

Democracy and Moral Inquiry: Misak's Methodological Argument

1. Introduction

In her book *Truth, Politics, Morality – Pragmatism and Deliberation* (2000), Cheryl Misak argues for a deliberative conception of democracy. Misak's argument revolves around a methodological principle she derives from a consideration of the pragmatist approach to truth, especially the truth of moral views. This principle 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 it, such evidence including the experience and arguments of others. Based on this methodological principle, the upshot of the argument is that, 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.

In what follows, I will first briefly canvass Misak's argument for liberal democracy and then concentrate on inspecting the merits of the methodological principle. This principle I will argue is questionable in light of counterexamples of individuals whose belief is *not* responsive to the evidence and argument of others; indeed, these are often exactly the sort of individuals who promote illiberal views. I will argue that the initial plausibility of the methodological principle is based on three considerations concerning the connection between belief and evidence on the one hand and belief and experience on the other. All of these considerations will however turn out to yield insufficient backing to the principle. Finally, I will suggest that the problems with Misak's methodological argument are only to be expected in light of her own criticism of the arguments for democracy proposed by Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas as well as John Rawls.

2. The 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, 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 holding them are mistaken (2000, 6). Misak’s main claim is that the pragmatist perspective on notions such as truth, belief and assertion result in a methodological principle of moral inquiry that “insists upon the inclusion of those who are or might otherwise be excluded” (2000, 7). Moreover, this principle, she argues, is binding over even those who otherwise uphold illiberal views.

Misak’s starting point is the pragmatist approach to truth as the *aim of inquiry*, which she contrasts with the traditional correspondence account of truth as well as contemporary deflationist views, especially disquotationalism. Against the correspondence theory of truth, Misak levies the common criticism of spuriousness, claiming that 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”, which, from the pragmatist point of view, verges on the meaningless (2000, 57). In particular, in moral and political questions, we cannot assume that truth is a correspondence or “fit” between our ideas and some (believer-independent) “facts”: with normative claims and beliefs, “truth and objectivity cannot be anything like that” (2000, 2).

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 or grammatical device. While the pragmatist can appreciate the idea motivating the deflationary view, she will not rest content with it (Misak 2000, 60–64; see Misak 1991, 127–130; Misak 2007, 68–70). In Misak’s view, deflationism leaves open issues concerning the role that truth plays in inquiry and belief; but for the pragmatist, “the important work is in spelling out the relations between truth on the one hand and assertion, verification, success, etc. on the other” (2000, 63). In particular, Misak argues, our assertoric practices show that many of our opinions aspire to *objectivity*, a standard that goes beyond one’s subjective approval. The marks of objectivity include the distinction between one’s thinking that one is right and *being* right, our using such statements as premises in inferences, and our perceiving them as open to improvement for example by way of argumentation (2000, 52). At least by and large, also our *moral* opinions bear the marks of objectivity, and should be approached as possible candidates for genuine knowledge or objects of inquiry. The deflationary view of truth, however, leaves us unable to deal with issues concerning epistemic standards and evidence (cf. 2000, 103–4).¹

The pragmatist account of truth that Misak proposes is put in terms of notions that enable us to deal with exactly such issues, the most central ones being those of inquiry and belief. As Misak’s puts this pragmatist position in brief, “a true belief is the best that inquiry

¹ Misak’s criticism of moral non-cognitivism proceeds along similar lines; and 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 along the lines suggested by the champion of the latter position, Paul Horwich (1990). However, at one point 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’” (2000, 72). But this is an uncharitable reading of non-cognitivism: by 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 that moral terms *refer* to the speaker’s subjective (mental) states.

could do” (2000, 60). Drawing from Charles S. Peirce’s discussion of inquiry, Misak 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” (2000, 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” (2000, 82).

This explication of the pragmatist view of truth gives Misak her main device in drawing her liberal democratic conclusion: the *methodological principle* that “the experience of others must be taken seriously”. If belief is to be fixed so that it would withstand the experience and argument of potentially everyone, the views of all may be relevant to our inquiries. A direct implication 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” (2000, 6). As corollaries of this principle, Misak lists many central democratic virtues, such as the respect for other persons and their autonomy, tolerance, and public and open deliberation. For example, she argues that the “preservation of autonomy, equal moral worth, and respect for persons” are required as “preserving these things is a vital part of deliberation aimed at the truth” (2000, 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 such a society that our inquiries, including our moral inquiries, may be most fruitfully pursued.²

² 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 (or moral “belief”) and its connection with scientific inquiry could be avoided. In recent years, Robert B. Talisse (2007; 2010) has been advancing just such a defence of democracy, which bears great resemblance to Misak’s methodological argument. For a detailed criticism of Talisse’s position, see Rydenfelt (2011b).

3. Belief and evidence

The pragmatist perspective on truth as the aim of inquiry – as developed by Misak, among others – offers an interesting and potentially fruitful alternative to the debate between standard meta-ethical alternatives. However, Misak’s particular pragmatist account of the aim of inquiry and truth more generally is problematic. While this account does not rest on an analysis of the concept of *truth*, it still relies on an analysis of our concept of *belief*. 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 [*sic*] attitude that is aimed at truth”. 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” (2000, 76).

The notion of belief as sensitive or responsive to reasons and evidence of the sort Misak envisions underlies the methodological principle. As I will now proceed to argue, this notion is however questionable, and *not* very accommodating of the variety of attitudes (or “mental states”) we usually call belief. It is vulnerable to salient counterexamples; moreover, such counterexamples can be derived from Peirce’s discussion in his classic piece, “The Fixation of Belief” (1877), which Misak herself employs in setting up her methodological argument.

The first of the methods Peirce discusses in the “Fixation” is tenacity, or the steadfast clinging to one’s opinion. By this method, the aim of inquiry (or belief) is not to fit any (external) “evidence”; indeed, it appears that this method lacks a notion of evidence (at least aside that of one’s already fixed opinion). As such, it appears to be an immediate counterexample to Misak’s notion of belief, and 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 which is *not* open to revision in

light of evidence and argument (Misak 2000, 74, 87, 94).³ 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, he admires the method of tenacity for its "strength, simplicity, and directness", and 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" (1877, 122). Even if tenacity is a crude way of fixing belief, it is distinct from psychological compulsion, or the inability of settling one's opinion in the first place. It is only under the influence of what Peirce calls the "social impulse" that this method is bound to fail. Then the disagreement of others begins to matter, and the question becomes how to fix belief for everyone instead of merely for oneself.

Of course, there is much to be said in favour of the assumption, central to Misak's discussion, 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. But even if we were to disclose the opinions arrived at by mere tenacity from the purview of genuine belief on the grounds of objectivity, another problem for Misak's methodological principle is posed by beliefs which appear to be sensitive to evidence of *some* kind, but not of the kind that Misak envisions – that is, to experience and argument, including that of others. 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*, its

³ 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, 74). However, tenacity does not equal the wilful selection of one's beliefs, which we may think impossible; it is rather the stubborn sticking to one's current beliefs, come what may.

conception of evidence is not the same as that required by the methodological principle. Instead of experience and argument, the follower of this method fully relies on the testimony of the authority.

Again, Misak attempts to avoid such counterexamples by drawing from conceptual considerations. As Peirce points out, religious belief is often a concrete example of such 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 principle. In response to this potential concern, she denies that religious beliefs amounts to *genuine* beliefs: “these propositional [*sic*] attitudes, if they really are not keyed to reasons, must also not be genuine beliefs” (2000, 75). Relying on the Wittgensteinian idea that demanding evidence or reasons for religious belief is to misunderstand the whole nature of such belief, she first argues that “the religious do not believe, but rather, have faith” (2000, 75). But delimiting religious belief as being outside the scope of “genuine” belief on the grounds that it is not responsive to the *sort* of evidence one thinks it should appear exceedingly artificial. Religious belief is, after all, responsive to the sort of evidence that the religious *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 (Peirce 1877, 118).

Indeed, even Misak does not follow the Wittgensteinian road to the conclusion that religious belief is (always) unsupported by evidence. Instead, 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 holds, we are after all “presented with a case of genuine belief” (2000, 76). But the admission that the theist’s belief *is* sensitive to “reasons” (of its own kind) is problematic for the methodological argument: the “theist’s” reasons or evidence for his belief is *not* the experience and argument of others, as the

methodological principle maintains. 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" (1877, 120), while the latter is a paradigmatic case of the method of authority. Consequently, also 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 counterexamples such as those of Peirce's tenacious believer and the follower of the method of authority, it appears that Misak's concept of belief is too limited to be plausible, or to match our usual understanding of belief. The methodological principle itself, relying on this account of belief, will inevitably face problems. Crucially, it is these sort of problems that we may expect when contesting the sort views that Misak's argument is intended to counter. Those who maintain illiberal views after all claim exactly that the experience and argument of others does *not* count as evidence or reasons. If differing conceptions of evidence, or of reasons for belief, are available in the manner suggested by Peirce, the methodological principle will lose its bite against the illiberal stance. 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" (1877, 116). Criticism from the liberal point of view – such point of view that does take the experience and argument of others seriously – will not be considered relevant by those who do not already share the same view of evidence and reasons.

4. The aim of belief

The criticism of Misak's argument just presented is that the methodological principle faces salient counterexamples – cases where belief is *not* sensitive to the experience and argument of others, as that principle maintains, of which Peirce's discussions give examples. The fact that the problems of Misak's argument seem so evident invites

the question of why the methodological principle initially appears plausible. I think we can distinguish three considerations – all of which appear in Misak’s discussion – that might be taken to support the methodological principle but on closer inspection turn out to be insufficient to show the feasibility of the principle..

A first reason for the appeal of the methodological principle is an equivocation of the central pragmatist notion of truth as the aim of inquiry. In a sense, the pragmatist – we may agree with Misak – considers truth to be the aim of inquiry: if anything, this is the pragmatist’s concept of truth (cf. Rydenfelt 2009b). This notion, as we have seen, figures prominently in Misak’s discussion. However, it should not be taken to imply that truth is to be conceived of as any *particular* such aim. As the examples of the methods of tenacity and authority already considered show, the aim may be differently conceived of: in effect, the four different methods of “Fixation” amount to four *different* accounts of truth from the pragmatist point of view.

A second source for the appeal of the methodological principle is a stretching of ideas motivating the deflationary account of truth. Arguing for the principle, Misak employs the idea the deflationists are fond of: that to assert or believe that p is to assert or believe that p is true. For Misak, this suggests that belief (and assertion) are aimed at truth, or sensitive to the test of experience:

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, 83, paragraph break omitted)

And elsewhere:

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. (Misak 2000, 51)

Such a defence of the methodological principle is however clearly problematic for two reasons. Firstly, from the deflationist platitude that the assertion (or belief) that p is the assertion (or belief) that p is true, it does not follow that belief and assertion “aim at truth”.⁴ The deflationists, after all, have argued exactly that 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.) Secondly, 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 the liberal and the illiberal.

The same points can be made by comparing Misak’s account with Peirce’s reaction to the same issue, which is briefly touched upon in the “Fixation”. At the outset of his discussion, Peirce supplies a pragmatist account of inquiry as the move from the unsettling state of doubt to the settlement of opinion, or belief. Then he points out that we might think this is not enough but 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” (1877, 115).

Peirce’s remark here allows for at least two different interpretations. As a first possibility, it can be taken as anticipating the deflationary account of truth (cf. Short 332–3). The “tautology” Peirce would have in mind would be that to assert or to believe that p is to assert or believe that p is true simply because this is how “true” operates as a linguistic or grammatical 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 belief and inquiry. On the other hand, Peirce may here be read as arguing that when we believe, we consider our belief to be supported by evidence, whatever

⁴ Elsewhere, Misak similarly suggests that “truth is also internally related to inquiry, reasons, and evidence” on the grounds that “reading the *DS* biconditional in the other direction, we get the thought that when I assert p , I assert that it is true” (73). Also see Misak (2007).

our conception of evidence might be: otherwise we would cease to believe. By this interpretation, then, it is a tautology that *if* we believe that p , we *think* that p is true by whatever conception of “true” we might entertain.⁵

Whichever of the two possible 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 concept of truth, nor the aim of inquiry. Indeed, this points towards the most crucial difference between Misak’s argument and Peirce’s discussion. Misak’s defence of the methodological principle is founded on a slippery slope from the 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 that of others). Peirce however does not argue that some of the methods of fixing belief – such as those of tenacity and authority – cannot be followed on such *conceptual* or *linguistic* grounds. The operation of the truth predicate as a *linguistic device* – the use of the predicate from which the deflationist draws – has no implications on what truth, understood as *the aim of inquiry*, is or should be. These two perspectives on truth, although mutually compatible in the pragmatist view, are to be kept distinct.

5. Belief and experience

A third reason for the plausibility of the methodological principle differs somewhat from the conceptual arguments just considered. Namely, the pragmatist perspective on beliefs as habits of action may be seen to imply that beliefs by their nature involve *expectations* concerning experience and, moreover, that the fulfilment or

⁵ This reading brings Peirce’s notion closer to Crispin Wright’s (1992) pluralistic concept of truth. For further critical comparison, see Misak 2000, 64–67; Short 2007, 333.

disappointment of such expectations should be viewed as constituting evidence for or against that belief.

Consider, first, the pragmatist view that a genuine belief has consequences to 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.'" (Misak 2000, 73)

While not crucial to Misak's discussion, this idea of *practical* implications of (genuine) belief is central to the pragmatist tradition. In "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" (1878) – the paper that follows "Fixation" in Peirce's series of articles, *Illustrations of the Logic of Science* – 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" (1878, 129–30). 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 "the occasion of such action [is] some sensible perception, the motive of it to produce some sensible result" (1878, 131). As our action thus has "exclusive reference to what affects the senses" (1878, 131), the pragmatist elucidation of the meaning of beliefs is put in terms of conditional expectations in experience – such as Misak's "if I do A , B will be the result" (cf. Rydenfelt 2009a).

The pragmatist view easily lends to the idea that the fulfillment or lack of fulfillment of the expectations entailed by a belief should be taken as *evidence* or *reasons* for or against the belief. Misak writes (without reference to the pragmatist view):

If there was nothing a belief had to be sensitive to, then we could not individuate it; we could not tell it from another. [...]. 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. (Misak 2000, 51)

Here Misak connects evidence for or against a belief (or what belief is “sensitive to”) and its meaning (or what “individuates” the belief). If the belief now is individuated in the pragmatist manner by the practical consequences it entails, including the conditional expectations it involves, then such conditional expectations can easily be taken to determine evidence for that belief.

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”. It is to be noted that the pragmatist’s test of the meaningfulness of beliefs does not equal naive verificationism by which any meaningful statement can be reduced to statements concerning immediate experience, or what Quine called observation sentences. 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 ’” (2000, 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, it is implausible to suppose that *moral* beliefs would entail conditional expectations, or moral “theories” would be receive confirmation from their predictive prowess (at least as usually conceived). For this reason Misak 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” (2000, 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 (empiricist) test “that it *answers to something*”. As with belief, meaningful statements are, by this view, “responsive to experience” (2000, 86).

It is clear that a broad holistic view such as that Misak proposes is required for us to bring moral questions into the fold of the sort of (objective) inquiry that is conducted in a (widely speaking) scientific fashion. However, radical holism brings with it a complication. If the notion of answerability is not tied up 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 taken into consideration, 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.

In Misak’s view, of course, beliefs are by their nature sensitive or answerable to *experience*, construed more widely than in the Quinean picture. She 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” (81). But Misak doesn’t give this idea any more robust content. Indeed, this is only to be expected in light of the examples we have considered. If Misak attempts to *limit* the sort of “experience” that counts for or against some (moral) opinion, she in effect offers a normative account of what counts as *good evidence* or *good reasons* for belief – an account that will be readily contested by those who, say, maintain illiberal views. For some, say, spiritual revelation or the testimony of a holy book appears to 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. But the problem with this extreme is that “experience” becomes an objectionable fudge-word for *whatever* our

beliefs may be “answerable” 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 us to the second, more general holistic complication, which concerns the identification of the fulfilment of conditional expectations with *evidence*. As the examples we have 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 standards of correctness.⁶ For experience (of any sort) to be considered evidence for or against some hypothesis, our theory (or our science as a whole) must include an account of what *counts* as evidence or reasons. By such broader holism, this is the case even with beliefs that *do* 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 normative role.

Accordingly, there is reason to pull apart the practical consequences central to the pragmatist elucidation of 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

⁶ 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, 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 (cf. Quine 1992, 19; Rydenfelt 2011a, 116–9). 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.).

expectations cannot be taken to (as if automatically) determine *evidence* for or against a belief. First, as Misak herself argues, *moral* opinions do not involve straightforward conditional expectations concerning experience of the type “if I do *A*, *B* will be the result”. Second, more generally, even in case of beliefs which involve such expectations, taking their fulfilment to count as evidence for that belief presupposes the acceptance of a (normative) account of evidence that maintains that these expectations determine evidence or reasons for belief.

6. Circularity and question-begging

The lesson of the preceding remarks is that Misak’s defence 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 criticism of alternative arguments which attempt to show the validity or truth of democratic principles. One such alternative is the argument advanced by Karl-Otto Apel (1980) and Jürgen Habermas (1990) which maintains that *communication* itself *presupposes* adherence to norms that lay ground to democratic principles. Misak’s criticism of this “transcendental” argument is that it is based on a too narrow notion of communication itself. It simply appears implausible that communication as such 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, 41). Apel and Habermas may obviously define communication in such a manner to allow for their conclusion, but a stipulation of this sort is too narrow: “it seems simply wrong to define communication in the restrictive way in which Habermas does” (2000, 42).

The structural similarities between Apel’s and Habermas’s transcendental argument and Misak’s methodological argument are however striking. After all, Misak argues exactly that simply by *believing*, or *qua believers* we are sensitive to the experience and argument of others and, hence, inevitably committed to some core

democratic principles. 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 (2000, 106), and on “a conception of inquiry which is so thin that the prima facie assumption is that everyone is an inquirer” (2000, 151).

However, as we have seen, the concept of belief that Misak operates with simply fails to be thin enough: it is far from evident that believing as such entails being sensitive to the experience and argument of others. In light of a reality check of the counterexamples we have considered, it is implausible to suggest the methodological principle as a *meta-ethical* view about what it *is* to maintain a moral opinion. Of course, Misak may wish to limit the scope of our notion of belief to such opinions (or mental states) that *are* sensitive to the experience and argument of others in the manner she has suggested. But this alternative 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 Misak herself finds 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* about having “beliefs”.

Indeed, Misak attempts to avoid such a transcendental cling to her argument, at one point suggesting that the methodological argument operates in a fashion which 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 the 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” (2000, 107).

Phrased in this manner, Misak's argument no longer hinges on the claim that beliefs *are* by their nature sensitive to the experience and argument – that being open to criticism based on the experience of others is what it *means* to have beliefs. Rather, the argument is that *if* one wishes to have beliefs which 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 also her illiberal opponent will argue that *his* beliefs are ones that will withstand the test of experience.⁷ But as we have seen, this view rests on an equivocation of “right” belief or the “aim” of truth. Perhaps the illiberal opponent does want the right belief, or aims at true beliefs – but right and true by *his* lights, not the liberal democrat's.

A second line of argument that Misak herself criticizes is John Rawls's defence 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 to an extent due to the liberal democratic tradition. Misak contests Rawls's view by maintaining that it will be an insufficient response to exactly those who question the basic idea of a liberal democratic society itself:

Our society happens to be a cooperative venture for mutual advantage. [...] The 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. (Misak 2000, 26)

However, the same problem will be faced by the methodological argument, which attempts to defend a set of *normative* principles of what kind of beliefs we would be best off having. Even if it were the case as a sociological, empirical claim that *everyone* wishes to form

⁷ As Misak argues at another connection: “[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-earthier, the Nazi, etc.) that one aims at getting the right belief, then one is open to a certain sort of criticism” (46).

their beliefs taking into account the experience and argument of others, it does not follow that we *ought to* aim at such beliefs. Analogously to Rawls's defence of the democratic principles, Misak's defence of the methodological principle will lose its *normative* bite, if it solely relies on a sociological and empirical fact of this sort.

Misak's methodological argument cannot avoid 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. But Misak's own methodological argument goes through only if we limit our notion of *belief* in a similar manner: it is to say 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, the sort of an empirical generalization underlying Rawls's later notion of an overlapping consensus will not lead to a conclusion that would justify any democratic principles or a notion of public reason. 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. But as a defence of the liberal democratic position, as Misak perceives, simply pointing this out will beg the question against any illiberal opponent. The problem is that Misak's own argument, when made to depend on an empirical, sociological claim about what sort of beliefs we (happen to) want to have is no better off in showing that we *ought to* aim at such beliefs. But when attempting to avoid the circularity of the transcendental argument, this seems to be the only alternative available.⁸

⁸ I have elsewhere (Rydenfelt 2013) argued that defences of related methodological principles are generally faced with a dilemma between either relying on stipulating normative concepts – or what I call “conceptual chauvinism” – and generalizing from our current normative point of view –

7. Conclusion

Misak's argument for liberal democracy is founded on a methodological principle of (moral) inquiry – the principle which maintains that beliefs, including moral opinions, are by their nature sensitive to the experience and argument of others. But the appeal of the methodological principle, I have argued, is due to considerations which will under closer inspection turn out not to support Misak's wide-reaching application of the methodological argument. A first source of the plausibility of the methodological principle is the pragmatist perspective on truth as the aim of inquiry, or "aim of belief" in the sense of the sort of a belief we *should* have, or *ought to* pursue. In Misak's hands, this approach leads quite directly to the conclusion that everyone is committed to acquiring such beliefs that are responsive to evidence of a certain sort – sensitive to experience, including the experience and argument of others. But as we saw, this is to confound the overall pragmatist approach to truth as the aim of inquiry with a particular account of that aim. Moreover, counterexamples – such as those provided by Peirce in his discussion of the fixation of belief – show that this view of truth is questionable from the point of view of other such accounts.

A second consideration that Misak employs in arguing for the principle are the claims on which the deflationary (or "disquotationalist") 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. Indeed, on the contrary, the deflationary account is founded on the very idea that the locution "is true" has no conceptual content such that would be of aid in formulating something like the methodological principle. And finally, a third node for the methodological principle is the connection between belief and

leading to "historicist relativism" of the sort advanced by Richard Rorty (e.g. "Introduction" to 1982).

experience. As we saw, 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 they entail, it does not follow that the fulfilment of such expectations as if 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 the “Sellarsian” fashion, including in its purview different (normative) accounts of what counts as evidence.

As I have argued, although Misak explicitly draws from the Peirce in setting up her methodological argument, the different methods of fixing belief that Peirce discusses in his “Fixation” rather provide counterexamples to the methodological principle: examples of ways of settling opinion which are not sensitive to the experience and argument of others. As a response, Misak may insist 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 may (and at one point does) argue that, as a sociological fact we *do* desire to have beliefs which are tested against experience, including that of others. But this alternative amounts to the sort of generalization from which, as she perceives – in considering Rawls’s defence 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 embedded in the methodological principle. Accordingly, 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 which attempts to fix belief in accordance with a reality independent of our opinions. He did not however argue for this notion based on a mere empirical generalization. In Peirce’s view, there is no non-circular *argument* available for the method of science. The choice of the method – 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.

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