Chapter 1

Introduction

Why This Book?

This volume develops a program for articulating and defending a novel pragmatist philosophy of the humanities, aiming at a philosophical theory of the basic character, objects of study, and general epistemology and ontology of humanistic inquiry from the perspective of pragmatism. The topic is, on the one hand, extremely comprehensive and wide-ranging, as I will deal with *the humanities in general* (albeit focusing on three main areas selected for closer case studies), but it is, on the other hand, very specific, because my articulation of the nature of the humanities will be based on a philosophical framework provided by *pragmatism*—a tradition initiated in the United States in the late nineteenth century by Charles S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, and later developed by many of their interpreters, critics, and followers. More precisely, my pragmatist philosophy of the humanities will build upon a distinctive Kantian version of pragmatism that I have defended in my own work since the late 1990s.

As a concept naming a field of study, *philosophy of the humanities* is only relatively rarely encountered—at least in comparison to analogous expressions denoting various other special fields in the philosophy of science, such as *philosophy of physics*, *philosophy of biology*, or *philosophy of economics*. *Philosophy of social science* is, of course, a well-established discipline, while *philosophy of the humanities* can hardly be regarded as such—even though the history of the humanities is an increasingly recognized area of scholarship.[1] As a first approximation, we may understand the philosophy of the humanities to mean the application of the problems, ideas,

and arguments originally developed in general philosophy of science to humanistic inquiry in particular. The philosophy of the humanities is, then, something like a general theory of scientific or rational inquiry as applied to the humanities (with the word *scientific* corresponding roughly here to the meaning of the German word *Wissenschaft* rather than to its usually more restricted meaning in English, referring only to the natural sciences), while the humanities themselves, broadly conceived, can be taken to include historically established and normatively constrained disciplines as diverse as aesthetics and arts studies, art history, anthropology, cultural studies, history, law and legal studies, linguistics, literary studies (or comparative literature), philosophy, religious studies, and theology—and no such list can aim at any exhaustiveness.[2] There are, then, both analogies and differences between what I am calling the philosophy of the humanities and other special areas of the philosophy of science and inquiry.

It might be objected right away that the philosophy of the humanities has been developed at least since the emergence of hermeneutics in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by thinkers such as Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey, Wilhelm Windelband, and others. However, the present book does not build upon this tradition but seeks a new opening for the philosophy of the humanities in the form of a pragmatist investigation of the ontology and epistemology of humanistic inquiry, especially focusing on the issue of realism. Moreover, pragmatism, while appreciating the insights of hermeneutical philosophers, adopts a critical distance from that tradition, which usually presupposes a sharp dualism between the natural and the human sciences. Nothing like that will be assumed in my pragmatist philosophy of the humanities; on the contrary, as will become clear shortly, my approach will be based on a general pragmatist theory of inquiry. On the other hand, the refusal to view the different branches of science and inquiry in dualistic terms does not at all mean that we would not have to appreciate the enormous differences between different practices of inquiry: theology and physics, for example, are certainly *very* different from each other. Pragmatism, with its pluralistic emphases, is ideally suited for defending this kind of diversity. It will also become clear in due course that the pragmatist tradition contains excellent philosophical resources for dealing with the humanities in their diversity in a manner that does not claim them to be essentially different from the other sciences.

Moreover, insofar as the humanities need to be "defended" in global academia today (perhaps more than previously), as many scholars seem to

think,[3] it may be advisable to understand academic politics as something like applied philosophy of science; thus, we arguably need the philosophy of the humanities in order to ground and systematize our attempts to articulate and defend the nature and value of the humanities also in more practical contexts of academic life. Therefore, explorations in the philosophy of the humanities may serve "political" goals, too, even though that is *not* a main purpose of this book. The chief intention of this volume is to understand more deeply what the humanities are about. Yet, while my focus will be more philosophical (and, indeed, epistemic and metaphysical) than political, it ought to be recognized that the humanities may certainly seem to be in the need of a defense protecting them from both external and internal threats or challenges, including a *technocratic instrumentalism* that views all research in terms of its explicit practical utility, a *reductionist scientism* that considers only the fundamental physical sciences to be capable of "limning the true and ultimate structure of reality" (to quote a well-known phrase by W. V. Quine), and a *radical postmodern relativism* that may in a sense collapse the humanities "from within" by suggesting that there is no room for any rational and critical scholarly discussion at all, as everything—including the most basic criteria of rational thought—is just relative to interpretation, discourse, or historical circumstances (cf., e.g., Pihlström 2011b).[4] Pragmatism, in the way I will characterize it here, is, I argue, able to offer such a defense based on a thoroughgoing philosophical account of what the humanities are in the business of doing, without succumbing to the temptations of instrumentalism, reductionism, or radical relativism. Therefore, it may be politically relevant in academia, too.

It should be noted right in the beginning that even though the humanities study cultural phenomena such as art and literature, historical events, and religious practices, I will not be directly engaging in any scholarly discussions in, say, the philosophy of art, of literature, of history, or of religion. In relation to these subdisciplines of philosophy, the philosophy of the humanities, in the sense I mean it, adopts a metalevel standpoint that is at the same time more abstract and more concrete. It is *more abstract* in the sense that it does not directly ask what, for example, literature, history, or religion *are* but more indirectly what literary critics, historians, and scholars of religion (along with other humanistic scholars) are doing, or what they ought to be doing, when investigating what they consider the "realities" studied in their disciplines. Thus, I will be concerned with the nature of literature, history, and religion *only* to

the extent that these are understood as objects of humanistic inquiry. I will not examine how, for instance, literature or religion may themselves be ways of pursuing "truth" (in some sense) but only how humanistic scholars investigating these human practices (ought to) pursue the truth about them. My discussion is also *more concrete* (insofar as a philosophical discussion can be concrete at all) in the sense that it examines the purpose-driven *practices* of humanistic disciplines rather than some presupposed abstract philosophical conceptions of what such disciplines are "about." Humanistic inquiry is something in which real human beings engage, and this—in itself humanistic—point of departure should never be overlooked. Indeed, one of the virtues of my pragmatist reflection will, I hope, be its ability to maintain a "human perspective" even when the philosophical issues themselves are examined at a rather abstract (more specifically, transcendental) level. What I am aiming at is an increased philosophical understanding of the activities of the humanistic inquiries that in turn focus on art and literature, history, and religion (as elements of human culture more generally), an understanding that may also contribute to the critical appreciation of what may be permanently and irreducibly valuable for human culture in humanistic scholarship.

Thus, while the philosopher of art and literature may ask highly relevant questions about the nature of literary works of art, for instance, I will here ask questions about the nature of the scholarship in literary theory and criticism that studies literary works of art. I will not be mainly interested in the ontological criteria of identity of a literary work, the ontology and semantics of fictional discourse (e.g., the sense, if any, in which a work of fiction can teach us truths about the human condition), or the ways in which fictional literature may convey philosophical (or other) cognitive information (cf. Haapala 1989; Mikkonen 2013; Geisenhanslüke 2015; Selleri and Gaydon 2016). Rather, I will be interested in what the literary critic and/or theorist is (or should be) aiming at when making theoretical and interpretive claims about such works and discourses. Analogously, while the philosophy of history, traditionally conceived, may inquire into, say, historical progress and teleology (or the lack thereof) in the development of civilizations,[5] my pragmatist philosophy of the humanities contributes to the philosophy of historiography by asking questions about the nature and epistemic status of historical inquiry, including the objects and methods of historiography. Thus, my goal is not the interpretation of history itself but a philosophical interpretation of what is (or should be) going on in scholarly interpretations of history,

especially at the ontological level (rather than, say, the level of historical explanation and understanding). This distinction roughly corresponds to the one traditionally drawn between "speculative" and "critical" philosophy of history or what is, rather, usually described today as the distinction between the philosophy of history and the philosophy of historiography, where the former explores, for example, historical "laws" or teleology while the latter focuses on the epistemology and methodology of historiography[6]—even though my focus will be primarily ontological. Furthermore, instead of contributing to the philosophy of religion characterized by questions concerning, for example, the nature of religious language or the relation between faith and reason (or the history of such questions), I hope to make a contribution to our understanding of theology and religious studies as fields of inquiry into religion; thus, again, this book does not deal with the philosophy of religion but aims at a philosophical investigation of the kinds of inquiries into religion that scholars in theology and religious studies (or comparative religion) may engage in.[7]

An obvious question is why I am proposing a *pragmatist* approach to the philosophy of the humanities instead of some of the other presumably better known and more widely discussed philosophical orientations that might be relevant to the topic I have chosen. What added value does pragmatism bring to our picture of the humanities, over and above the well-established accounts of the nature of the humanistic disciplines based on, say, hermeneutics as a general theory of interpretation and understanding, on deconstruction as a poststructuralist method of reading historical texts, or on many analytic philosophers' careful theorization of the concept of interpretation and the structure of historical explanations? Clearly, I cannot possibly deal with these and many related approaches in the philosophical study of the nature of the humanities in a single book. In particular, the "postmodern" developments in poststructuralism and deconstruction, though clearly relevant to my concerns, will be more or less left aside here. Rather than engaging with the rivals of pragmatism in any detail, I will only be able to sketch a pragmatist approach to the kinds of issues—particularly realism—that I believe philosophers interested in the humanities ought to take seriously, no matter which theoretical (or antitheoretical) background they come from.[8]

Answering the question "why pragmatism?" is one of the overarching purposes of this volume, but I will in this introductory chapter outline the project by preliminarily providing some key reasons for adopting the pragmatist point of view in this context. It will also become clear in

due course that one of the metalevel questions to be addressed is how exactly pragmatism itself—in its historical and contemporary manifestations—ought to be interpreted and developed in order to best sustain a comprehensive philosophy of the humanities. I cannot claim expertise on the various methodological debates within the slightly more detailed case study areas I propose to explore; what I primarily intend to do in this book is to sketch a pragmatist *approach*—indeed, merely a *program* or a *prolegomenon* opening up certain key questions without being able to provide any full-fledged theory—to the philosophy of the humanities, suggesting a certain way of looking at the ways reality gets represented in these fields.

Few previous contributions address the philosophy of the humanities at the general level this inquire operates at, let alone within a pragmatist framework. One exception is Jan Faye's (2012) naturalistic program for a "reconstruction" of the humanities, to be occasionally cited in relevant contexts below. Another important recent book is the comprehensive introduction to the history and philosophy of the humanities by Michiel Leezenberg and Gerard de Vries (2019). Many of its themes are relevant to my project as well: Leezenberg and de Vries emphasize the Kantian background of the rise of the modern humanities (see ibid., 61–69, 141–143), focusing on the *possibility* of both scientific and humanistic knowledge as well as of the objects of knowledge, and observing that major twentieth-century thinkers like Thomas Kuhn and Michel Foucault (whose historicist ideas have to a considerable extent shaped our understanding of the development of both science and the humanities) in a sense worked within this broadly Kantian framework (cf. ibid., 121–126, 133–139). Leezenberg and de Vries fail to consider pragmatism in any detail, though (apart from a few remarks on, e.g., Richard Rorty's neopragmatism: see ibid., chapter 4 and 304–309). This provides, for my undertaking, a natural way of both relying on work that has already been done on the emergence and development of the humanities—there is certainly no need to repeat the historical discussions that other, much more competent scholars have provided before me—and advancing from it by proposing what is lacking in earlier research, namely, a (broadly) Kantian yet pragmatist articulation of the humanities.[9]

However, for my pragmatist taste, Leezenberg and de Vries's discussion, though in many ways excellent and informative, operates too much with the dualism between science as seeking the truth and the humanities as pursuing new interpretations (see, e.g., ibid., 24, 35).[10] This is one of

the dichotomies that a pragmatist philosophy of the humanities should, in my view, avoid by taking seriously the idea that the humanities are also cognitive projects in search of knowledge and truth. Before explicating my own pragmatist standpoint, let me, however, add some further thoughts on why we should examine the philosophy of the humanities in the first place.

Why Study the Philosophy of the Humanities?

Scholars across the humanities seem frequently to suggest that the humanistic disciplines constantly need to define and redefine themselves in contemporary academia. Some fear that the humanities may face the danger of being reduced to other (more obviously "relevant") fields or narrowed down in the interest of practical applications and "useful knowledge," a fear exacerbated by the reduction in recent decades of the resources of humanities departments in many countries—though certainly not everywhere. (In some cases there seems to be a collectively held belief among humanities scholars that their resources have been or are at permanent risk of being steeply reduced, even if nothing like that has happened or is planned.) A major worry, in brief, is that the humanities may be losing their own distinctive "voice" in academia, at least in comparison to their central position in traditional "Humboldtian" research universities. Reacting to this situation, international and national scholarly networks and other actors have powerfully defended the humanities and their special value both within academia and more generally in society. The academic as well as societal *impact* of the humanities—in its many different meanings and across different time periods—is thus constantly discussed, and for good reasons, also taking into consideration the kind of larger political contexts with the various threats to universal human rights we are painfully familiar with. We certainly vitally *need* whatever it is that the humanities are able to deliver.

My philosophical examination of the nature of the humanities takes its departure from the conviction that a pragmatist analysis of the status, objects, aims, and value of the humanities will be able to crucially enlighten these discussions and to offer a novel way of accounting for the distinctive impact potential of the humanities. Moreover, it is very important to study the humanities *in general*, because—even for the pragmatist antiessentialist—many of the problems concerning the status

and value of the humanistic disciplines are common to most or all of these fields of scholarship. On the other hand, in order to keep this book within a reasonable size, I have chosen specifically to comment on three case studies concerning traditional—and also interestingly different—areas of humanistic scholarship: literary theory and criticism, historiography, and theology and religious studies. As a fourth such area, we might, at the metalevel, view this entire undertaking as, implicitly, a pragmatist investigation of the nature of philosophy (of the humanities) itself as a humanistic discipline. The reasons for my choices of exemplary cases are mostly practical; however, the arguments to be formulated will, I hope, be relevant to the other fields within the humanities and, mutatis mutandis, outside them, too.[11]

I will deliberately focus on *traditional* fields of humanistic scholarship such as literary theory, history, and theology. It is, I believe, a more difficult and therefore also more interesting philosophical challenge to develop a pragmatist philosophy of those fields than of more "dynamic" (and for that reason currently more "trendy") interdisciplinary areas. As is well known, various relatively recent transformations have shaped the general understanding of the humanities among both their practitioners and university administrators. These include the increasing *interdisciplinarity* (not only within the humanities but also between the humanities and the natural and social sciences) and the strengthening *research group structure* of humanistic scholarship, as well as the growing emphasis on *digital research materials and methods* that have led to novel research questions utilizing "big data"—at least in comparison to the traditional image of the humanistic scholar sitting in the learned solitude of their "study chamber" immersed in reading and writing about obscure old texts.

The present book suggests that these developments, despite their obvious importance for the practice and self-understanding of the humanities, are relatively minor trends in comparison to the fundamental need to increase our deeper philosophical comprehension of the nature of the knowledge-acquisition characteristic of the humanities in general (both in contemporary digital and interdisciplinary contexts and in more traditional scholarly contexts), and especially the relation of that characteristic to the "reality" about which knowledge is to be acquired. We cannot afford to lose our philosophical sense of how the autonomous role of the humanities can be maintained in an academic culture and environing society that may increasingly expect direct applicability and concrete results. More specifically, we cannot, I argue, lose the idea of the individual human

being at the center of humanistic inquiry—and this is one reason that we need a pragmatist philosophy of the humanities. I am, of course, not at all opposed to the ways in which the humanities are being developed today (e.g., within "digital humanities" or "environmental humanities"), but I also wish to defend the permanent value of traditional humanities. The fact that something is "new" does not by itself make it better than something "old."[12]

One possible source for the worry—perhaps primarily among humanistic scholars themselves—that the (especially traditional) humanities may not be taken sufficiently seriously as "sciences" among natural scientists might be the idea that the *ontological* status of the objects of research in the humanities is somewhat less clear than the ontological status of natural-scientific research objects. The meanings of texts are ontologically more obscure entities than, for instance, electrons, molecules, or genes. Therefore, a philosophical question concerning the very existence of humanly created cultural entities as objects of humanistic inquiry needs to be asked—and it is, clearly, a question prior to the more practical questions concerning more practical issues of methodology, such as interdisciplinarity and digital methods. I will, accordingly, focus on fundamental ontological and epistemic questions concerning the humanities rather than methodological ones.[13] But I will do so in a pragmatist context defined by the understanding of ontology itself as ineliminably pragmatic (cf. Pihlström 2009, 2013, 2020).

My ontological orientation also indicates the kind of issues concerning the humanities' objects of study that will be considered and those that will remain beyond the scope of this discussion. A simple example may enlighten this. In his famous work, *The Great Chain of Being* (1936), Arthur O. Lovejoy suggested that the history of ideas should study what he called "unit ideas," such as the "principle of plenitude" whose long and complex history he sought to uncover. These unit ideas may, according to Lovejoy, take rather different shapes as implicit elements of more comprehensive philosophical systems and ways of thinking ("compounds") characteristic of their authors and their times. A few decades later, another major twentieth-century thinker, Jaakko Hintikka (1976), vigorously challenged this view, arguing not only that the principle of plenitude is *not* a unit idea in Lovejoy's sense but more generally that there are no general unit ideas in that sense *at all* and that a historian of ideas should rather focus on more detailed ideas that more accurately reflect historical philosophers' ways of thinking, as well as on their logical connections. Now, my aim

is of course not to settle this dispute, even though both Lovejoy and Hintikka wrote immense *oeuvres* that could be relevant to my own project in various ways.[14] (Even less is my aim to settle specific methodological controversies in the methodology of historiography, for example.) My main interest lies in *what kind of entities* Lovejoyian unit ideas would be, if any such ideas existed, and in what kind of *ontological assumptions or presuppositions* the philosopher of historiography (or the philosopher seeking to understand the conceptual, ontological, and methodological structures of the history of ideas as a humanistic discipline) makes in claiming that such ideas ought to be studied—or that there is nothing of that kind to be studied, as the case might be. My philosophy of the humanities lies at a metalevel with regard to the kind of philosophical controversies exemplified by the Lovejoy v. Hintikka case.[15]

The pragmatic frameworks of humanistic inquiries also manifest remarkable differences in the ontological status of the objects of study within different fields of the humanities. Literary critics are concerned with works of literature and their meaningful structures, as well as, for example, the representational relations they may bear on historical and/or contemporary social and political events and processes, while historians examine what really happened in the past, why it happened, and why something else did not happen.[16] Theologians and religious studies scholars may investigate the meanings involved in religious documents, practices, and institutions from a wide range of historical, textual, and systematic (including philosophical) points of view. It is not at all clear that the ontological questions concerning the existence of these different types of entities—that is, works of art, past (chains of) events, and religious meanings—are the same. It also needs to be understood that religious studies and theology[17] need *not* be concerned with questions about the existence of supernatural or transcendent beings (which are, rather, a concern of religion itself); these academic fields, in contrast to religious activities, need to operate within an ontology that may resemble both literary studies (meaningful textual structures) and history (past events and actions)—a cultural ontology, in short. Pragmatism will, I suggest, prove useful in its ability to acknowledge not only the methodological but also the ontological *pluralism* of such research fields.[18] It goes without saying that pragmatism is generally opposed to ontological reductionisms that find only some privileged class(es) of entities fully real; such monistic ontologies cannot serve as a ground for the philosophy of the humanities. Rather, pragmatism recognizes that "humanistic entities" such as meanings,

values, and historical events are as fully real as, say, electrons or atoms, or other theoretical entities postulated by fundamental physics.[19]

It might be suggested, however, that at least some elements of both theology and philosophy—such as philosophy of religion or "analytic theology," which utilizes analytic philosophical concepts and arguments for theological purposes (cf., e.g., Vainio 2020)—do seek to engage with the transcendent. One might thus claim that in some sense philosophy is *not* a humanistic discipline, as it cannot be defined in terms of its subject matter—and here it differs from basically all other academic disciplines. Philosophy can investigate reality in general—not just humanly made cultural reality but also fundamental metaphysical questions, including the theologically relevant one concerning the existence or nonexistence of God (or other "religious entities," as we might call them, such as souls, the afterlife, and so on). To the extent that (analytic, systematic) theology relies on such philosophical investigations, it could also be taken to reach beyond the merely human. However, such a metaphysical characterization of the tasks of philosophy and theology already presupposes an essentially non-Kantian and (thus) nonpragmatist account of the nature of these disciplines based on what may be called metaphysical realism (cf. also chapter 2). From a Kantian critical and/or pragmatist perspective, even theology and philosophy, including philosophy of religion, primarily investigate human reality, *our attempts* to refer to God, the world in general, transcendence, and other metaphysical realities beyond the "merely human."[20] The metaphysical realist could maintain that the Kantian conception of theology and philosophy as humanistic disciplines that investigate only human language, culture, and world-categorization (rather than the "world in itself") begs the question against stronger realism that claims the fundamental metaphysical nature of reality itself to be among the legitimate objects of study in these fields. However, the very fact that this metalevel dispute remains an open issue in my view counts in favor of the basically Kantian (and pragmatist) position. This issue indeed needs to be settled first, and *it* is an inescapably humanistic question concerning the very possibility of referring, by means of human language-use, to a transcendent reality; it is an inquiry into human inquiry.[21] Accordingly, I do believe it is justified to maintain that theology, religious studies, and even the philosophy of religion are primarily humanistic practices of inquiry into human meanings that shape, for us, the world—even if we did believe that the world thus shaped exists independently of those meanings (see, however, also chapter 4 below).

As we indeed shape the world we live in through our meaning-making activities and interpretations, the broader *societal context* of our discussion of the philosophy of the humanities is also, I believe, remarkable. Academic life and universities may change significantly and perhaps even permanently due to the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2022 and the ensuing, possibly long-lasting social, educational, and economic crises. At the time of this writing, we do not know how these developments will unfold, but the crisis could fundamentally affect the long-term future of the humanities in ways that are still hard to predict. Further potential contextual significance—as well as potential societal impact—characteristic of this inquiry can be expected because the humanities may yield results that are culturally and politically controversial. An obvious example is the politics of history (and what has come to be called interdisciplinary "memory studies") in post-communist countries, sometimes resulting in deliberate, politically opportunistic misinterpretations of historical events such as World War II (as, notoriously, in Vladimir Putin's increasingly authoritarian and nationalistic Russia today, a "post-truth" society by any decent judgment).[22] Another example is the constant tension between secular and religious worldviews, which has political consequences in, say, the struggle between liberal and conservative social and cultural forces. Such an interplay of political power struggles and academic research needs *holistic*—and, I argue, pragmatic—evaluation. Indeed, one reason for approaching the humanities from a pragmatist viewpoint is that we need to understand academic research and politics as *human practices* with their distinctive aims and goals that nevertheless overlap and entangle with each other, for better and for worse. We also need to realize that the very ontologies of humanistic research may reflect our various practice-embedded needs, interests, and value commitments. One book can only make a very small contribution to the kind of critical discussion that is needed in order to tackle these vast themes, but a philosophical articulation of the nature of the humanities will, I hope, be helpful for those hoping to examine more directly, for instance, the political significance of historical interpretations.

Investigating the ontology and epistemology of the humanities may also have what might be called a very significant *weltanschaulich* (worldview-related) impact; that is, it may profoundly affect our understanding of the reality we live in. For example, in the philosophy of science, it has been debated for decades whether electrons and other unobservable theoretical entities postulated in scientific theories to explain observable

data "really exist."[23] Indeed, questions like this played a vital role in the emergence of twentieth-century philosophy of science in the context originally provided by logical empiricism, which sought to reduce the language of scientific theories via explicit translations to language only referring to the observable world. Accordingly, the extent to which we are justified in believing in the existence of unobservable theoretical entities on the basis of observational evidence has been debated (see, e.g., van Fraassen 1980; Hacking 1983; Niiniluoto 1999; Psillos 1999)—in a sense continuing the age-old discussion of David Hume's problem of induction. Not only have most philosophers rejected the empiricist restriction to the observable, but there are even strong scientific realists who go as far as to claim that *only* the scientific entities in the last analysis exist: the theoretical entities postulated by best-explaining scientific theories are what is ultimately real, as the "scientific image" ontologically replaces the "manifest image" (cf. Sellars 1963; Tuomela 1985). However, even when such radical formulations of scientific realism and materialism are rejected, serious ontological attention is usually not directed in the same way to the ontological postulations (or ontologically relevant background assumptions) of humanistic scholarship—even apart from the question of the ontological status of historical facts and events, which is a big discussion in its own right. If we have good philosophical reasons to believe in the reality of, say, literary meanings or interpretive possibilities (as Peircean-like "real generals," for instance, as explained in chapter 3), our world is, ontologically speaking, considerably *richer* than the world as seen merely from the point of view of the natural (physical) sciences. Understanding the humanities philosophically thus contributes to understanding the human world. Therefore, we can also say that the philosophy of the humanities may contribute to the classical philosophical project of human *self-understanding*. Enhancing our philosophical understanding and appreciation of humanistic scholarship contributes to our understanding and appreciation of some of the central dimensions of the human world we live in and the activities we engage in.

On the other hand, this of course does not mean that the humanities scholar should or could simply accept whatever ontological postulations are made in or by their objects of study (e.g., the texts whose meanings they are analyzing). Historical documents may postulate any number of truly weird ontologies, and humanistic scholarship may and often does focus on products of human thinking containing manifestly false statements about what there is. It scarcely needs to be argued in any

great detail that our humanistic inquiry ought to be compatible with a reasonably comprehensive natural-scientific (and social-scientific) picture of the world.[24] In particular, as already remarked, the scholar of theology and religious studies can by no means presuppose the existence of God or other religious "realities" that their objects of study—for example, religious documents, doctrines, or groups of people—may have postulated but must critically study those postulations themselves. Indeed, ontological postulations of various kinds—ways of thinking about the existence (or nonexistence, as the case might be) of various types of entities—and the more or less problematic reasonings behind such postulations may themselves be among the very objects of inquiry in the humanities.[25]

The Philosophy of the Humanities Today

Even though there is no agreement among scholars engaged in the philosophy of the humanities about the precise scope or even definition of this field, there are, of course, plenty of scholarly contributions on specific areas such as the philosophy of literary criticism, the philosophy of historiography, and the philosophy of religious studies.[26] When canvassing the conceptual and scholarly background of this project, it is important to realize that a wealth of previous work has already been done and that only a very small fragment of it can really be taken into consideration here. For example, both philosophers and historians have actively discussed the methodology of historiography (see again Tucker 2009 for a comprehensive collection of relatively recent essays), and controversies on the epistemology and methodology of literary interpretation and religious studies, raising issues of interpretive objectivity and relativism are also well known.

On the other hand, the philosophy of history and the philosophy of historiography, have not always been clearly distinguished from each other conceptually even by central figures in the field—not until relatively recently, that is (cf. ibid., "Introduction"; Kuukkanen 2015). It may be difficult to draw such a distinction in any principled and ahistorical (!) way; this division, as all conceptual distinctions, is itself subject to historical change (and must be pragmatically evaluated on the basis of the purposes it serves in different contexts).[27] What has been called critical philosophy of history examines, among other things, the objectivity of historical knowledge and the nature of historical explanation (see, e.g.,

Mandelbaum 1977), topics clearly relevant to the question of realism about historiography and its objects (to be considered in more detail below). Some major scholars in the philosophy of history and historiography, such as William Dray (1980), have investigated *both* philosophical issues of (the methods of) historiography—including, say, R. G. Collingwood's classical views on historical understanding as reenacting past experiences or rethinking past thoughts (see Collingwood 1946), as well as the traditional idea of objectively reconstructing the past "as it actually was"—*and* more speculative or "metaphysical" issues in the philosophical interpretation of history itself, such as historical progress, human freedom in its historical contexts, and Spenglerian cultural pessimism.[28]

The present undertaking will focus—from its distinctive pragmatist angle—on the former kind of topics instead of the latter, while recognizing that a sharp division between them will be quite impossible. The pragmatist philosopher of history and historiography should therefore, in my view, be strongly opposed to, for example, Hegelian historical teleology, but arguing for that general view is only tangentially relevant to my investigations in this book. On the other hand, the way in which Karl Popper (1972 [1957], 1977) both criticizes historicist accounts of historical inevitability or "laws of history" and offers a philosophical articulation of realism about history would certainly be significant for a (more comprehensive) pragmatist study of history and historiography, too, even though Popper himself never sympathized with pragmatism at all. Furthermore, when exploring, say, historical or interpretive objectivity, the philosophy of the humanities is primarily concerned with fundamental philosophical questions concerning the very possibility of such objectivity—in its social and historical contingencies (cf. also Hacking 2002, 181).

Moreover, a monumental scholarly work like Paul Ricoeur's *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004) may successfully combine deep insights into the historicity of human existence and the ethical and political issues of memory[29] with careful philosophical examination of the methodology of historiography, including explanation, understanding, and historical representation. It is a clear indication of the entanglement of philosophy of history and philosophy of historiography. Furthermore, if we read G. H. von Wright's classic *Explanation and Understanding* (1971), dealing with the methodology of historical explanation in particular and developing the theory of intentional explanation understood in terms of the famous "practical syllogism,"[30] in the context of his overall philosophical oeuvre, which also includes essays on the historical development of the

Western civilization and critical analyses of the state of humanity and the environmental crisis (e.g., von Wright 1993), we can appreciate the profound connections between the epistemology of historical scholarship and the broader philosophical attempts to understand human beings as historical beings ethically concerned with their past, present, and future.[31] Even though specific methodological issues in historiography will not be centrally present in this book, the well-known contributions by major thinkers including Dray, Ricoeur, von Wright, and Hayden White (among others) would potentially be among the kind of materials that would have to be critically studied in more comprehensive investigations of the philosophy of the humanities. Whatever I will have to say (primarily in chapter 3) about the kinds of issues these scholars have worked on will only be in relation to the pragmatist views I will develop.

Analogous examples characterizing the contemporary state of the philosophy of the humanities can be found in the other case study areas. For example, when Paisley Livingston (1988) examines the knowledge that literary theory may offer us, he also comments on the epistemic status of literature itself; in comparison, again, my discussion focuses on the former kind of issues rather than the latter.[32] Moreover, while debates over the methodology of theology and religious studies are primarily confined to the epistemic credentials of scholarly contributions to those fields, it is almost inevitable that the possibility of "religious knowledge" is thereby also discussed. Even what is sometimes labeled "methodological naturalism" (see chapter 4 below) is not entirely neutral. For a thoroughgoing naturalist, the commitment to naturalism (or atheism) as a background assumption of religious studies can hardly remain "merely methodological"; it is at the same time a commitment to a conception of the world according to which religious experience (due to its aspiration to the transcendent), for example, should not be regarded as being cognitively in touch with reality in the same way in which scientific experimentation and theorization may be, and should not therefore play an evidential role in the methodology of the study of religion. A naturalist account of religion—based on, for example, Dewey's nonreductive pragmatic naturalism (cf. Pihlström 2005, 2013)—will thus have to determine exactly how scholarly perspectives on religious practices and their practitioners' experiences are related to religious worldviews themselves (see several essays in Bagger 2018, esp. Proudfoot 2018 and Davis 2018).

In a comprehensive philosophy of the humanities, the relations between humanistic scholarship and the "world" such scholarship aims at representing, understanding, and explaining are therefore complex.

This "world" also contains human beings' (e.g., literary or religious) ideas about and attempts to "know" something about the reality they (we) live in, and those cognitive pursuits themselves also need to be critically explored, in connection with the very attempt to study the philosophical foundations of humanistic scholarship generally. This reflexive structure is nicely manifested in historiography, in particular: the writing of history is itself an element of the historicity of human beings.

What we need, then, is an enriched philosophy of the humanities exploring the status of our scholarly endeavors seeking to understand the literary, historical, and (possibly) religious aspects of human beings' "being-in-the-world" (to adopt a Heideggerian expression out of context) in their reflexive complexity. Humanities scholars typically analyze human practices that are themselves (purportedly) *about* the world, and the philosophical assessments of those practices will, to a certain degree, inevitably include an assessment of their successes and failures in this "aboutness."[33] Hence, philosophical discussions of literary theory or religious studies will also to some extent have to engage with literary and religious attempts to cope with the world we live in, even though that is not my primary aim in this study.

It should be observed that, in comparison to the plethora of scholarship available within, for example, the philosophy of historiography in general, specifically pragmatist contributions to this field have been few and far between. Yet, two pragmatist giants—both recently deceased—stand out. In the philosophy of historiography and more generally in the philosophy of culture, Morton White (e.g., 2002) defended what he called holistic pragmatism (to be further discussed below), while Joseph Margolis (e.g., 1993) wrote extensively over the years on what he labeled the "flux" of history, developing a complex form of historicist pragmatism. Interestingly, special issues of relatively new but well-established journals such as *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* and *Journal of the Philosophy of History* have been devoted to pragmatism in historiography, offering a rich set of perspectives on both pragmatist classics' views on history and the ways in which the methods of historiography might be developed along pragmatist lines (see Gronda and Viola 2016; Kuukkanen et al. 2019; and esp. Grigoriev and Piercey 2019, an informative introduction to the aforementioned *Journal of the Philosophy of History*'s special issue).[34]

Giles Gunn (2014, 2017) has proposed a pragmatist approach to the study of literature and examined the history of American literature that emphasizes its connections with pragmatism.[35] But probably by far

the best-known pragmatist philosopher of literary theory, and of the humanities generally, is Richard Rorty,[36] whose work emphasizes the radical contingency of our historically developing practices, including the ways we speak about and conceptualize reality. In a sense, Rorty extends a broadly "Kuhnian" understanding of the historicity of the development of the sciences (cf. Kuhn 1970 [1962]) to philosophy and human culture generally, proposing an "ironist" attitude to the contingency of even our most fundamental "final vocabularies," while creatively engaging with some of the most profound literary works of modern times, including Vladimir Nabokov's and George Orwell's great novels (see esp. Rorty 1989; on Orwell, cf. also chapter 3 below). However, while Rorty's radical neopragmatism certainly needs to be taken seriously by the pragmatist philosopher of the humanities,[37] it is not easy to find any systematically developed philosophical account of the humanities in his work. I am also on a rather different track from Ulf Schulenberg's (2015) defense of a pragmatist "humanism" as a Rortyan antifoundationalist and postmetaphysical "poeticized culture," as my own version of pragmatist humanism (as developed, e.g., in Pihlström 2021) is Kant-inspired and thus "transcendental"; yet, the Rortyan "uses of literature" in moral and political emancipation, as analyzed by Schulenberg (and many others), could be among the research objects of humanistic inquiry (arguably characterizable as Peircean-like "real generals"; cf. chapter 3).

In comparison to pragmatist philosophy of literary theory, there is a lot of discussion available on pragmatism as applied to religion. However, in most cases this is, at least primarily, pragmatist philosophy of religion rather than pragmatist philosophy of theology and religious studies (cf., e.g., Pihlström 2013, 2020; see, however, also Bagger 2018). In some of my own previous work, I have tried to develop a pragmatically realist and nonreductively naturalist approach to religion and its academic study, and clearly whatever I will have to say about the study of religion in this book is intended to be compatible with such a broadly pragmatist philosophy of religion.

In any event, I am not claiming that I can always clearly maintain the distinction between the philosophy of the humanities, on the one hand, and the philosophy of the "objects" of the fields of humanistic scholarship to be studied (viz., the philosophy of literature, the philosophy of history, and the philosophy of religion), on the other hand; to a certain degree this can only be a matter of emphasis rather than any strict division. But trying to maintain a distinction like this will determine my focus.

Why Study the Philosophy of the Humanities from a Pragmatist Perspective?

Very few among the major theorists cited above have approached the philosophy of the humanities in an explicitly pragmatist manner. However, pragmatism, I will argue, is considerably better suited to the task of philosophically understanding the nature and value of the humanities than, for example, "pure" analytic philosophy, hermeneutics, or phenomenology. This is so especially because the pragmatist tradition has developed a *general theory of inquiry* (cf., e.g., Capps 2015) not restricted to either the natural sciences or the humanities, or to any other specific field of inquiry, for that matter; nor does it presuppose any principled dichotomy or dualism between the natural and the human sciences.[38] The very concept of inquiry, as articulated by pragmatist philosophers, is extremely broad yet specific in its own way. Pragmatism provides philosophical tools for developing a general conception of rational inquiry that can be fruitfully applied to humanistic inquiry in particular and to investigating what is distinctive in such inquiry in comparison to other forms of inquiry. We need, moreover, a philosophical theory of the humanities that can also be appreciated from the perspective of the natural sciences, as well as from the standpoint of general philosophy of science (often focusing on scientific rather than humanistic inquiry as a model of all rational science). Few philosophers of natural science care much for hermeneutics, but many of them could without difficulties embrace pragmatism. This is a further practical (external) reason for developing a pragmatist philosophy of the humanities, in addition to the intrinsic philosophical value such a development may embody.

Thus, while I have nothing against the kind of philosophy of the humanities that has been articulated in the tradition of hermeneutics since Schleiermacher and Dilthey, up to and including contemporary hermeneutic scholars such as Charles Taylor, my pragmatist approach offers, I think, unique advantages, especially in its understanding of the problem of realism as fundamentally similar across all the disciplines of inquiry.[39] This adds a kind of *commensurability* to the philosophy of science and the philosophy of the humanities: the pragmatists' insights concerning realism, truth, and objectivity in the philosophy of science are arguably directly relevant to the problem of realism in the philosophy of the humanities, though the latter cannot be reduced to the former. The pragmatist tradition also equips us with a number of specific philosophical ideas that

can be usefully applied to the philosophy of the humanities, even though they were originally developed in more general contexts of metaphysics, epistemology, and theory of inquiry; these include the value-embeddedness of all ontology (as thematized by both classical figures like James and Dewey and modern pragmatists like Hilary Putnam) as well as, for example, Peircean realism concerning "real generals" (see chapter 3).

I believe it is indeed fair to say that pragmatist thinkers, early and late, have successfully formulated sophisticated approaches to general epistemology and philosophy of science, integrating the most plausible insights from both *realism*—affirming the mind- and theory-independence of reality as an object of inquiry—and *constructivism*—emphasizing the constitutive significance of human practices of inquiry for the emergence of the objects of scientific and humanistic investigations.[40] This book will ask to what extent a *pragmatic realism* offering a middle path between strong realism and radical constructivism is available in the philosophy of the humanities (again, see chapter 3 for more elaborated questions along these lines, as well as some attempts to answer them). This basic issue entangling pragmatism and realism will be tackled in a number of specific dimensions, potentially also leading to a careful critical reevaluation of the ways we think about concepts such as rationality, progress, and impact in the context of humanistic inquiries.[41]

Precisely in its project of integrating realism with constructivism, pragmatism is an inherently *pluralistic* philosophy, both in general philosophy of science and inquiry and more broadly in other areas of philosophy, including metaphysics, ethics, social and political philosophy, and philosophy of religion (see, e.g., Pihlström 2013, 2020, 2021). Pragmatism is therefore well equipped to take up the task of philosophically systematizing the structure of humanistic scholarship in a thoroughly *nonreductive* and *antifoundationalist* framework that recognizes the radical historicity of human culture, including our inquiries into human culture and its history. It is, I will argue, only within an overall pragmatist context that we can plausibly hope to avoid the opposite challenges of *reductive naturalism*, which ultimately yields a form of *scientism*, culminating in the view that cultural phenomena are in the end "nothing over and above" natural or even physical phenomena, based on biological or eventually just physical contingencies and laws of nature,[42] and *radical relativism*, which can take the form of *historicism* claiming that the humanities can reach no objectivity, or no realistic truth about their objects of study, because they are always open to multiple historically contextualized interpretive points