



UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI



<https://helda.helsinki.fi>

Helda

Democracy and Moral Inquiry : Problems of the Methodological Argument

Rydenfelt, Henrik

Indiana University Press

2019

Rydenfelt, H 2019, 'Democracy and Moral Inquiry : Problems of the Methodological Argument', Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society, vol. 55, no. 3, pp. 254-272. <https://doi.org/10.2979/trancharpeirsoc.55.3.03>

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/323951>

10.2979/trancharpeirsoc.55.3.03

acceptedVersion

Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.

This is an electronic reprint of the original article.

This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

Please cite the original version.

Democracy and Moral Inquiry: Problems of the Methodological Argument

HENRIK RYDENFELT

Abstract

Recent decades have seen the rise of arguments for democracy based on the *epistemic* goods that democratic societies, institutions, and decision-making are supposed to provide. Within contemporary pragmatism, Cheryl Misak has proposed the most extensive and carefully argued defense of democracy in this vein. At the center of this argument is a methodological principle that Misak derives from pragmatist sources, notably from Charles S. Peirce. I will argue that this methodological principle rests on an implausibly narrow notion of belief. To explain its *prima facie* appeal, I will distinguish three considerations concerning the connection between belief and evidence, on the one hand, and belief and experience, on the other. Finally, I will point out that these problems are not limited to the methodological argument but extend to many similar arguments for democracy on epistemic grounds.

Keywords: Charles S. Peirce, Cheryl Misak, Pragmatism, Democracy, Legitimacy, Epistemic Arguments, Truth, Aim of Inquiry, Belief.

1. Introduction

Why is democracy good, or preferable to other systems of governance and political decision-making? Democracy has been argued to incorporate or promote central values, such as equality or freedom. On the other hand, many contemporary defenses of democracy have relied on arguments that attempt to show that democracy promotes or enables some second-order good, such as the validity, justification or legitimacy of political decision-making. Recent decades have seen the rise of *epistemic* arguments for democracy that belong to this latter type. For example, David Estlund (2008) has proposed that democracy is epistemically preferable among the societal arrangements that could be acceptable to all citizens. In turn, proponents of deliberative democracy, such as Jürgen Habermas (1990), John Rawls (1996), and Joshua Cohen (1989), have proposed that the very validity or justification of political decisions depends on their acceptability to all citizens, or at least all reasonable citizens. Either implicitly or explicitly, such arguments attempt to derive either or both of two conclusions. The first is that democracy is *preferable* to its various alternatives in governance and political decision-making. The second is that democracy and the exercise of democratically underwritten political power is *acceptable* to all citizens.¹

1

NOTES

A central concern in the liberal political tradition is the legitimacy of governments and the use of state power, which—beginning with John Locke (1689)—liberals have usually

Many pragmatist views of the justification of democracy are based on considerations of the latter type. Rather than arguing for democracy based on some first-order value, pragmatists have defended democracy with reference to the epistemic goods that democratic societies, institutions, and decision-making are supposed to secure. Typically, these arguments connect democracy with the pragmatist notion of inquiry: they hold that the truth—at least concerning some issues—can only, or best, be approached in a democratic society. Among the early pragmatists, John Dewey defended democracy as both intrinsically and instrumentally valuable from a moral perspective: for Dewey, democracy was both the fulfillment of human (moral) potential and a required means to negotiate various interests to the benefit of all. Dewey also offered a glimpse of an instrumental, epistemic defense by arguing that democracy enables—or is a form of—social inquiry. Although Dewey’s views have been compared to those of the proponents of deliberative democracy, the classics of the pragmatist tradition hardly attempted to formulate an argument that would meet the contemporary challenge of justifying or legitimizing democracy.

Within contemporary pragmatism, Cheryl Misak has proposed the most extensive and carefully argued defense of democracy in this vein.² Misak’s argument revolves around a methodological principle that she derives from pragmatist sources, notably from Charles S. Peirce. This argument holds that maintaining a moral view involves a commitment to the truth of that view, which in turn implies a requirement to give evidence and reasons for the belief. As evidence and reasons include the arguments and experiences of others, Misak argues, anyone who has full-fledged beliefs is responsive to such arguments and experiences. For this reason, democracy, where such arguments and experiences can be freely expressed, is preferable to alternative forms of government, as well as acceptable, at least in principle, to all citizens.

In what follows, I will canvass Misak’s methodological argument and argue that the notion of belief on which it rests is too narrow in light of cases of (moral) belief that are not responsive to the experience and arguments of others (section 2). However, the argument appears to have great *prima facie* appeal, both among the pragmatists and elsewhere. To explain its allure, I will distinguish three considerations concerning the connection between belief and evidence on the one hand and belief and experience on the other—considerations that, while having considerable initial plausibility, turn out to yield insufficient backing to Misak’s argument (sections 3–4). Finally, I will point out that these problems are not limited to the methodological argument but extend to many similar arguments for democracy. Indeed, these problems are only to be expected in light of Misak’s own, perceptive criticism of the arguments for democracy proposed by Habermas and Rawls (section 5).

2. Misak’s methodological argument

Misak sets out to show that pragmatism not only offers a plausible epistemology—or a viable notion of truth—for moral questions, but that this epistemology has societal implications. She intends to counter the view of those to whom the opinions, experiences and arguments of others do not matter in moral deliberation and political decision-making, those who “denigrate the experiences of others” (2000, p. 6). While Misak does not profess to offer a knock-down argument against illiberal views of this kind, her argument is supposed to give us an idea of where those views are mistaken. Her main claim is that the pragmatist

predicated on the acceptability of the government or its decisions on the part of the governed individual, or citizen.

² However, the first to formulate such an “epistemic,” pragmatist argument for democracy was likely Hilary Putnam (1992; 1994).

perspective on notions such as truth, belief and assertion result in a methodological principle: engaging in genuine moral inquiry requires taking seriously the experiences and arguments of others (*ibid.*, pp. 7, 57, 104). Moreover, this principle, she argues, is binding over even those who otherwise uphold illiberal views.

The starting point of the methodological argument is the pragmatist approach to truth as the *aim of inquiry*, which Misak contrasts with the traditional correspondence account of truth as well as with contemporary deflationist views (such as disquotationalism). Against the correspondence theory of truth, Misak levies the common criticism of spuriousness: the notion of truth as correspondence is practically empty when not spelled out in terms of tangible results for inquiry. The correspondence account envisions the possibility “that ‘*p*’ fails to correspond to reality, despite its being the best that a belief could be,” which “is such that nothing could speak for or against it” (*ibid.*, p. 55). From the pragmatist point of view, this conception of truth verges on the meaningless. Misak’s position is that with regard to moral and political questions in particular, we cannot assume that truth is a correspondence or “fit” between our ideas and some believer-independent facts.

For many, the problems of the correspondence account have suggested a retreat to a deflationary view of truth, which—instead of giving the concept any substantial content—approaches truth as a linguistic device. While the pragmatist can appreciate the ideas motivating the deflationary view, she will not rest content with it (*ibid.*, pp. 60–64; Misak 1991, pp. 127–130; Misak 2007, pp. 68–70). The deflationary view of truth is not intended to deal with issues concerning epistemic standards and evidence.³ For the pragmatist, it is exactly these connections between truth and assertion, evidence, verification and the like that are of interest. In particular, our assertoric practices show that many of our opinions aspire to *objectivity*, a standard that surpasses anyone’s subjective approval. In Misak’s view, these marks of objectivity include the distinction between one’s thinking that one is right and being right, the use of our views as premises in inferences, and perceiving our views as open to improvement, for example, by way of argumentation (Misak 2000, pp. 53, 63). Our moral opinions bear the marks of objectivity, and they should be approached as possible candidates for genuine knowledge or objects of inquiry.

By contrast, the pragmatist account of truth is couched in terms of notions such as inquiry and belief. In Misak’s view, “a true belief is the best that inquiry could do” (*ibid.*, p. 60). Drawing from Peirce’s account of inquiry, she argues that the “core of the pragmatist conception of truth is that a true belief would be the best belief were we to inquire as far as we could on the matter,” where “best” is understood as the belief that “best fits with all experience and argument” (*ibid.*, p. 49). This account of the “goodness” of belief has bearings on the sort of inquiry we are to pursue: to gain “beliefs which would forever fit with experience and argument,” the best means “is clearly a method by which we test our beliefs against experience” (*ibid.*, p. 82).

³ Misak’s criticism of moral non-cognitivism proceeds along similar lines (see 2000, pp. 103–4). Indeed, many contemporary non-cognitivists follow Simon Blackburn’s (1998) lead in arguing that the truth of moral claims amounts to nothing more robust than the truth predicate of the deflationary view. This is in line with the views of the champion of the deflationist approach, Paul Horwich (1990). At one point, however, Misak argues against non-cognitivism as advanced by Horwich on the grounds that the non-cognitivist or emotivist view would amount to the implausible suggestion that (in her words) “‘Good’ amounts to ‘*Y* believes that *x* is good’” (Misak 2000, p. 72). This, however, is an uncharitable reading of non-cognitivism: on that view, moral claims *express* the speaker’s mental states, such as those of approval and disapproval. Non-cognitivists have taken pains to argue that this position is distinct from the view that Misak imputes to them, viz. that moral terms *refer* to the speaker’s subjective (mental) states.

This understanding of the pragmatist view of belief gives Misak her main device in drawing her liberal democratic conclusion: the methodological principle that “the experience of others must be taken seriously” in settling moral questions (*ibid.*, pp. 6, 57). If belief is to be fixed so that it would withstand the experience and arguments of potentially everyone, the views of all might be relevant to our inquiries.⁴ A corollary of this principle is that everyone must have the chance to express their opinion in moral debates: the methodological principle “requires a democracy in inquiry” and “insists upon the inclusion of those who are or might otherwise be excluded” (*ibid.*, pp. 6, 7). Misak lists, as further implications of the principle, many central democratic virtues, such as the respect for other persons and their autonomy, tolerance, and public and open deliberation. She argues that the “preservation of autonomy, equal moral worth, and respect for persons” are required as “a vital part of deliberation aimed at the truth” (*ibid.*, p. 115). The pragmatist perspective on truth and belief thus lays the ground for an argument against the illiberal stance and for a liberal democratic society: it is in a democratic societal setting that our inquiries, including moral or ethical ones, may be most fruitfully pursued.⁵

Although Misak does not explicitly apply these labels, the methodological argument is an epistemic argument for democracy on both of the aforementioned counts. Democracy is epistemically *preferable* to its alternatives: as everyone’s experience and reasoning may be evidence for or against moral opinions, inquiry into moral questions can be most successfully pursued in a framework of liberal democracy. And democracy is *acceptable* to all who maintain moral views—presumably, then, to all agents, whatever their particular moral opinions—because we are (at least tacitly) responsive to the experience and arguments of others.

The methodological argument does not rest on an *analysis* of the concept of truth. However, it relies on a substantial account of belief and its connection to truth. In Misak’s view, a believer “must simply take her belief to be responsive to reasons, for that is what is required of a propositional attitude that is aimed at truth” (2000, p. 76). Such responsiveness to reasons is distinctive of beliefs as opposed to other mental states: “We might have other attitudes toward propositions—for instance, we might, against the evidence, hope or wish that *p* is true. But whenever a mental state is sensitive to reasons, it is a belief.” This view, Misak maintains, is “really very accommodating of what we usually call belief” (*ibid.*). The notion of belief as sensitive or responsive to reasons and evidence underlies the methodological principle.

However, this account of belief and its responsiveness to “reasons” is vulnerable: it appears too narrow in light of cases of belief that are not responsive to reasons (at least of the

⁴ Misak sets out to defend the idea that *moral* inquiry (in particular) requires “democracy in inquiry.” But if her methodological principle holds, the argument could be made that *any* inquiry presupposes a democratic setting. The advantage of this more general line of argument would be that some troubling issues concerning the particular nature of moral opinion and its connection with scientific inquiry could be avoided. In recent years, Robert B. Talisse (2007; 2010; see also Misak and Talisse 2014) has been advancing just such a defense of democracy, which bears great resemblance to Misak’s methodological argument (cf. Rydenfelt 2011a).

⁵ In what sense does the methodological principle prescribe a *democratic* society? Eric MacGilvray (2014, p. 109) criticizes Misak on the grounds that in making important decisions, we do not follow “democratic procedure.” However, the import of the methodological principle is, one might expect, a broader point concerning the freedom of expression and accessibility of differing points of view. In any case, the main target here is the notion of belief that underlies the methodological principle, not its (allegedly) democratic consequences.

kind required). Such cases of belief can be derived from Peirce's discussion in his classic work "The Fixation of Belief" (1877), which Misak employs in setting up her methodological argument. In this piece, Peirce distinguishes between four methods of "fixing belief," or inquiry. The first of the methods is tenacity, or the steadfast clinging to one's opinion. By this method, the aim of inquiry is not to fit any (external) "evidence"; indeed, it appears that this method lacks a notion of evidence (at least aside from that of one's already fixed opinion). Against this light it comes as no surprise that in Misak's reading, Peirce maintains that there is a distinction between genuine belief and tenacity, the latter being a sort of state that is not open to revision in light of evidence and argument (Misak 2000, pp. 74, 87, 94).⁶ Here Misak, however, diverges from Peirce's original discussion: he nowhere argues that belief cannot be fixed by tenacity, or that the results of the application of this method are anything other than beliefs. Instead, Peirce admires the method of tenacity for its "strength, simplicity, and directness," and he clearly maintains that this method may be and is concretely applied by many: "Men who pursue it are distinguished for their decision of character, which becomes very easy with such a mental rule" (W 3:256). Even if tenacity is a crude way of fixing belief, it is distinct from psychological compulsion, or the inability to settle one's opinion in the first place. It is only under the influence of what Peirce calls the "social impulse" that this method becomes suspicious. When the disagreement of others begins to matter, the question becomes how to fix belief for everyone instead of merely for oneself.

There is much to be said in favor of the assumption, central to the methodological argument, that our opinions—including our moral opinions—aspire to be *objective*: we assume that there is a standard of opinion beyond one's mere preferences, one that is moreover common to all of us as believers and inquirers. However, even if we were to exclude the opinions arrived at by mere tenacity from the purview of genuine belief on grounds of objectivity, another problem for the methodological argument is posed by beliefs that appear to be sensitive to evidence of some kind but not of the kind that the argument would allow—that is, to experience and argument, including that of others. Objectivity, understood as the view that truth is shared, or *public*, does not entail a particular notion of good reasons and evidence. Consider the second method in Peirce's discussion, the method of authority. This method attempts to solve the problem faced by tenacity by imposing the opinion decided upon by an authority on everyone by any means, however ruthless. While the method of authority then renders belief sensitive to something outside of oneself, its conception of evidence is not the same as that required by the methodological argument.⁷ Instead of experience and argument, the follower of this method relies on the testimony of the authority. As Peirce points out, religious belief is often a concrete example of the kind of belief that is fixed by the method of authority.

Misak recognizes that the lack of experiential evidence for religious beliefs might be considered to run against her methodological argument. In response to this potential concern, she denies that religious beliefs amount to *genuine* beliefs as they are not responsive to reasons. Relying on the Wittgensteinian idea that to demand evidence or reasons for religious belief is to misunderstand the nature of such belief, she first argues that "the religious do not believe, but rather, have faith" (2000, p. 75). But it appears artificial to exclude religious belief from the scope of genuine belief on the grounds that it is not responsive to the sort of

⁶ At one point, Misak also likens tenacity to deciding to believe at will: "I cannot get myself to believe that *p* by deciding that if the coin I am about to flip lands heads, I will believe it, and if it lands tails, I will not" (2000, p. 74). However, tenacity does not equal the willful selection of one's beliefs, which indeed appears impossible; it is rather the stubborn sticking to one's current beliefs.

⁷ For further discussion of the contrast between objectivity and the scientific method, see Rydenfelt 2019.

evidence to which one thinks it should be responsive. Religious belief is, after all, responsive to the sort of evidence and reasons that the religious person himself deems relevant. Accordingly, in Peirce's view, it is not considerations of this conceptual sort that speak against the method of authority. Rather, a "wider sort of social feeling" will count against the method by showing that different peoples at different ages have held differing views, and that the opinions dictated by the authority are at bottom arbitrary (W 3:251).

Indeed, Misak does not follow the Wittgensteinian road to the conclusion that religious belief is (always) unsupported by evidence. She admits that "the theist might [...] offer reasons for her belief—she has had a spiritual revelation, or takes some great revelatory book to be keyed to the evidence" and that "these reasons can be such that if stronger reasons are presented, the belief will be shaken and perhaps revised or abandoned." Under such circumstances, Misak admits, we are after all "presented with a case of genuine belief" (2000, p. 76). But this admission that the theist's belief is sensitive to "reasons" (of its own kind) poses a problem for the methodological argument: the theist's reasons or evidence for his belief is *not* the experience and arguments of others. Rather, among the theist's reasons may be spiritual revelation or the testimony of a great revelatory book; if anything, the former amounts to tenacity where, as Peirce puts it, "the conception of truth as something public is not yet developed," while the latter is a paradigmatic case of the method of authority (W 3:253). Consequently, what would count as stronger reasons for such an individual—what would make the theist revise his belief—would not be the experience and argument of others but further "evidence" of the same kind.

In light of cases such as those of Peirce's tenacious believer and the follower of the method of authority, the notion of belief grounding the methodological principle is too narrow to be plausible or to match our usual understanding of belief. Those who maintain illiberal views are likely to claim exactly that the experience and argument of others do not count as evidence or reasons. If differing conceptions of evidence, or of reasons for belief, are available, the methodological principle will lose its bite against the illiberal stance.⁸ Criticism from the liberal point of view, which does take the experience and arguments of others seriously, will not be relevant to those who do not already share the same view of evidence and reasons.

3. The aim of inquiry and belief

The criticism of the methodological argument just presented is that the notion of belief grounding the methodological principle is implausibly narrow in light of cases where belief is not sensitive to the experience and argument of others. The availability of such cases invites the question why the methodological principle has such initial appeal. In what follows, I will distinguish three considerations that might be taken to support the principle but on closer inspection turn out to be insufficient to show its feasibility.

A first reason for the appeal of the methodological argument is an equivocation involving the central pragmatist notion of truth as the aim of inquiry. The pragmatists approached truth in terms of the sort of beliefs that we should have—in William James's dictum, truth is the "good in the way of belief." The pragmatist perspective on truth is in one sense deeply epistemic: truth is the aim of the *practice* of inquiry. However, it should not be taken to imply that truth is to be conceived of as any particular such aim. As shown by the examples of the methods of tenacity and authority already considered, this aim may be

⁸ As Peirce puts this point (in connection with the method of tenacity): "It would be an egotistical impertinence to object that his procedure is irrational, for that only amounts to saying that his method of settling belief is not ours" (W 3:249–250).

differently conceived of: in effect, the four different methods of “Fixation” amount to four different accounts of truth from the pragmatist point of view. Merely arguing that belief is always sensitive to evidence, reasons and argument (or “experience”) will not suffice to distinguish between different conceptions of truth as the aim of inquiry: what counts as reasons or evidence (or the relevant kind of “experience”) depends on the particular method followed.⁹

A second source for the appeal of the methodological principle is a stretching of ideas from deflationary or minimalist accounts of truth. In Misak’s discussion, the methodological principle is supported by the key idea motivating deflationism: to believe (assert) that *p* is to believe (assert) that *p* is true. For Misak, this suggests that belief aims at truth:

If we want to arrive at true beliefs, we ought to expose our beliefs to the tests of experience.

There is a whiff of circularity here: we test beliefs because we want beliefs which are true—beliefs which will stand up to testing. The circularity, however, evaporates once the pragmatist is explicit that we in fact value the truth. We can see that this is the case when we see that the assertion that *p* is the assertion that *p* is true. Belief and assertion aim at truth. (Misak 2000, p. 83; paragraph break omitted)

However, as a defense of the methodological principle, this is problematic. From the deflationist platitude at hand, it does not follow that belief or assertion aim at truth.¹⁰ The deflationists, after all, argue exactly that the locution “is true” adds nothing to the original assertion of *p*. By analogy, perhaps to dream that *p* is to dream that *p* is true, but it does not follow that dreaming aims at truth or that we want to have true dreams.¹¹ These platitudes cannot be taken to show that belief has an aim—let alone a particular such aim.

The previous points can be made by drawing, again, from Peirce. While Peirce supplies a pragmatist account of inquiry as the move from the unsettling state of doubt to the settlement of opinion, or belief, he also points out that we might insist that “we seek, not merely an opinion, but a true opinion.” However, this “fancy” is immediately dispelled: “we think each one of our beliefs to be true, and, indeed, it is mere tautology to say so” (W 3:248). Peirce’s remark here allows for at least two different readings. First, Peirce might here be read as arguing that when we believe, we consider our belief to be true, whatever our view of *truth* is: otherwise we would cease to believe. By this interpretation, the “tautology” at hand is this: *if we believe that p, we think that p is true, by whatever conception of “true” we might entertain.*¹² Truth just is what we call the aim of our inquiry. Second, the remark can be taken to anticipate the deflationary account of truth.¹³ The “tautology” Peirce would have in mind would be that to believe that *p* is to believe that *p* is true simply because this is

⁹ For a clear discussion of this point, see Short 2000.

¹⁰ Misak similarly suggests that “truth is also internally related to inquiry, reasons, and evidence” on the grounds that reading the deflationist biconditional (“*p* is true if and only if *p*”) “in the other direction, we get the thought that when I assert *p*, I assert that it is true” (2000, p. 73).

¹¹ Elsewhere, Misak makes a slightly different argument based on a deflationary platitude: “A belief aims at truth—if I believe *p*, I believe it to be true. But if this is right, then the belief that *p* must be sensitive to something—something must be able to speak for or against it” (2000, p. 51). But even if it were the case that belief “must be sensitive to something” it is exactly this something—a conception of evidence, or reasons for belief—that distinguishes between different notions of truth (in the broad pragmatist sense).

¹² This reading brings Peirce’s notion closer to Crispin Wright’s (1992) pluralistic concept of truth. For further critical comparison, see Misak 2000, pp. 64–67; Short 2007, p. 333.

¹³ For this reading, see Short 2007, pp. 332–333.

how “true” operates as a linguistic device. By this interpretation, Peirce is pointing out that this function of the concept of truth leads to no substantial results concerning the aim of inquiry or belief.

Whichever of the two interpretations we choose, the result concerning the connection of the platitude Peirce enlists and our notion of truth will be the same: from the tautology that we “think” our beliefs to be true, nothing substantial follows concerning the aim of inquiry or belief. This points towards a central problem with the methodological argument. It involves a slippery slope from deflationary platitudes—such as that to believe that p is to believe that p is true—*via* the pragmatist perspective on truth, which maintains that truth is the aim of inquiry, to a particular interpretation of this aim in terms of experience and argument (including that of others), finally leading to the conclusion that to believe that p is to believe that p would be supported by experience and argument (including of others). However, the function of the truth predicate as a linguistic device—the use of the predicate from which the deflationist draws—has no implications about what truth, understood as the aim of inquiry, is or should be; in turn, the pragmatist perspective on truth as the aim of inquiry does not offer us a particular conception of that aim.

4. Belief and experience

A third source for the plausibility of the notion of belief grounding the methodological principle differs somewhat from the conceptual arguments just considered. It is the pragmatist view that beliefs are habits of action. This view can be taken to imply that beliefs by their nature involve *expectations* concerning experience and, moreover, that the fulfilment or disappointment of such expectations constitute evidence for or against that belief. Consider the pragmatist view that a genuine belief has consequences for the believer’s conduct. This idea is reflected by Misak:

[W]hen I assert or believe that p , I commit myself to certain consequences—to having expectations about the consequences of p ’s being true. Some of those consequences are practical. These will be specified in terms of actions and observations: ‘if p , then if I do A , B will be the result’. (2000, p. 73)

The idea of practical consequences of (genuine) belief is central to the pragmatist approach. In “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” (1878), Peirce argues that the “essence” of belief is the establishment of a habit: “different beliefs are distinguished by the different modes of action to which they give rise” (W 3:263–264). Despite differing verbal formulations, two beliefs are one and the same if they give rise to the same rule of action, or habit. Moreover, Peirce maintains that “[t]he occasion of such action [is] some sensible perception, the motive of it to produce some sensible result” (W 3:265–266). As our action thus has “exclusive reference to what affects the senses” (W 3:266), Peirce’s pragmatist elucidation of the meaning of beliefs is (at least in this early paper) put in terms of conditional expectations in experience—such as Misak’s “if I do A , B will be the result.”¹⁴

This view easily lends itself to the idea that the fulfilment or lack of fulfilment of the expectations entailed by a belief should be taken as evidence or reasons for or against the belief. “If there was nothing a belief had to be sensitive to, then we could not individuate it; we could not tell it from another,” Misak writes, concluding that “I can interpret or come to understand a sentence which is initially unintelligible to me only by coming to see what it is responsive to” (2000, p. 51). Here, the evidence for or against a belief (or what the belief is

¹⁴ For further discussion of this point, see Rydenfelt 2009.

sensitive to) is identified with the ground of its meaning (or what individuates the belief). The practical consequences of the belief are taken to determine what counts as evidence for (and against) it.

However, there are two complications to this idea of an intimate connection between conditional expectations and evidence. The first concerns the nature of “conditional expectations.” The pragmatist’s test of the meaningfulness of beliefs does not equal naive verificationism, according to which any meaningful statement can be reduced to statements concerning immediate experience. Rather, these expectations have to be understood in a holistic fashion. In a lucid discussion of holism, Misak first formulates its Quinean version, which maintains that our beliefs (or hypotheses) receive confirmation or disconfirmation only as parts of larger webs of beliefs (or theories): “Only when taken in conjunction with countless auxiliary hypotheses does a statement entail that ‘if we do *x*, we shall observe *y*’” (*ibid.*, p. 84). For the Quinean holist, meaningful sentences entail such observation sentences as parts of a theory. With all the countless auxiliary hypotheses in place, if the expectations entailed by one of our hypotheses are disappointed, at least some part of the larger theory—which may comprise all of our science—is to be revised.

Misak, however, argues that this is not the case with all meaningful statements. In particular, in her view, it is implausible to suppose that *moral* beliefs would entail conditional expectations or that moral “theories” would receive confirmation from their predictive prowess (at least as usually conceived). For this reason, she goes further than Quine. By the *radical holism* she proposes, meaningful statements are not required to entail observation sentences even as parts of a larger theory. Rather, the notion of experience and experiential consequences is to be understood far more broadly: “[W]e can accept the idea that a belief is constitutively responsive to experience without committing ourselves to anything as strong as the verificationism of the logical positivists, for the kind of experiential consequences required of various beliefs will turn out to be very broad indeed” (*ibid.*, p. 51). Accordingly, Misak proposes that “for a subject matter to qualify for a place in our system of knowledge” or “as an objective area of inquiry,” it must pass the test “that it *answers to something*.” Meaningful statements are “responsive to experience” (*ibid.*, p. 86).

It appears clear that a broad holistic view is required for us to bring moral questions into the fold of the sort of (objective) inquiry that is conducted in a (broadly speaking) scientific fashion. However, radical holism brings with it a complication. If the notion of answerability is not tied to anything quite as tangible as predictive power, we can no longer argue that meaningful statements or our beliefs are sensitive or responsive to the fulfillment or disappointment of conditional expectations. Even with holistic reservations in place, not all meaningful hypotheses can be expected to imply something like Quinean observation sentences. Thus the pragmatist view that beliefs involve practical consequences cannot be used to argue for the methodological principle simply by pointing out that all meaningful opinions entail conditional expectations of the type “if I do *A*, *B* will be the result.” As Misak herself points out, this is not the case with *moral* opinion.

As a consequence, the nature of such responsiveness to experience becomes less clear, especially in the case of moral belief. Misak argues that “in our deliberations about what is valuable,” all “we have to go on” is our experience, or “what we see as valuable and our refinements of those thoughts, in light of the arguments of others and in light of reflection” (*ibid.*, p. 81). This appears plausible, but only because it allows for various interpretations.¹⁵

¹⁵ Against Misak’s view of belief, MacGilvray (2014, pp. 113–114) argues that we do not experience doubt or engage in inquiry as long as our beliefs (as habits) “reliably serve our purpose”; consequently, belief is not sensitive to the arguments of everyone. But the issue here is, I think, deeper: what it is for beliefs to “serve our purposes” depends on what those purposes are.

If we attempt to limit the sort of “experience” that counts for or against some (moral) opinion, we in effect offer a normative account of what counts as good evidence or good reasons for belief—an account that will be readily contested by some. As in the cases already considered, for some, spiritual revelation or the testimony of a holy book may count as the relevant sort of “experience.” For the notion of belief as sensitive to experience to be plausible, “experience” must be read in an extremely inclusive fashion. The problem with this extreme is that “experience” becomes an objectionable fudge-word for whatever our beliefs may be “responsive” to. This leads to a trivial—indeed, circular—account of belief as sensitive to whatever belief *is* sensitive to, an account that is not at all helpful in showing the merits of the methodological principle.

This brings to the fore the second holistic complication, which concerns the identification of the fulfilment of conditional expectations with evidence. As the examples so far considered show, it does not appear that experience (of any sort) constitutes evidence for or against a belief in isolation from our norms for good evidence or reasons for belief. As what we could call a *Sellarsian* holist would maintain, in order for a kind of experience to be able to justify one’s opinion, the believer must hold it to fulfil a normative role, or consider it as meeting a standard of correctness.¹⁶ For experience (of any sort) to be considered evidence for or against some hypothesis, we must accept some (implicit or explicit) account of what counts as evidence or reasons. This is the case even with beliefs that involve conditional expectations of the type “if I do *A*, *B* will be the result.” Even with such beliefs—and even with all the Quinean auxiliary hypotheses in place—the fulfilment or lack of fulfilment of such expectations will not count for or against a hypothesis unless we *take* them to have this role.

Accordingly, there is reason to pull apart the practical consequences central to the pragmatist elucidation of a belief and the pragmatist’s notion of evidence or reasons for belief. Practical consequences, including expectations concerning experience, may individuate beliefs as the pragmatist maxim maintains. But these expectations cannot be taken to (as if automatically) determine evidence for or against a belief. First, some opinions—such as moral ones—do not seem to involve conditional expectations concerning experience of the type “if I do *A*, *B* will be the result.” Second, even in the case of beliefs that involve such expectations, taking their fulfilment to count as evidence for those beliefs presupposes the acceptance of a view that maintains that these expectations determine evidence or reasons for belief.

5. A dilemma for epistemic arguments

The lesson of the preceding remarks is that Misak’s defense of her methodological principle depends on a questionable notion of *belief* and its “aim.” Interestingly enough, this conclusion is only to be expected based on Misak’s own, perceptive criticism of alternative arguments for democracy. One such alternative is the argument advanced by Karl-Otto Apel

¹⁶ A part of Sellars’s rejection of the “Myth of the Given” is that observational knowledge presupposes “knowledge of general facts of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y*” (1963, p. 128). By contrast, for Quine, there is no similar *normative* issue about the connection between “observation statements” and knowledge—about, say, whether predictive prowess, at least with all the required auxiliary hypotheses in place, should be considered evidence for a theory (see Quine 1992, p. 19; Rydenfelt 2011b). Here, of course, reliability is taken to be a normative term on its own right, or at least a descriptive term closely related to our normative account of what sort of beliefs to have (*viz.*, that we *ought* to maintain such opinions that are due to reliable processes of perception, etc.).

(1980) and Jürgen Habermas (1990) that maintains that *communication* presupposes adherence to norms that lay ground for democratic principles. This is not merely to argue that democratically-inclined norms lay ground for the best ways to communicate or for a manner of communication that is acceptable to all. Rather, it is the transcendental argument that our actual practices of communication presuppose—even if implicitly—adherence to norms of rationality that (it is then argued) underlie a democratic society. Misak’s criticism of this argument is that it is based on a notion of communication that is too narrow. It simply appears implausible that communication requires everything that is assumed by this argument: “it seems that some people do communicate—do speak and utter statements to others—without presupposing the things Habermas and Apel insist are undeniable” (2000, p. 41). Apel and Habermas may obviously define communication in a narrow manner to allow for their conclusion, but a stipulation of this sort is implausible: “it seems simply wrong to define communication in the restrictive way in which Habermas does” (*ibid.*).

The structural similarities between Apel’s and Habermas’s transcendental argument and the methodological argument are, however, striking. After all, the central idea of the methodological argument is that simply by believing, or *qua* believers, we are sensitive to the experience and argument of others and, hence, ultimately would find some core democratic principles acceptable and preferable to their alternatives. While Misak perceives this structural analogy between the two arguments, she maintains that there is a relevant dissimilarity: although she has argued that “certain things are required for genuine belief,” her argument, unlike Apel’s and Habermas’s, is based “on a plausible and thin understanding of what is involved in the concept” of belief (*ibid.*, p. 106) and on “a conception of inquiry which is so thin that the *prima facie* assumption is that everyone is an inquirer” (*ibid.*, p. 151). But as we have seen, the concept of belief that Misak operates with is not thin enough: it is far from evident that believing entails being sensitive to the experience and argument of others. In light of the cases we have considered, it is implausible to suggest that the methodological principle follows from a plausible meta-ethical view about what it *is* to maintain a moral opinion. We might limit the scope of our notion of belief to such opinions that are sensitive to the experience and argument of others in the manner suggested. But this is simply to stipulate that only the opinions of those who are democratic in their inquiries count as genuine beliefs—exactly the sort of conceptual device that is problematic in Apel’s and Habermas’s arguments. Perhaps the liberal democrat can point out that the opinions that are not sensitive to the experience and argument of others do not count as genuine beliefs, for they do not fulfil this conceptual condition—but then the illiberal opponent will simply not *care* for having “beliefs.”

Indeed, Misak attempts to avoid such a transcendental cling to her argument, and she suggests that the methodological argument operates in a fashion that differs from the transcendental one: the former is not after a necessary truth of the sort that the latter professes to show. The methodological argument “does not suggest that the possibility of language or communication depends on a certain conception of how to live (i.e. freely and equally).” Rather, it is based on “a hypothetical imperative of this sort: if you want beliefs which will withstand the force of experience, then do such-and-such.” To this imperative, Misak then adds the “empirical or sociological claim” that “virtually everybody claims to be after such beliefs” (*ibid.*, p. 107). Phrased in this manner, Misak’s argument no longer hinges on the claim that beliefs *are* by their nature sensitive to experience and argument—that being open to criticism based on the experience and argument of others is what it means to have beliefs. Rather, the argument is that *if* one wishes to have beliefs that withstand the force of experience, *then* one should proceed in a manner that takes the experience and arguments of others seriously. Here Misak seems to think that her illiberal opponent will argue that his

beliefs are ones that will withstand the test of experience.¹⁷

However, this line of argumentation is problematic in light of the Misak's own criticism of a second argument for democracy, John Rawls's later defense of liberal democratic principles. In his later work, especially in *Political Liberalism* (1996), Rawls argued that citizens, despite their differing comprehensive moral views, can reach what he calls an overlapping consensus about the central tenets of deliberative democracy. Misak contests this view by a perceptive criticism. Rawls's argumentation is an insufficient response to exactly those who question the basic idea of a liberal democratic society itself. While "[o]ur society happens to be a cooperative venture for mutual advantage," writes Misak, "[t]he problem is that, even if Rawls' social ontology were right, even if such ideas were so deeply entrenched that they were shared by everyone, nothing about that fact warrants the thought that that is what we ought to aim at" (2000, p. 26). However, the same problem will be faced by the methodological argument if it attempts to rest on similar empirical grounds. Even if it were a sociological or psychological matter of fact that everyone wishes to form their beliefs taking into account the experience and argument of others, it does not follow that we ought to aim at such beliefs.

The methodological argument is torn between the pitfalls of these two alternative arguments. On the one hand, the transcendental argument supplied by Apel and Habermas faces the problem of circularity: in order for the argument to go through, we must artificially limit the scope of the concept of communication in order to arrive at the desired conclusion. It will turn out that everyone involved in communicative interaction is bound by a set of norms simply because that is what it means to be a participant in a communicative interaction. The methodological argument requires that we limit our notion of belief in a similar manner by claiming that everyone, by way of having beliefs aimed at truth, is open to the experience and argument of others—for that is what it means to be someone with genuine beliefs. On the other hand, if the methodological argument rests on the sort of empirical generalization underlying Rawls's later notion of an overlapping consensus, it will not be apt to justify the democratic conclusions. Perhaps many or even all citizens of a liberal democratic society share a number of principles concerning good deliberation, public reasoning and the formation of moral opinion. However, as a defense of the liberal democratic position, as Misak perceives, pointing this out will beg the question against any illiberal opponent.¹⁸

6. Conclusion

¹⁷ As Misak argues: "[H]aving a belief which is aimed at the truth is something that we can assume of our opponents. Once the acknowledgement is made (as it *is* made by the flat-earther, the Nazi, etc.) that one aims at getting the right belief, then one is open to a certain sort of criticism" (2000, p. 46).

¹⁸ I have elsewhere (Rydenfelt 2013) argued that defenses of related methodological principles are generally faced with a dilemma between either relying on stipulating normative concepts—what I call "conceptual chauvinism"—or generalizing from our current normative point of view—leading to "historicist relativism" of the sort advanced by Richard Rorty (e.g., "Introduction" to 1982). In a similar vein, MacGilvray (2014, p. 112) argues that if Misak avoids such a quasi-transcendental line of argument and, rather, draws from our context-bound (or "parochial") standards of rationality, her argument will not convince an illiberal opponent. Misak might respond that the standards of rationality are inevitably context-bound; however, as we have just seen, this alternative is excluded as too weak.

The methodological argument for democracy is centered on the principle that engaging in genuine moral inquiry requires taking seriously the experiences and arguments of other—a principle that in turn rests on the notion that beliefs, including moral opinions, are sensitive to the experience and argument of others. I have argued that this notion of belief, despite its initial appeal, turns out to be too narrow. A first source of the appeal of the methodological argument is the pragmatist perspective on truth as the aim of inquiry, in the sense of the sort of belief that we *should* have, or that we *ought to* pursue in inquiry. In Misak’s hands, this view of truth leads to the conclusion that everyone is committed to acquiring beliefs that are responsive to evidence of a certain sort—sensitive to experience, including the experience and argument of others. However, this is to confound the overall pragmatist approach to truth as the aim of inquiry with a particular account of that aim. A second consideration that Misak employs in arguing for the principle are the claims on which the deflationary account of truth is based, such as the platitudinous claim that to assert or believe that *p* is to assert or believe that *p* is true. However, as I have argued, such platitudes allow for no substantial conclusions of the sort that Misak envisions. On the contrary, the deflationary account is founded on the very idea that the locution “is true” has no conceptual content of the sort that would be of aid in defending something like the methodological principle. Finally, a third node for the appeal of the methodological argument is the connection between belief and experience. However, even if—as the pragmatist maxim may be seen to maintain—our beliefs are *individuated* by their practical consequences, including the expectations concerning future experiences that they entail, it does not follow that the fulfilment of such expectations automatically constitutes evidence for that belief. Rather, our picture of the connection between belief and experience should be holistic not only in the Quinean but also in what I have called the Sellarsian fashion, including in its purview different (normative) accounts of what counts as evidence.

I have argued that the different methods of fixing belief that Peirce discusses in his “Fixation” provide examples of ways of settling opinion that are not sensitive to the experience and argument of others. As a response, Misak might argue that the opinions settled in these other ways fail to be full-fledged, genuine beliefs. But this is exactly the sort of argumentative strategy she herself criticizes—when considering Apel’s and Habermas’s transcendental argument—of relying on a mere conceptual device to arrive at the desired conclusion. Alternatively, she might argue that, as a sociological or psychological fact, we do desire to have beliefs that are tested against experience, including that of others. However, this alternative amounts to the sort of generalization from which, in her own view—in considering Rawls’s later defense of deliberative democracy—we cannot derive any substantial normative conclusions. Relying on either alternative will be insufficient for Misak’s methodological argument to have any bite against her illiberal opponent, someone who simply does not share the norms expressed in the methodological principle. Accordingly, it comes as no surprise that we cannot find an attempt of this sort in Peirce’s writings. In “Fixation,” Peirce championed the notion of truth entailed by what he called the scientific method of fixing belief—the method that attempts to fix belief in accordance with a reality independent of our opinions. He did not argue, however, for this notion based on an empirical generalization or by transcendental means. There is no non-circular argument available for the method of science. The choice of the method—and the choice of what counts as the relevant kind of evidence or argument—is itself a substantial normative issue, which allows for no such simple resolution.

This issue pertains more broadly to epistemic defenses of the preferability or acceptability of democracy that are grounded in normative aspects of central epistemic notions—belief, truth, assertion and the like. Such defenses maintain that democracy is the best setting—the best instrument—in achieving certain epistemic goals. But even if their

assessment of the merits of democracy is correct, we should resist attempting to argue, on mere conceptual grounds, that the epistemic goals in question are shared by all. Indeed, if those goals were shared by all citizens, the need to justify democracy to an illiberal or anti-democratic opponent would be far less likely to appear, or it would at least be easily resolved. Conversely, to the extent that our conceptions of democracy, its benefits, preferability and acceptability rely on such epistemic considerations, we should make clear that these conceptions depend on shared epistemic values.

University of Oulu
henrik.rydenfelt@gmail.com

REFERENCES

- Apel, K.-O. (1980). "The a priori of the Communication Community and the Foundations of Ethics: The Problem of a Rational Foundation of Ethics in the Scientific Age," in *Towards a Transformation of Philosophy*. Trans. G. Adey and D. Frisby. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Blackburn, S. (1998). *Ruling Passions*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Cohen, J. (1989). "Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy," in A. Hamlin and P. Pettit, eds., *The Good Polity: Normative Analysis of the State*. New York: Blackwell.
- Estlund, D. (2007). *Democratic Authority*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Habermas, J. (1990). *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. Trans. C. Lenhardt and S. W. Nicholsen. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Horwich, P. (1990). *Truth*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Locke, J. (1689). *Two Treatises of Government*. Ed. Peter Laslett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- MacGilvray, E. (2014). "Democratic Doubts: Pragmatism and the Epistemic Defense of Democracy," *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 22(1): 105–23.
- Misak, C. (1991). *Truth and the End of Inquiry: A Peircean Account of Truth*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Misak, C. (2000). *Truth, Politics, Morality. Pragmatism and Deliberation*. London: Routledge.
- Misak, C. (2007). "Pragmatism and Deflationism," in C. Misak, ed. *New Pragmatists*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 68–90.
- Misak, C., and R. Talisse (2014). "Debate: Pragmatist Epistemology and Democratic Theory: A Reply to Eric MacGilvray," *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 22(3): 366–76.
- Peirce, C.S. (1982–2009). *Writings of Charles S. Peirce, 7 vols. (1–6, 8)*, edited by the Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press). Cited as "W" followed by volume number and page number.
- Putnam, H. (1992). "A Reconsideration of Deweyan Democracy," in *Renewing Philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Putnam, H. (1994). "Pragmatism and Moral Objectivity," in *Words and Life*. Ed. J. Conant. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Quine, W.V.O. (1992). *Pursuit of Truth*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Rawls, J. (1996). *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rorty, R. (1982). *Consequences of Pragmatism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Rydenfelt, H. (2009). "The Meaning of Pragmatism. James on the Practical Consequences of Belief," *Cognitio* 10(1): 81–90.
- Rydenfelt, H. (2011a). "Naturalism and Normative Science," in J. Knowles and H. Rydenfelt,

- eds. *Pragmatism, Science and Naturalism*. Berlin and New York: Peter Lang, pp. 15–38.
- Rydenfelt, H. (2011b). “Epistemic Norms and Democracy,” *Metaphilosophy* 42(5): 572–88.
- Rydenfelt, H. (2013). “Constructivist Problems, Realist Solutions”, in J. Kegley and K. Skowronski, eds. *Persuasion and Compulsion in Democracy*. Lanham: Lexington Books, pp. 153–69.
- Rydenfelt, H. (2019). “Realism without Representationalism,” *Synthese*.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-019-02251-4>
- Sellars, W. (1963). *Science, Perception and Reality*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Short, T.L. (2000). “Peirce on the Aim of Inquiry: Another Reading of ‘Fixation,’” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 36(1): 1–23.
- Short, T.L. (2007). *Peirce’s Theory of Signs*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Talisse, R.B. (2007). *A Pragmatist Philosophy of Democracy*. London: Routledge.
- Talisse, R.B. (2010). “Peirce and Pragmatist Democratic Theory,” in M. Bergman, S. Paavola, A. Pietarinen and H. Rydenfelt, eds. *Ideas in Action: Proceedings of the Applying Peirce Conference*. Helsinki: Nordic Pragmatism Network, pp. 105–116.
- Wright, Crispin (1992). *Truth and Objectivity*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.