

PRAGMATIST TRUTH IN THE POST-TRUTH AGE

It is commonly believed that populist politics and social media pose a serious threat to our concept of truth. Philosophical pragmatists, who are typically thought to regard truth as merely that which is “helpful” for us to believe, are sometimes blamed for providing the theoretical basis for the phenomenon of “post-truth”. In this book, Sami Pihlström develops a pragmatist account of truth and truth-seeking based on the ideas of William James, and defends a thoroughly pragmatist view of humanism which gives space for a sincere search for truth. By elaborating on James’s pragmatism and the “will to believe” strategy in the philosophy of religion, Pihlström argues for a Kantian-inspired transcendental articulation of pragmatism that recognizes irreducible normativity as a constitutive feature of our practices of pursuing the truth. James himself thereby emerges as a deeply Kantian thinker.

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PRAGMATIST TRUTH IN
THE POST-TRUTH AGE

Sincerity, Normativity, and Humanism

SAMI PIHLSTRÖM

University of Helsinki



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What happened to the truth is not recorded.

Julian Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot*

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Acknowledgments

In a sense, I have been writing this book for a long time, presumably ever since I defended my doctoral thesis on the problem of realism in the tradition of pragmatism a quarter of a century ago, in 1996. Since then I have published several monographs, many of which examine topics relevant to the present undertaking, such as transcendental pragmatism and philosophical anthropology (Pihlström 1998, 2003, 2016), pragmatist ethics (Pihlström 2005, 2011a), pragmatist metaphysics (Pihlström 2009), pragmatist philosophy of religion inspired by William James (Pihlström 2008a, 2013, 2020a), as well as our need to address the evil and suffering we see around us in the world we live in (Pihlström 2014a, 2020a; Kivistö and Pihlström 2016). Only in this volume, however, do these *prima facie* diverse philosophical topics come together, and only here do I think I have been able to weave them into (what I hope to be) a coherent whole.

Some of the chapters of this book have a background in articles or conference papers originally written separately over the past couple of years. All the material from which the volume emerges has, however, been significantly expanded and thoroughly rewritten, and insofar as any copyrighted material is used, the appropriate permissions have been obtained.

Some sections of Chapter 1 are partly based on an essay published in the open access journal *Pragmatism Today*, the twentieth anniversary issue of the Central European Pragmatist Forum (2021), invited by the special issue editors Armen Marsoobian and Lyubov Bugaeva. Chapter 3 partly draws on a paper titled “Kantian Transcendental Pessimism and Jamesian Empirical Meliorism,” published in another open access journal, *Contextos Kantianos*, vol. 11 (2020), a special issue featuring Finnish contributions to Kant scholarship (thanks to Hemmo Laiho for the invitation). A brief and early version of Chapter 5 appears in *Acta Philosophica Fennica*, vol. 96, in a collection of essays titled *Normativity*, based on the 2019 Entretiens of Institut International de Philosophie (I.I.P.), edited by Ilkka

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Niiniluoto and myself (© Societas Philosophica Fennica, 2020). Chapter 6 combines some elements of two open access papers published in 2020: “Meaning Agnosticism and Pragmatism” appears in *Religions*, vol. 11 (a special issue on agnosticism – thanks to Francis Jonbäck for inviting my contribution), and “Theodicy by Other Means?” in *Cosmos and History*, vol. 17. In addition, short fragments of some small pieces of my work have been used in appropriate contexts. These include my reviews of Naoko Saito’s *American Philosophy in Translation (Metaphilosophy)*, vol. 51, 2020; © Metaphilosophy LLC and John Wiley & Sons Ltd.) and of Logi Gunnarsson’s *Vernunft und Temperament (William James Studies)*, Fall 2020, and my brief essay, “Advancing Pragmatist Humanism,” in *Esperienza, contingenza, valori: Saggi in onore di Rosa M. Calcaterra*, edited by Guido Baggio et al. (Quodlibet, 2020).

Some conference presentations and guest talks whose audiences have played a role in the critical development of these chapters should also be mentioned. Parts of Chapter 1 were presented in the memorial conference in honor of Rein Vihalemm at the University of Tartu, Estonia, in August 2019 (thanks are due to Endla Lõhkivi for the invitation), and as an online visiting lecture at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, hosted by Mathias Girel, in November 2020; an early Finnish version was presented in a seminar on truth and the “post-truth” era at the University of Helsinki in November 2018. Chapter 2 was partly presented in a workshop organized by the Academy of Finland Centre of Excellence, *Reason and Religious Recognition*, at the University of Helsinki, in September 2019, in collaboration with Naoko Saito (Kyoto University). Chapter 3 was partly presented as a guest lecture related to my visiting position at the École Normale Supérieure in December 2019. (That visit, kindly organized by Mathias Girel and originally planned as a context for the presentation of many of the early versions of the book chapters, was unfortunately disrupted due to various reasons, including the 2019 strikes in France and then the COVID-19 pandemic.)

Various parts of Chapter 4 have been presented at a number of institutions and conferences: a conference on epistemic vices at Leiden University, The Netherlands (January 2018); Jagiellonian University, Cracow, Poland (March 2018 – thanks to Adam Dyrda for hosting my visit); the Department of Philosophy at the University of Tartu, Estonia (May 2018 – thanks to Roomet Jakapi); the World Congress of Philosophy in Beijing, China (August 2018); the “Science Days” at the University of Helsinki (January 2019); a workshop on “The Will to Believe” and medieval philosophy at the Faculty of Theology, University of Helsinki

(February 2019 – thanks to Nicholas Faucher); and a session of the “Comprehensive Worldviews” group at FEST in Heidelberg, Germany (August 2019 – thanks to Matthias Jung and Magnus Schlette, in particular). Chapter 5, furthermore, in a sense goes back to my early inquiries into pragmatist philosophical anthropology and pragmatist accounts of normativity in the 1990s, or even to my earliest interest, as a student, in the philosophical issues of “human nature” that Heikki Kannisto – one of my undergraduate teachers – was at that point working on. More recently, I have discussed its material on a number of occasions, including two symposia at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies in May–June 2019, as well as the I.I.P. Entretiens at the University of Helsinki in August 2019. My warm thanks go to all the I.I.P. conference participants who commented on that paper, including Pascal Engel, Camilla Serck-Hansen, Dagfinn Føllesdal, and Martin Kusch.

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