

# Book Review

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Misak, Cheryl. *Truth, Politics, Morality: Pragmatism and Deliberation*. London: Routledge, 2000. 208 pp. Paperback. \$24.99

Truth – its place in our theoretical and practical lives has been in an indeterminate state in recent years. Especially in moral and political matters, talk of truth in our pluralist society is usually met with thoughts of extremism or scepticism. The works of philosophers such as John Mackie, Bernard Williams, and Alasdair MacIntyre have cast the potential for the attainment of genuine moral knowledge in doubt. In her book *Truth, Politics, Morality: Pragmatism and Deliberation*, Cheryl Misak attempts to restore the central position of truth in the area of moral and political philosophy in a way that avoids moral relativism without resorting to cultural imperialism.

Building on Charles S. Peirce's pragmatic account of truth which states that a true belief is one that is fated to be agreed upon were we to inquire as far as we could, Misak improves this notion of truth to read that a "true belief is one upon which inquiry could not improve – a belief which would fit with experience and argument and which would satisfy the aims of inquiry, no matter how much the issue was subject to experiment, evaluation, and debate" (1). When we inquire into a particular matter, we aim at truth – we think that there is a determinate answer. If we did not think that there was a determinant answer, why would we inquire at all? This view not only applies to scientific discourses such as mathematics, but non-scientific discourses such as morality, for both have marks of objectivity. In both cases, we weigh evidence and reasons, we use these beliefs in inferences, we believe that we can discover that something is right or wrong, and we change our beliefs in the face of recalcitrant experience.

Misak puts forth a cognitivist account of ethical and political inquiry in which truth, democracy, and deliberation play a central role. Misak takes on the ambitious project to attempt to show that a Peircean account of truth can be incorporated into a view which, while establishing that moral judgments are genuine candidates for objective truth-values, preserves the integrity of concepts of inquiry and genuine beliefs without resorting to moral relativism. What we end up with is an epistemically robust account that can be used to criticize those whose beliefs are wrong and amoral. And this is one of the biggest strengths of the account Misak puts forth. If we cannot develop a moral epistemology that aims at truth and objectivity and that can confidently assert that, for instance torturing small children for fun is wrong, what hope, theoretically and practically, will we have? This is the advantage a pragmatic account brings.

The discourse surrounding truth and inquiry should not be taken to suggest that the pragmatist would seek to arrive at one particular conception of the good immediately, and denounce the rest as untrue or amoral conceptions. Instead, pragmatism works well with

our liberal democratic notions in that there are many permissible conceptions of the good life. However, there are some that are not. But how does pragmatism avoid falling into what Paul Taylor called the “ethnocentric fallacy,” in which the designation of false or amoral practice is not simply a result of incongruence with our non-liberal values? On Misak’s view, Peirce’s account does not admit various communities of inquiries, as suggested by some contemporary pragmatists such as Richard Rorty, but instead asserts that there is only one community of inquirers which all strive to obtain the best beliefs (where “best” denotes beliefs that fit with evidence and argumentation). Thus, the pragmatist can confidently say that conceptions of the good life such as Nazism or anarchy are conceptions that do not fit with evidence and argumentation, and the beliefs associated with these doctrines can be disregarded as invalid because they do not aspire to truth. The pragmatist is not attempting to say that all truth-values associated with moral judgments will be *true*, it is just that only the pragmatic account can keep the epistemic door open for those propositions that aspired to truth to be adequately verified.

This is Misak’s third book in which she has elucidated and developed Peirce’s pragmatic theory of truth. In previous works *Truth and the End of Inquiry: A Peircian Account of Truth* and *Verificationism: Its History and Prospects*, Misak has done a great deal to revitalize the appeal of pragmatism as a competing epistemology. Her recent project has shown that pragmatic theory can have substantive applicability to the areas of moral and political philosophy.

Well-written and sophisticated, yet not bogged down in terminology or theory, Misak presents a persuasive argument for the centrality of truth in our epistemic, social and political theory. This book is an absolute delight to read and will appeal to those interested in pragmatism, epistemology, and political and moral philosophy.