being, arguably, the most critically self-reflective philosophical approach to truth and the practices of inquiry. Our pragmatist investigations of these matters should combine themes from general ethics and metaphysics as well as the philosophy of religion and, ultimately, metaphilosophy. I will in this volume examine pragmatist truth in its ethical and existential dimensions, in particular, by exploring pragmatist philosophy of religion as an area of inquiry where our commitment to truth and truthfulness matters deeply to us.

My main argument can, I suppose, be summarized as follows.[1] We seem to be living in a cultural situation that has endangered the concept of truth itself. However, when considering philosophical ways of defending the concept of truth, we also need to recognize discourses and practices within which it may, at least prima facie, seem to be difficult to apply this concept. Thus, for example, when resisting populist politicians' distorting claims, outright lies, and other violations of truth, we have to do so in a manner that is also able to make sense of people's *sincere* ethical, political, religious, and other "*weltanschaulichen*"[2] beliefs. It is not at all obvious how exactly (or if at all) the concept of truth *can* be applied to all such beliefs, let alone how to determine whether our beliefs are true or false, but a pragmatist account of the pursuit of truth as a value-directed human practice should at

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[1] For this formulation, I am indebted to one of the anonymous reviewers of my book manuscript.

[2] I find myself often resorting to the use of this German word (which William James also occasionally used), because there does not seem to be any exact English equivalent. ("Worldview-related" might work, but it sounds clumsy to me.)

least aim at accommodating the ethical norm of individual sincerity in seeking the truth within a diversity of normative contexts shaping our lives. I will suggest that the pragmatist conception of truth enables us to defend the fundamental role played by the concept of truth – and thus to firmly resist, for example, populist rhetoric that does not seem to properly acknowledge that concept at all – while also enabling us to remain committed to the pursuit of truth in areas of culture, such as religion, that cannot easily be accounted for in terms of any traditional realistic (e.g., correspondence) theory of truth. Thus, I will argue that the concept of truth must itself be understood as contextually practice-laden: it is a structural element of our thoroughly normatively organized habitual action in the world we live in, always challenging us to sincere individual (and hence also irreducibly ethical) commitment.

In this manner, I hope to contribute to the critical discussion that the pragmatist tradition has, since its initiation, sought to advance, that is, the on-going examination of our need to both inquire into the way things are independently of our human contingencies and reflect on our own existential depths, which provide us all with unique and distinctive perspectives on viewing the ways the world is independently of those perspectives.

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I have chosen to investigate these topics by dividing the book into six main chapters. After this introduction briefly explaining the outline of the volume, the first two chapters specifically deal with *the notion of truth in the context of pragmatist articulations of diversity and pluralism*.

In Chapter 1, "James's Children? The Pragmatist Conception of Truth and the Slippery Slope to 'Post-Truth'", I directly take up the question of whether James's account of truth, as articulated in *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (1907) and other major works, leads, first, to the radical neopragmatism espoused by Richard Rorty (especially in his *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 1989) and, secondly, to the more radical and much more problematic "pragmatism" we may perceive at work in current "post-truth" populist politics dramatically exemplified not only by, say, the Trump presidency and the Brexit process in the UK but also by political developments in various European countries. I argue that pragmatism can accommodate a contextualizing meta-level pluralism concerning the "truth" about truth itself and thus counter the realistic criticism that claims such a slippery slope to be inevitable. Realism, then, is to be maintained within pragmatism itself. A critical integration of the

pragmatist concepts of truth and truthfulness will, however, be needed for this purpose.

In Chapter 2, "Religious Truth and Pluralism from a Pragmatist Point of View", I apply the general Jamesian pragmatist considerations about truth to a more specific yet potentially extremely wide-ranging issue, the pluralism and diversity of religious and more generally existential outlooks in contemporary societies. Pragmatism, especially in its Jamesian variety, can and should honor what Hannah Arendt called our "natality", that is, our individual and irreplaceable capacity of beginning things anew, of spontaneously creating novelties into the world. By combining Jamesian pragmatic pluralism with an Arendtian concern with the political – and more generally ethical and existential – significance of the pursuit of truth and truthfulness, we can demonstrate the considerable relevance of pragmatism in the confusing times we are living in.

Chapter 3, "Around or through Kant? Kantian Transcendental Pessimism and Jamesian Empirical Meliorism", continues the exploration of the legacy of Jamesian pragmatism by returning to what we may call *the Kantian background of pragmatism*. In a sense, this chapter poses the question "*why* pursue the truth?", suggesting that our commitment to truth-seeking is constitutively embedded in our ethical commitment to ameliorating the human condition. I argue that while James himself thought we ought to go "round" instead of going "through" Kant, this is a serious mistake and distorts the pragmatist's philosophical self-understanding, especially when it comes to inquiring into fundamental issues of human life, ethics, and value. In addition to briefly demonstrating why, and how, pragmatists can employ Kantian-styled transcendental argumentation (or, more broadly, transcendental reflection) as a philosophical method,[3] I will offer a critical comparison of Kant's transcendental philosophy and James's pragmatism by focusing on their shared philosophical anthropology, especially their pessimistic conception of the human being (in an ethical as well as epistemic sense), which however gives rise to a kind of meliorism (to use James's favorite term) about the possibility of always making things better with no guarantee of success. This combination of pessimism and meliorism, again, has both ethical and religious significance.

James's philosophical anthropology is further studied in Chapter 4, "The Will to Believe and Holistic Pragmatism", which focuses on his

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[3] This is a topic I have explored in a series of works since the late 1990s. See, for example, Pihlström 2003, 2004, 2009, 2013, 2016, 2020a.

"will to believe" argument and the underlying holism emphasizing the "whole man [*sic*]" in us, sharply critical of narrow rationalism and "vicious intellectualism", yet never sacrificing the critical stance of inquiry. This chapter asks *how* we ought to pursue the truth, suggesting that a Jamesian will to believe strategy may be needed in personal existential situations of human life (both religiously relevant and secular). I interpret and further develop these Jamesian ideas in terms of what Morton White, a somewhat neglected twentieth-century pragmatist, called *holistic pragmatism*. The combination of holistic pragmatism and the will to believe idea will also enable us to further illuminate the pragmatist entanglement of the epistemic and the ethical, as well as the (Arendtian) emphasis on individual natality and the significance of our personal vocations in contexts of social habituality. A will to believe leap is, arguably, needed for us to be what or who we are, but at the same time the pragmatist constantly needs to deal with the actual or potential tensions between concrete existential decisions and continuous habits of action. By willing to believe, we may also pursue the truth in our individual way.

The kind of individual diversity of ethical, existential, and religious outlooks defended in the context of largely Jamesian pragmatism needs, however, a shared human framework of values and norms. Chapter 5, "How Is Normativity Possible? A Holistic-Pragmatist Perspective", investigates the very possibility of normativity from a pragmatist perspective, asking *how it is possible* to (individually or collectively) pursue the truth and drawing attention to the irreducibly normative contexts of inquiry and, more generally, of the human form of life. Such normative contexts are necessary for pursuing both truth and truthfulness in any epistemic and ethical matters. The chapter criticizes attempts to ground normativity in mere psychological or social facts or processes, such as our contingent acts of recognition, and further examines what it means, from a pragmatist point of view, for us to be genuinely *committed* to normativity within our human practices. This applies to the norms of the epistemic pursuit of truth as much as it applies to ethical and political normativity and existential truthfulness. In relation to this issue, the very structure of what we know as the human form of life is at stake, and the Jamesian pragmatist approaches it in terms of our irreducibly ethical commitment to living a life colored by genuine existential concern. Ultimately this yields a defense of *pragmatist humanism* in contrast to attempts to reduce humanity and humanly distinctive normativity to something non-human and non-normative.

Chapter 6, "Pragmatic Agnosticism – Meaning, Truth, and Suffering", the final substantial chapter of the book, returns to pragmatist philosophy of religion and the "will to believe" discussion by suggesting that even though James claimed agnosticism to collapse (pragmatically) to atheism, there is actually a sense in which the pragmatist, especially the pragmatist humanist as characterized in Chapter 5, may plausibly develop a sophisticated form of agnosticism, especially regarding the meaningfulness of religious language. Even though we should advocate a pragmatic pursuit of truth and truthfulness in the "post-truth" era, we must not uncritically assume that all our discourses, especially religious discourses, always are truth-apt and cognitively meaningful. In particular, this chapter investigates a special issue in which the will to believe strategy may be inefficient: *religious meaning agnosticism*. I argue that agnosticism is crucial for avoiding the "post-truth" situation, as it enables us to maintain a critical distance to too easy truth-claims and hence to *care for* our pursuit of truth itself (both at the "first-order" epistemic level and at the meta-level concerned with the meaningfulness of what we are trying to say). In this sense, agnosticism at the meta-level is an element of the pragmatic pursuit of truthfulness and the critical avoidance of self-deception and insincerity. In addition to the application of agnosticism to the issue concerning the truth-aptness of religious language (cf. also Chapter 2), the chapter examines the controversy between "theodicist" and "antitheodicist" responses to the problem of evil and suffering from a pragmatically agnostic perspective.[4]

The conclusion briefly summarizes the main argument of the book in terms of what I like to call "transcendental humanism" in pragmatism, reminding pragmatism scholars that it is, indeed, primarily William James whom we may regard as a (transcendental) humanist among the classical pragmatists, defending the irreducible value of the individual human perspective on the world – in contrast to Peircean emphasis on continuity (synechism) and Deweyan transactional naturalism. The concluding remarks thus also show how pragmatism must embrace humanism as a necessary condition for the possibility of our not only being committed to the pursuit of truth but (transcendentally formulated) our even being able to ask the question about whether any normative truth-pursuit is possible in the first place.

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[4] This is another theme I have explored in a series of (relatively recent) works: see Pihlström 2013, 2014a, 2020a, 2020c; Kivistö and Pihlström 2016.

These six main chapters are thus sandwiched between this introduction and a brief conclusion summarizing the key findings in terms of holistic pragmatism and transcendental humanism.

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It should be noted that this book is not a thoroughgoing historical investigation of James's (or anyone else's) pragmatist philosophy or what I am calling Jamesian pragmatism, not even of James's conception of truth; rather, it attempts to follow a Jamesian-*inspired* pragmatist line of argument focusing on such key concepts as truth, normativity, belief, sincerity, and individuality – concepts that receive a distinctively pragmatist and humanist flavor when subjected to the kind of Jamesian interpretation and articulation that I will sketch and defend. The book, I hope, does not merely make a novel contribution to our understanding of James's pragmatism and its philosophical significance today. It also examines how some of the fundamental issues concerning the pursuit of truth especially in ethical, existential, and religious (or generally *weltanschaulichen*) contexts ought to be reconsidered when we take seriously the worry that some philosophical ideas – including pragmatism itself – might threaten to take us down the slippery slope leading to "post-truth" and irresponsible irrationalism.

I hope my book may therefore be of interest not only to scholars of pragmatism but to anyone seriously reflecting on what it means to be genuinely committed to the pursuit of truth and to the normative contexts enabling such commitments in our contemporary societies. Even so, I can offer no analysis of the current post-truth situation itself. That would be a task for more general cultural philosophy, media commentary, and/or political theory. I will try to be sufficiently sensitive to the ways in which issues concerning the pursuit of truth arise in non-academic contexts, including political and religious contexts, while confining my own discussion to an academic philosophical examination.

There is a sense in which my project in this book cuts across a number of philosophical sub-disciplines. To a certain degree, my discussion falls within general epistemology and metaphysics, pragmatistically conceived, as I will be investigating our ability to pursue the truth in various areas of human life. Some of my most important case studies (e.g., the extended discussions of religious diversity and Jamesian "will to believe" in Chapters 2 and 4, as well as the exploration of meaning agnosticism in Chapter 6) are drawn from (pragmatist) philosophy of religion, however, so the book could also be categorized as primarily belonging to the philosophy of

religion. On the other hand, the more general examinations of our com-
mitment to the pursuit of truth (and the very concept of truth) and of the
normative structure of human forms of life (see Chapters 1 and 5) are by no
means restricted to the philosophy of religion. Along with the Kantian-
cum-Jamesian philosophical anthropology articulated in Chapter 3, they
could be regarded as philosophical attempts to understand the human
form of life in its basic conceptual and normative features. Perhaps the best
overall category for my pragmatist elaborations is thus something like
"critical philosophical reflection on the human condition". Working
under this very general and inevitably vague rubric, my argument may
occasionally seem to take somewhat complicated detours, but I am trying
to carve out a recognizable path – an essentially Jamesian path incorporat-
ing Kantian transcendental insights – through the philosophical discus-
sions I comment on, showing why I think we have good reasons to walk
that path when considering what exactly to do with the concept of truth
(and related concepts) that we possess.

Even if the end point of that path is something relatively obvious – we
must continue to seriously and responsibly use the concept of truth, and we
ought to carefully reflect on the practices within which we do so – I believe
the philosophical route to that point is worth following. Philosophical
reflection, arguably, is not valuable primarily for the results it yields but for
the intellectual, and hopefully ethical, progress during the process leading
toward those results. Furthermore, someone might ask (as one of the
anonymous reviewers of my manuscript did) why exactly I need James,
among the pragmatists, for the philosophical path I am proposing to tread.
At least some of my views on why the pursuit of truth matters to us in our
lives could perhaps be more easily defended by employing Charles S.
Peirce's or John Dewey's pragmatism, rather than James's. My brief
response to this question is that James is needed precisely because his
version of pragmatism takes the ethically, religiously, and existentially
problematic character of what we may call "the human condition" more
seriously than any other version of pragmatism I am familiar with. While I
certainly do not wish to neglect the other key pragmatists or neopragma-
tists (cf., e.g., Pihlström 2015), I vitally need James for this particular
inquiry because of his sensitivity to existential concerns, his openness to
a certain kind of melancholy and even the tragic dimension of human life,
including his commitment to what I have called his "antitheodicism" (see
Chapter 6, as well as Kivistö and Pihlström 2016; Pihlström 2020a). My
longer response will become available only throughout this entire book, as

I hope to show how we can actually do some philosophical work by employing broadly Jamesian ideas in my selected areas of discussion.

It is unfortunately impossible to acknowledge all relevant scholarship on the topic of my research in a single book. Pragmatism, including Jamesian pragmatism, has of course been investigated voluminously in earlier philosophical literature.[5] So has, obviously, the concept of truth, and so have many other concepts that are central in my inquiry, such as normativity and truthfulness or sincerity. However, I suppose this book is distinctive in its attempt to develop precisely the kind of argument that I am planning to formulate, focusing on the constitutive (transcendental) entanglement of truth, sincerity, and humanism in pragmatism – in the context of what I hope to be a timely analysis of pragmatist truth in the unfortunate "post-truth" era. Clearly, some of the recent contributions to James scholarship and broader pragmatism scholarship will be taken into account in specific contexts in the chapters that follow, and some critical dialogue with other interpreters will be included, but the main aim of this undertaking is not to secure the final scholarly truth about what James (or anyone else) actually thought but to investigate what we can and should pragmatically do with the notions he (and others) developed. In addition to being broadly Jamesian, this book finds inspiration in, for example, White's holistic pragmatism and even Rorty's neopragmatism, as well as many other philosophical ideas that have hardly been brought into contact with each other previously, such as Arendt's analysis of natality and early analytic philosophy of religion. I also offer excursions to, as well as some critical dialogue with, a number of contemporary philosophers whose views are relevant to either my interpretation of pragmatism or the overall position I seek to develop. These philosophers include, among others, Richard Bernstein, Rosa Calcaterra, Logi Gunnarsson, Martha Nussbaum, and Naoko Saito. Their very different voices, I think, enrich our picture of pragmatist diversity.[6]

Let me also note that, as pragmatists are strongly divided in their responses to Kant's critical or transcendental philosophy as a historical background of the pragmatist tradition, my approach is presumably rather controversial in emphasizing the need to integrate Jamesian pragmatist insights with Kantian critical ones. One key reason why I also need a strong

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[5] For more extensive use of both primary and secondary literature on pragmatism in some of my earlier work, see, for example, Pihlström 2003, 2008a, 2009, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2020a.

[6] Thus, my methodology could be described as a two-way movement from highly general explorations (e.g., on Jamesian truth) to zoomings into specific analyses or interpretations (e.g., Calcaterra's reading of James on freedom in comparison to G. H. von Wright's views) and back again.

Kantian "voice" for my argument in this book is that I find it natural to construe the dependence of both facts and truths on the normative practices of our pursuit(s) of truth in a (quasi-)Kantian sense. More precisely, pragmatist explorations of, for example, the constitutive dependence of the objects of inquiry on the practices of inquiry ought to be understood in this Kantian meaning: the objects of inquiry are dependent on the practices of inquiry, instead of existing "ready-made" prior to inquiry, not in the causal or factual sense that our human practices would directly "produce" them but in the transcendental sense that it is only in the context of a certain practice of inquiry that certain (kinds of) objects become possible as objects for us in the first place.

Accordingly, our purpose-driven practices provide contextually necessary (transcendental) conditions for the possibility of the kinds of entities postulated within them. Roughly, our social participation in shared practices – or in what Ludwig Wittgenstein called the human "form of life" – takes the role of the traditional Kantian transcendental self in the process of world-constitution. The objects of truth-pursuing inquiry are only possible within value-laden, normatively structured practices of inquiry, analogously to the way in which the objects of human cognition are, according to Kant, necessarily constituted by the constitutive transcendental features of the human cognitive faculty (i.e., space and time as forms of pure intuition, and the categories, or the pure concepts of the understanding).

This is not to suggest that a Kantian transcendental articulation of pragmatism could be uncritically assumed. On the contrary, within our pragmatist examination of truth, post-truth, and the pursuit of truth it will be vitally important to consider critically how far this form of pragmatism is able to function as a comprehensive philosophy of the human condition (see also, e.g., several essays in Skowroński and Pihlström 2019, some of them highly critical of any Kantian account of pragmatism). The choice to integrate Kantian critical philosophy with pragmatism should itself be regarded as a relatively controversial philosophical hypothesis to be tested by its success in formulating a plausible overall – holistic – pragmatist position. If a comprehensive account of our practices of pursuing the truth, normativity, and individual sincerity can be based on transcendental pragmatism, this will yield an important meta-level (pragmatic) argument for the plausibility of such pragmatism. Furthermore, my comprehensive account of pragmatism as a critical fallibilist and pluralist reconceptualization of Kantian transcendental idealism, and of transcendental philosophy more generally, cannot be developed in a single book. I have devoted a number of earlier publications to this topic, and while I do try to explain,