Plato’s Pragmatism offers the first comprehensive defense of a pragmatist reading of Plato. According to Plato, the ultimate rational goal is not to accumulate knowledge and avoid falsehood but rather to live an excellent human life.

The book contends that a pragmatic outlook is present throughout the Platonic corpus. The authors argue that the successful pursuit of a good life requires cultivating certain ethical commitments, and that maintaining these commitments often requires violating epistemic norms. In the course of defending the pragmatist interpretation, the authors present a forceful Platonic argument for the conclusion that the value of truth has its limits, and that what matters most are one’s ethical commitments and the courage to live up to them. Their interpretation has far-reaching consequences in that it reshapes how we understand the relationship between Plato’s ethics and epistemology.

Plato’s Pragmatism will appeal to scholars and advanced students of Plato and ancient philosophy. It will also be of interest to those working on current controversies in ethics and epistemology.

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Plato’s Pragmatism
Rethinking the Relationship between Ethics and Epistemology

Nicholas R. Baima and Tyler Paytas
And so, Glaucon, his story was saved and not lost; and it would save us, too, if we were persuaded by it, since we would safely cross the River of Forgetfulness with our souls undefiled. But if we are persuaded by me, we’ll believe that the soul is immortal and able to endure every evil and every good, and always hold to the upward path, practicing justice with wisdom every way we can, so that we’ll be friends to ourselves and to the gods, both while we remain here on Earth and when we receive the rewards of justice, and go around like victors in the games collecting prizes; and so both in this life and on the thousand-year journey we have described, we shall fare well.

*Republic* 10.621b8–d3
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Translations and Abbreviations

Translations of Plato are slightly modified from those found in Cooper and Hutchinson (1997). However, with respect to the Laws, we have also made use of the translations by Griffith (2016) and Meyer (2015). The Greek follows the most recently published Oxford Classical Text. References to Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics follow Rowe (2002). For Aristotle's other works, we refer to the translations in Barnes (1984). Abbreviations of ancient sources follow those found in the fourth edition of the Oxford Classical Dictionary, https://oxfordre.com/classics/page/abbreviation-list/; abbreviations of non-ancient historical sources are found in the historical section of the reference page.

Regarding the Greek language, we will follow this convention: we will transliterate key individual Greek words but will provide the Greek for longer strings of words; we will cite specific line numbers where a particular word or string of words is pertinent (e.g. 2.382a1) and will cite overall passage numbers to indicate that the passage as a whole is generally relevant (e.g. 2.383a).
But you will have understood what I am aiming at, namely, that our faith in science is still based on a *metaphysical faith*—that even we knowers of today, we godless anti-metaphysicians, still take *our* fire from the flame lit by a faith thousands of years old, that faith of the Christians, which was also Plato’s faith, that God is truth, that truth is *divine*. But what if precisely this becomes more and more unbelievable, when nothing any longer turns out to be divine except for error, blindness, and lies—and what if God should prove to be our most enduring lie?

(Nietzsche, GS 5.344; GM 3.24)

When the health of our soul and our self-respect are at stake, even irrational measures are justified.

(Epictetus, *Frag.* 10a)

1 The Alethic Interpretation

In the late 19th century, William James started a debate with W. K. Clifford over the norms of belief-formation and inquiry. James was responding to Clifford’s essay, “The Ethics of Belief,” which argues that “it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence” (EB 77). Clifford asks us to imagine a shipowner about to send to sea an old and weathered ship in need of serious repairs. Seeing the ship in this condition, the shipowner doubts the seaworthiness of the vessel, but he sets these worries aside and convinces himself that the ship can endure a few more trips. He reasons to himself that “she had gone safely through so many voyages and weathered so many storms that it was idle to suppose she would not come safely home from this trip also” (EB 70). So he “put[s] his trust in Providence” and acquires “a sincere and comfortable conviction that his vessel was thoroughly safe and seaworthy” as he watches the ship depart “with a light heart” (EB 70). The shipowner, nevertheless, should have trusted the evidence—for the vessel sank mid-ocean.
The moral of the story is that we should believe on the basis of evidence rather than hope, wish, or faith; and this remains true even if our wishful thinking turns out true or has positive consequences:

When an action is once done, it is right or wrong for ever; no accidental failure of its good or evil fruits can possibly alter that. The man [i.e. the shipowner] would not have been innocent, he would only have been not found out. The question of right or wrong has to do with the origin of his belief, not the matter of it; not whether it turned out to be true or false, but whether he had a right to believe on such evidence as was before him.

(Clifford’s larger point is that, as a matter of social obligation, we ought always to form reasonable beliefs, for “no one man’s belief is in any case a private matter which concerns himself alone” (EB, 73). Even seemingly innocuous beliefs need to be subjected to rigorous inspection:

No real belief, however trifling and fragmentary it may seem, is ever truly insignificant; it prepares us to receive more of its like, confirms those which resembled it before, and weakens others; and so gradually it lays a stealthy train in our inmost thoughts, which may some day explode into overt action, and leave its stamp upon our character for ever.

(James wasn’t buying it. In his essay, “The Will to Believe,” James argues that sometimes the demands of life require that we believe without proper evidence; indeed, science and inquiry itself demand faith before evidence. He puts the point thus:

Our faith is faith in some one else’s faith, and in the greatest matters this is most the case. Our belief in truth itself, for instance, that there is a truth, and that our minds and it are made for each other,—what is it but a passionate affirmation of desire, in which our social system backs up? We want to have truth; we want to believe that our experiments and studies and discussion must put us in a continually better and better position towards it; and on this line we agree to fight out our thinking lives.

(James’ point is that not only should the epistemic sometimes take a back seat to the practical, but that the epistemic depends on the practical as well. Our drive for knowledge is, after all, a volition, and it requires having faith in our epistemic community and processes as well as the hope
that we will succeed. Given that James is perhaps the most well-known pragmatist, this response should come as no surprise.¹

The debate between Clifford and James brings to the forefront questions concerning the relationship between practical and epistemic normativity. Demarcating between the epistemic and the practical can be tricky—neither James nor Clifford were entirely successful in this regard. Although some amount of vagueness is unavoidable, for the purposes of this book, we will distinguish between these two types of normativity on the basis of what we take to be their general ends. Practical normativity aims at well-being (one’s own or others’) and moral goodness or rightness. Epistemic normativity aims at truth (or at least avoidance of falsehood) and knowledge. One might also try to distinguish between the two by focusing on the things to which they apply. Whereas practical normativity applies to actions, epistemic normativity applies to beliefs. While this is a reasonable way of proceeding, it is not without ambiguities. For instance, some norms apply to actions but are directed towards epistemic ends; consider: “Always take precautions to avoid being influenced by your biases while gathering evidence.” This norm seems practical insofar as it guides our actions. But since the norm is directed towards the goal of true belief, we will classify it as an epistemic norm.

Understood in this way, “alethists,” like Clifford, maintain that we should never violate epistemic norms, whereas “pragmatists,” like James, maintain that sometimes we should.² Plato is typically contrasted with pragmatists and viewed as a great champion of the alethically inclined. As Simon Blackburn puts it in his introductory book on truth, “The sides in this conflict have various names: absolutists versus relativists, traditionalists versus postmodernists, realists versus idealists, objectivists versus subjectivists, rationalists versus social constructivists, Platonists versus pragmatists” (2005, xiii). Let us call the anti-pragmatist reading of Plato the “Alethic Interpretation.” As the first epigraph illustrates, Nietzsche accuses philosophers of fetishizing truth and undervaluing falsehood, and he sees Plato as an originator of this problem. To be clear, Nietzsche isn’t accusing Plato of thinking that everyone should always seek truth and avoid falsehood. After all, Nietzsche congratulates Plato for putting forth “a real lie, a genuine, resolute, ‘honest’ lie” in the Republic (GM 3.19). Instead, Nietzsche’s charge is that Plato thinks that philosophers themselves aim only at truth and never accept falsehood, and that in doing this, they neglect the value of uncertainty, ignorance, and falsehood (BGE 1.1).

Nietzsche’s view of Plato is not eccentric; his interpretation was prevalent in antiquity as well. It was, for instance, essential to the Academy’s turn towards skepticism. Arcesilaus extracted from Plato’s dialogues the lesson of suspending judgment in order to avoid false belief. Moreover, many scholars today agree that the essence of Platonic philosophy is pursuit of the true and avoidance of the false. Katja Vogt, for instance,
argues that it is a Socratic intuition “to avoid the acceptance of falsehoods, and that it is preferable to make no truth claims as opposed to false ones” (2012, 24).

The Alethic Interpretation is not limited to scholars with skeptical leanings. Pragmatic readings are unpopular because they flout orthodoxy about the unity of practical and theoretical reason in Plato. As Julia Annas puts it in her classic introduction to the Republic:

[Plato] would reject any distinction of practical and theoretical reasoning, and hence of the “practical” and “contemplative” conceptions of the philosopher; he would say that there was only one conception, that of the person in whom reason is supreme both in contemplating the Forms and in making good practical decisions.

(1981, 265)

More recently, C. M. M. Olfert writes in reference to Plato’s view of reason:

When we engage in practical reasoning, we do not pursue acting well, or truth and knowledge, as independent aims or values. Instead, when we engage in practical reasoning (perhaps especially when we do so knowledgeably and well), the aim or the value of figuring out what to do is inseparable from the aim or the value of grasping the truth. What is more, from the perspective of practical reasoning, our practical and epistemic aims and values are equally fundamental and important—neither is pursued for the sake of the other. So when we reason about what to do, truth and knowledge on the one hand, and action and acting well on the other, are inseparable and equally fundamental values or aims. Practical reasoning is irreducibly and equally both rational and practical.

(2017, 2)

It is widely held that in explicitly distinguishing between theoretical and practical reasoning, Aristotle departs from Plato. In her introduction to the Nicomachean Ethics, Sarah Broadie explains:

Aristotle seems to have been the first to teach that abstract theoretical understanding does not confer practical wisdom, is not a precondition of that sort of wisdom, and is to be prized entirely for its own sake; and the first to see clearly that these are two quite different kinds of excellence. Whereas Plato used the terms “phronēsis” and “sophia” without distinction, Aristotle makes them names of different qualities, and brings out the differences to the point of being able to say that wisdom is “antithetical to [theoretical] intelligence.”

(Aristotle 2002, 7; see also Nic. Eth. 6.8.1142a25)
An implicit appeal to this dogma is found in Sean Kelsey’s (2013) response to Raphael Woolf’s (2009) challenge to simplistic forms of alethism. With the useful falsehoods of the Kallipolis in mind, Woolf argues that not all truths are equally valuable in the Republic—in fact, non-philosophical truths have no inherent value. Rather than directly challenging the textual evidence Woolf references, Kelsey defends Plato’s love of truth generally by appealing to the conceptual connection between truth, wisdom, the other virtues, and goodness: wisdom necessarily involves valuing truth completely, not merely some individual truths. Given wisdom’s connection to the other virtues and goodness, all truths are valuable in themselves (see also L. Pangle 2014).

If Plato thinks that theoretical and practical reason are unified such that there cannot be a genuine conflict between epistemic and practical norms, then an alethic/anti-pragmatist reading must be correct. If living well never requires setting aside one’s commitment to truth and truthfulness, then obviously there would be no reason for Plato to advocate a form of pragmatism; the Platonic recipe for virtue and flourishing would involve the unwavering adherence to sound epistemic practices.

It isn’t difficult to see why so many students of Plato, both past and present, accept some version of the Alethic Interpretation. After all, in Plato’s so-called early dialogues, Socrates notoriously disavows knowledge of important things and admonishes those who falsely claim to possess it. For instance, in the Apology, Socrates tests the Oracle of Delphi’s claim that no one is wiser than he is by seeking out and challenging those who profess to have wisdom (20e–23c). Upon doing this, Socrates discovers that he is wiser than those who think they are wise because only he is cognizant of his ignorance—others claim knowledge without really knowing and thus are ignorant of their ignorance. Socrates identifies this practice of self-examination with philosophy, a divine exercise that he will pursue to his death (28b–32e). From this text, it is easy enough to see why one would think that Plato considers philosophy a skeptical practice that is fundamentally about avoiding falsehood and expelling false beliefs from others.

Consider also that in the Gorgias Socrates is careful to distinguish philosophy from mere rhetorical persuasion. Philosophy is concerned with truth and goodness, while rhetorical persuasion is indifferent to the truth, being merely concerned with flattery and pleasure. For example, when Polus attempts to refute Socrates through rhetoric, Socrates replies, “You don’t compel me; instead you produce many false witnesses against me and try to banish me from my property, the truth” (472b3–6). Socrates’ identification of truth as his property is consistent with his assertion in the Euthyphro that he “prefer[s] nothing, unless it is true” (14e9).

Plato’s commitment to truth and aversion to falsehood isn’t idiosyncratic to his so-called early dialogues but extends to the rest of the corpus as well. The philosophers of the Republic, for instance, are committed to
truth in the same way that Socrates is in the Apology and the Gorgias. In the Republic, Socrates says that philosophers “must be without falsehood—they must refuse to accept what is false, hate it, and have a love for the truth” (6.485c3–4). Plato’s love of truth continues into what many scholars consider his last work, the Laws. Through the mouth of the unnamed Athenian, Plato says that “truth heads the list of all things good, for gods and humans alike” (730c1–2).

Additionally, throughout the corpus, Plato expresses a steadfast pledge to sound epistemic practices. Notably, Socrates asserts that they must follow the argument wherever it blows (Resp. 3.394d8–9) and always accept the reasoning that seems best (Cr. 46b). This commitment is clearly a feature of Plato’s love of truth; for it is through rational and impartial inquiry, not emotional and partial reasoning, that we reliably reach truth and make epistemic progress.

From all of this, we see that the Alethic Interpretation is not without cause. Given the historical precedent for this interpretation, as well as the textual evidence just cited, it is unsurprising that Plato’s unwavering commitment to truth seems to operate as a background assumption for many philosophers and classicists. And yet, despite all of this, we believe that the Alethic Interpretation is mistaken—Plato is much closer to James than to Clifford. Our aim in this book is to propose and defend an interpretation of Plato according to which the ultimate human goal is not truth and knowledge but rather living well and maintaining psychological harmony—we call this view “Plato’s Pragmatism.” While this isn’t identical with versions of pragmatism advanced by thinkers such as Peirce, James, and Dewey, we use this name in order to convey both that life involves a clash of normative commitments and that the practical has priority over the epistemic. As emphasized by Epictetus (one of Socrates’ greatest admirers) in the second epigraph, the pursuit of virtue can justify the occasional violation of epistemic norms.

In order to make progress on this issue, we must specify the conventional interpretation that we seek to challenge. We take the following three claims to compose the essence of the Alethic Interpretation:

1. **Absolutist Evaluative Claim**: Plato believes that truth is always preferable to falsehood.
2. **Epistemic Caution Claim**: Plato believes that we ought never to form beliefs in the absence of strong evidence.
3. **Philosopher Claim**: Plato believes that a philosopher could never benefit from false belief or epistemic risk.

Each of these claims can be stated in many different ways; indeed, different scholars are implicitly and explicitly committed to different formulations of each. Rather than critically examining all of the myriad alethic readings, we will confront the general thrust of these three central claims.
John Doris once described the perils of such an approach as being like drawing a face that looks like many faces but doesn’t look like any particular face. This runs the risk of upsetting those who possess the particular faces we are targeting (i.e. those who are sympathetic to the Alethic Interpretation). Our response to this worry follows that of Doris (2015, 17): we wager that the face we depict is easily recognizable. That said, even if no one had ever suggested an Alethic Interpretation, our project would hopefully still prove useful in its organization and integration of passages that endorse both falsehood and risky belief-formation, as well as its construction of a Platonic ethics of belief.

The core of our pragmatic interpretation of Plato consists in grounds for rejecting each of the three aforementioned claims. Against the Absolutist Evaluative Claim, we maintain that for Plato there are certain commitments—to care for the health of one’s soul, to promote justice within one’s city—that a person needs in order to live well. A successful life requires that these commitments be entrenched and unwavering, and falsehoods are sometimes necessary for initiating and sustaining them—especially for those people and soul-parts that lack philosophical understanding. Against the Epistemic Caution Claim, we hold that there are some questions that outstrip one’s ability to answer them with adequate epistemic justification—questions, for instance, that concern the nature of the soul, the gods, death, and even philosophy itself. Sometimes the demands of living well require one to form beliefs about these questions despite the high risk of error. Finally, the fact that all humans, including philosophers, can benefit from falsehoods in these ways, tells against the Philosopher Claim.

2 Summary

The book comprises three parts, with each part focused primarily on one of the above claims. Part I takes on the Absolutist Evaluative Claim by analyzing the value of truth and falsehood. Chapter 1 examines the useful falsehoods of the Republic in light of a puzzling passage in Book 2 where Socrates distinguishes between genuine falsehoods and falsehoods in words. Genuine falsehoods are always bad, but falsehoods in words are sometimes beneficial (2.382a–d). We argue that genuine falsehoods are a restricted class of false beliefs about ethics: they are false beliefs about how one ought to live and what one ought to pursue. We refer to these beliefs as “ethical commitments.” False ethical commitments are always pernicious because they create and sustain psychological disharmony. Unlike genuine falsehoods, falsehoods in words can be about anything. These falsehoods are preferable when they help initiate and sustain true ethical commitments (as in the case of the noble lie, 3.414d–415c). In Chapter 2, we corroborate our interpretation of useful falsehoods by arguing that the same account is found in the Laws. This is most
evident in the Athenian Stranger’s use of preludes (4.711c, 4.718b–d, and 4.722b) and the myth-based account of religion offered to citizens. Both of these present false explanatory beliefs for the sake of cultivating true ethical commitments.

Since the concept of ethical commitment is central to our pragmatic reading, it is important to get a clear understanding of what ethical commitment involves—this is the goal of Chapter 3. Our pragmatic interpretation might misleadingly suggest that Plato’s ethics is primarily concerned with individual acts and their material consequences. The tendency to think of ethical and evaluative judgments along these lines underlies an influential critique of the ring of Gyges argument from Republic 2. Some scholars claim that Glaucon’s argument cannot achieve its ostensible aim of demonstrating that nobody values justice for its own sake. This is because endorsement of Gyges’ actions (i.e. using the invisibility ring to commit murder and seize power) is compatible with assigning some intrinsic value to justice—one might simply judge this value to be outweighed. We argue that this is not a plausible understanding of the intrinsic valuing of ethical ideals such as justice. An agent who chooses to pursue justice for its own sake is someone who has an ethical commitment to justice. Ethical commitments involve endorsement of the essential norms of the object in question (e.g. justice), and such endorsement must be relatively stable in order for pursuit of the object to be rational. This discussion reveals that Platonic ethical commitment is more complex than alternative notions of valuing that are prevalent within contemporary ethical theory.

After explaining what kinds of false beliefs can be beneficial in Part I, Part II examines the norms of belief. The primary aim of this part is to demonstrate that Plato does not accept the Epistemic Caution Claim, for he holds that sometimes it is appropriate to accept a proposition in the absence of strong evidence. In Chapter 4, we examine the behavior of Plato’s favorite philosopher, Socrates, in the Phaedo. Socrates apparently believes that he is justified in violating epistemic norms but that his friends should continue to search for the truth (90e–91c). We argue that it is primarily in virtue of Socrates’ philosophical acumen and position of influence that he is permitted to risk false belief, even though his friends are not. Socrates’ willingness to adopt an unphilosophical approach to his beliefs about death tells against the Epistemic Caution Claim (as well as the Philosopher Claim).

The aim of Chapter 5 is to bolster our case against the Epistemic Caution Claim by showing that Plato’s endorsement of epistemic risk extends across a broader range of contexts. This chapter focusses on the Meno and its well-known paradox of inquiry—that one needs ignorance to be motivated to inquire, and yet one cannot hope to succeed in inquiry when starting from a place of ignorance. We argue that Socrates’ solution to this problem involves an appeal to a type of faith that is essential
for virtue. While Meno is right about the lack of objective reasons for believing that our inquiries will bear fruit, the choice to carry on with inquiry makes us braver and more active. Hence, we are justified in having faith regarding this matter on pragmatic grounds, and thus we have an example of a justified epistemic risk that arises for anyone who is in a position to engage in inquiry.

Chapter 6 compares the way that Socrates engages in inquiry with others in the *Euthydemus* and the *Protagoras*. In the *Euthydemus*, Socrates is eager to discuss the nature of virtue with the sophist brothers, Dionysodorus and Euthydemus, and he encourages others to do so as well. Conversely, in the *Protagoras*, Socrates is cautious and warns Hippocrates about the dangers of inquiry. We argue that Socrates is more cautious when dealing with Protagoras because there is greater risk of developing false beliefs when engaging in inquiry with interlocutors who are seemingly truthful than when one’s interlocutors are clearly ridiculous like Euthydemus and Dionysodorus. This chapter further demonstrates the complexity of Plato’s thoughts on inquiry. We cannot accept a simple prescription such as “always avoid the risk of falsehood” because how we should engage in discussion depends on who we are talking to, what we are talking about, and the state of our own character.

Part III addresses the questions of how false beliefs can be utilized and to whom they are beneficial. According to the Philosopher Claim, false beliefs are useful only for non-philosophers, if at all. In Chapter 7, we argue that a proper understanding of Plato’s moral psychology suggests that the non-reasoning part of philosophers’ souls requires false beliefs in order to be virtuous, in much the same way that non-philosophers require false beliefs. The non-reasoning part of philosophers’ souls, like a non-philosopher, is too unsophisticated to grasp the complete truth; hence, it requires falsehood in order to be properly motivated.

Having established that philosophers’ epistemic superiority does not preclude their benefitting from falsehoods, Chapter 8 examines whether the same is true of the gods. Socrates explicitly denies that the gods ever deceive (2.382a–383a), but his explanation is rather curious. A common philosophical explanation for why God doesn’t lie is that deception is immoral and thereby incompatible with divine attributes such as moral perfection. Yet, instead of highlighting the inherent badness of lying, Socrates emphasizes the ostensible fact that the gods never have any reason to lie. This is puzzling since the gods love justice, and they would presumably have reason to utilize deception to facilitate justice in human beings just as the philosopher-rulers do. Our solution to this puzzle centers on the distinction between gods and humans with respect to self-sufficiency. Because humans are not self-sufficient, we must live in societies and interact with individuals who stand towards us as both friends and enemies. It is these relations that sometimes necessitate beneficial lies and override their inherent
badness. Since the gods are self-sufficient, they have no need for such relations and the lies that they necessitate.

With our evidence against the Alethic Interpretation amassed, we conclude by synthesizing the main tenets of Plato’s Pragmatism and addressing two potential objections to our reading: that it can’t account for passages which seemingly privilege truth and rationality, and that it overlooks Plato’s emphasis on metaphysics. After responding to these objections, we end by highlighting the numerous ways in which the views we’ve attributed to Plato are relevant for contemporary problems that are of philosophical, political, and personal interest.

3 Methodology

The goal of this book is both interpretive and philosophical. We aim to offer a lively interpretation of Plato that respects textual evidence while raising deep questions about the connection between ethics and epistemology—questions which will pique the interests of contemporary philosophers. We avoid trenchant and painstaking interpretive methodologies because we think a more permissive and ecumenical approach allows for more fruitful discussion. Nevertheless, five key interpretive and methodological principles guide our work.

First, we believe that each of the Platonic dialogues has its own specific topic and character that makes it deserving of individual treatment. Hence, most chapters center on a particular dialogue. As such, we are not ourselves invested in a chronological or developmental narrative. But this is not to deny that Plato had relatively stable views on key issues (such as the relation between practical and epistemic norms). Cross-dialogue comparisons of different texts are often useful for illuminating these views, and so we gladly compare and extrapolate from different texts when doing so seems warranted. When we employ this strategy, we endeavor to provide textual, literary, and philosophical justification for the comparison.

Second, most of the chapters in this book are puzzle-driven; we begin by locating a tension in the text between various passages and Platonic commitments. We proceed in this way not to proliferate puzzles but because, as Aristotle recognized, it is an effective way to get to the heart of a philosophical issue (see Irwin 1988, Chap. 2). Our goal is to either reconcile these puzzles on behalf of Plato or show why he might not want them resolved. As interpreters, we adhere to a principle of charity: we proceed under the assumption that Plato advances plausible, well-developed, and interesting views, even if we are not always fully convinced.

Third, we are happy to engage with multiple aspects of Plato’s dialogues and to pull in outside resources when this helps advance the discussion. As such, we will occasionally call attention to how literary features of the dialogues inform what is at stake philosophically. In addition, we
will draw on other figures from the history of philosophy where they are relevant, including Aristotle, Epictetus, Kant, Nietzsche, Sidgwick, and James.

Fourth, because our interest is primarily in the ethics of belief, and because we are interested in bringing Plato into conversation with philosophers across a vast time span, we will be somewhat liberal with our application of concepts. For instance, we will sometimes utilize contemporary philosophical terminology in order to illuminate and connect various ideas in the texts, usually with corresponding clarificatory endnotes. While our defense of the pragmatist interpretation includes discussion of key elements of Platonic epistemology and metaphysics, we do not have adequate space for a comprehensive examination of these subareas of Plato’s philosophy. That being said, we believe our account is compatible with a range of interpretations of Plato’s epistemology and metaphysics.

Fifth, we assume that Socrates (or in the case of the Laws, the Athenian Stranger) has positive commitments, which Plato is at least sympathetic to. We do not make any claims about the historical Socrates, and as far as we know, the Athenian Stranger is simply a stranger.

We have of course benefitted greatly from works with very different methodological approaches to the dialogues, and we do not claim that ours is superior to others; every approach has its benefits and drawbacks. Our hope is that even those with different predilections will find this book to be of interest in its own right, as well as a potential resource for new developments in Plato studies and philosophy in general.

Notes
1 We are following the standard narrative concerning the debate between James and Clifford. For more nuanced accounts, Aikin (2014); Aikin and Talisse (2017, Chap. 4); Hollinger (1997); and Zamulinski (2002; 2004); see also Haack (2001); Feldman (2006); Wood (2002, Chaps. 1–2). Aikin (2014) and Aikin and Talisse (2017, Chap. 4). Aikin (2014) and Aikin and Talisse (2017, Chap. 4) point out that Clifford’s principle is itself endorsed for pragmatic reasons: bad epistemic practices should be avoided because they harm society.
2 In epistemology, the position that one should only (or can only) form beliefs on the basis of evidence is called “evidentialism.” We are using the term, “alethism,” because the anti-pragmatist position we are interested in is broader than evidentialism. Note also that throughout this book we will use the term “evidence” broadly to include the notion of an epistemic reason—a consideration which counts in favor of taking something to be true. Construed this way, philosophical arguments count as evidence.
Part I

Virtue, Veracity, and Noble Lies